

## **In Such an Era of Political Correctness, Why is the Word "Retard" Still OK?**

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"I want to tell you a quick story before I start. I was walking through hallways, not minding my own business, listening to the conversations around me. As I passed the front door on my way to my English classroom, I heard the dialogue between two friends nearby. For reasons of privacy, I would rather not give away their race or gender.

So the one girl leans to the other, pointing to the back of a young man washing the glass panes of the front door, and says, "Oh my gaw! I think it is so cute that our school brings in the black kids from around the district to wash our windows!" The other girl looked up, widened her slanted Asian eyes and called to the window washer, easily loud enough for him to hear, "Hey, Negro! You missed a spot!" The young man did not turn around. The first girl smiled a bland smile that all white girls - hell, all white people - have and walked on. A group of Mexicans stood by and laughed that high pitch laugh that all of them have.

So now it's your turn. What do you think the black window washer did? What would you do in that situation? Do you think he turned and calmly explained the fallacies of racism and showed the girls the error of their way? That's the one thing that makes racism, or any discrimination, less powerful in my mind. No matter how biased or bigoted a comment or action may be, the guy can turn around and explain why racism is wrong and, if worst comes to worst, punch 'em in the face.

Discrimination against those who can defend themselves, obviously, cannot survive. What would be far worse is if we discriminated against those who cannot defend themselves. What then, could be worse than racism?

Look around you and thank God that we don't live in a world that discriminates and despises those who cannot defend themselves. Thank God that every one of us in this room, in this school, hates racism and sexism and by that logic discrimination in general. Thank God that every one in this institution is dedicated to the ideal of mutual respect and love for our fellow human beings. Then pinch yourself for living in a dream. Then pinch the hypocrites sitting next to you. Then pinch the hypocrite that is you.

Pinch yourself once for each time you have looked at one of your fellow human beings with a mental handicap and laughed. Pinch yourself for each and every time you denounced discrimination only to turn and hate those around you without the ability to defend themselves, the only ones around you without the ability to defend themselves. Pinch yourself for each time you have called someone else a "retard."

If you have been wondering about my opening story, I'll tell you that it didn't happen, not as I described it. Can you guess what I changed? No, it wasn't the focused hate on one person, and no it wasn't the slanted Asian eyes or cookie cutter features white people have or that shrill Hispanic hyena laugh (yeah, it hurts when people make assumptions about your person and use them against you doesn't it?).

The girl didn't say "hey Negro." There was no black person.

It was a mentally handicapped boy washing the windows. It was "Hey retard." I removed the word retard. I removed the word that destroys the dignity of our most innocent. I removed the single most hateful word in the entire English language.

I don't understand why we use the word; I don't think I ever will.

In such an era of political correctness, why is it that retard is still ok? Why do we allow it? Why don't we stop using the word? Maybe students can't handle stopping - I hope that offends you students, it was meant to - but I don't think the adults, here can either.

Students, look at your teacher, look at every member of this faculty. I am willing to bet that every one of them would throw a fit if they heard the word faggot or nigger - hell the word Negro - used in their classroom. But how many of them would raise a finger against the word retard? How many of them have? Teachers, feel free to raise your hand or call attention to yourself through some other means if you have.

That's what I thought. Clearly, this obviously isn't a problem contained within our age group.

So why am I doing this? Why do I risk being misunderstood and resented by this school's student body and staff? Because I know how much you can learn from people, all people, even - no, not even, especially - the mentally handicapped.

I know this because every morning I wake up and I come downstairs and I sit across from my sister, quietly eating her Cheerio's. And as I sit down she sets her spoon down on the table and she looks at me, her strawberry blonde hair hanging over her freckled face almost completely hides the question mark shaped scar above her ear from her brain surgery two Christmases ago.

She looks at me and she smiles. She has a beautiful smile; it lights up her face. Her two front teeth are faintly stained from the years of intense epilepsy medication but I don't notice that anymore. I lean over to her and say, "Good morning, Olivia." She stares at me for a moment and says quickly, "Good morning, Soeren," and goes back to her Cheerio's.

I sit there for a minute, thinking about what to say. "What are you going to do at school today, Olivia?" She looks up again. "Gonna see Mista Bee!" she replies loudly, hugging herself slightly and looking up. Mr. B. is her gym teacher and perhaps her favorite man outside of our family on the entire planet and Olivia is

thoroughly convinced that she will be having gym class every day of the week. I like to view it as wishful thinking.

She finishes her Cheerio's and grabs her favorite blue backpack and waits for her bus driver, Miss Debbie, who, like clockwork, arrives at our house at exactly 7 o'clock each morning. She gives me a quick hug goodbye and runs excitedly to the bus, ecstatic for another day of school.

And I watch the bus disappear around the turn and I can't help but remember the jokes. The short bus. The "retard rocket." No matter what she does, no matter how much she loves those around her, she will always be the butt of some immature kid's joke. She will always be the butt of some mature kid's joke. She will always be the butt of some "adult's" joke.

By no fault of her own, she will spend her entire life being stared at and judged. Despite the fact that she will never hate, never judge, never make fun of, never hurt, she will never be accepted. That's why I'm doing this. I'm doing this because I don't think you understand how much you hurt others when you hate. And maybe you don't realize that you hate. But that's what it is; your pre-emptive dismissal of them, your dehumanization of them, your mockery of them, it's nothing but another form of hate.

It's more hateful than racism, more hateful than sexism, more hateful than anything. I'm doing this so that each and every one of you, student or teacher, thinks before the next time you use the word "retard," before the next time you shrug off someone else's use of the word "retard". Think of the people you hurt, both the mentally handicapped and those who love them.

If you have to, think of my sister. Think about how she can find more happiness in the blowing of a bubble and watching it float away than most of us will in our entire lives. Think about how she will always love everyone unconditionally. Think about how she will never hate. Then think about which one of you is "retarded."

Maybe this has become more of an issue today because society is changing, slowly, to be sure, but changing nonetheless. The mentally handicapped aren't being locked in their family's basement anymore.

The mentally handicapped aren't rotting like criminals in institutions. Our fellow human beings are walking among us, attending school with us, entering the work force with us, asking for nothing but acceptance, giving nothing but love. As we become more accepting and less hateful, more and more handicapped individuals will finally be able to participate in the society that has shunned them for so long. You will see more of them working in places you go, at Dominicks, at Jewel, at Wal-Mart. Someday, I hope more than anything, one of these people that you see will be my sister.

I want to leave you with one last thought. I didn't ask to have a mentally handicapped sister. She didn't choose to be mentally handicapped. But I wouldn't trade it for anything. I have learned infinitely more from her simple words and love

than I have from any classroom of "higher education." I only hope that, one day, each of you will open your hearts enough to experience true unconditional love, because that is all any of them want to give. I hope that, someday, someone will love you as much as Olivia loves me. I hope that, someday, you will love somebody as much as I love her. I love you, Olivia.

Soeren Palumbo