

One Thing You Can't Hide

by [Jeff Plude](#) (October 2019)



My Buddy Mike, Karen Plude, 2003

One time a friend of mine who's a high school soccer coach was yelling some instructions to one of his players during a game, as he often did. But this one particular time it was to a player who was an exchange student from Germany named Richard, and my friend used the pronunciation the boy would've heard back home: "REEkard!..."

After the game, my friend's father, a mailman, made a beeline to his son and started to ream him out, saying something like: "Why did you call one of your players a retard? You shouldn't say that." My friend calmly explained to his father that that's not what he yelled, and gave him a very brief lesson in Teutonic phonetics.

That happened twenty-five to thirty years ago. That kind of parent, for the most part, is a relic of a more genteel world, at least outwardly. It's not that the word wasn't used back then. It's that *retard* was generally considered crude and cruel by sane, civilized people.

Now it seems ubiquitous, and I don't go a day without hearing or reading some derogative form of it. Even from people who are supposed to be our leaders.

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For instance, Kamala Harris, one of the more prominent Democratic presidential candidates, recently reacted in the exact opposite manner than my friend's father the mailman. She was taking questions at a town hall sort of event outdoors, and a pudgy middle-aged guy from India, judging from his thick accent, was rambling about President Trump and wound up his incoherent jeremiad with what has become for many a smug quip: he declared that the president is "mentally retarded."

Ms. Harris, who turns fifty-five this month, and is a former prosecutor, a former state attorney general, and a current U.S. senator from California, immediately responded with glee. "Well said!" she said with a big grin, laughing and clapping, "Well said!"

The seated crowd of liberal heads, including gray ones, laughed and clapped too.

She later claimed that she hadn't heard the damning phrase (a defense she's used before to mask other responses of hers that didn't play so well). But if you watch the video, I don't believe any but the most prejudiced jury would acquit Ms. Harris based on such plain evidence to the contrary.

As a former San Francisco district attorney, Ms. Harris would've been outraged, I suspect, if the commenter had called Mr. Trump the f-word. And I don't mean the curse word equivalent to a middle finger, which is what the f-word would've meant when I was younger. I don't even dare write the actual word I'm talking about, with context routinely ignored by political thugs, "journalists," pundits, and the twitter mob. The new f-word was a common epithet when I was younger to describe someone who was considered less than manly, but is now verboten. Sort of like the way rappers and their ilk—even women—nowadays use the term "bitch."

It's perhaps the only point that many Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, could agree on today: not that President Trump is unintelligent, but that calling someone *mentally retarded* who isn't, or simply a *retard*, is

not only acceptable to say, but positively hilarious. Check out the comments on any political blog and it probably won't be long before you run across "libtard," which so-called conservatives proudly say and write as if it's some ingenious neologism. One popular columnist on Breitbart.com proudly chastised "woke-tard America," and many commenters singled out that very phrase like it was the best *bon mot* they'd ever heard. (Sadly, for them, it may be.)

Even worse, Breitbart.com carried a story blasting Ms. Harris for her reaction to the Indian guy! And many commenters, some without the slightest hint of irony, called her in turn a "retard" or "retarded." A few reflected the old-fashioned take on the word, but they were a very small minority.

President Trump himself, on two appearances on Howard Stern's radio show back in 2004, has also called people "mentally retarded" who actually aren't (interestingly, one time he stopped short). But he denies referring to former Attorney General Jeff Sessions as such, as he is quoted as doing in Bob Woodward's book *Fear: Trump in the White House*, which came out last year.

Of all the unofficial off-limit words, why is *retard* and its variants not only fair game, but open season?

I think it's because that of all the so-called oppressed groups championed in the supposedly newly enlightened America, the mentally retarded are unable to defend themselves. They are also unable to vote. In other words, they are the perfect target for the wimp and the opportunist. It's also why *retard*

and *retarded*, when the latter is used as an insult, are particularly cowardly and cynical. The word also seems to be a handy crutch for the morally and culturally impoverished. And maybe the mentally retarded even serve as a kind of collective living and breathing *memento mori*, a striking reminder to all the rest of us supposed "normal" people of our own frail mind and body, not to mention heart and soul, and are therefore despised and degraded.

And in the oddest manifestation of all, with the rise of political correctness—which I also oppose in its more insidious forms—*retard* has become like the last verbal weapon in the thought-language wars, a sort of verbal Second Amendment to defend and protect the First Amendment. These wars have escalated to gargantuan proportions since the new millennium.

What I'm talking about has nothing to do with politics. It has to do with courtesy. It's also about manliness (not that women are exempt from callousness): If you want to pick on somebody, pick on somebody who can answer back to you. This used to be the unwritten code of comedy, for the most part. What used to set the real comedian apart was to mock those in power, or better yet the common man, which takes much more art and talent than to mock those who are generally mocked by the audience, meaning anybody below themselves.

Of course agitating all this is the internet, or more particularly, social media, which is closer to antisocial. It has emboldened the weaklings who would've been forced to leave their dwelling and venture into the street not very long ago and risk a confrontation, but now cower behind screens for much of their lives.

You may have noticed that I have used the phrase “mentally retarded” to refer to people who truly are. I don’t care for “mentally disabled” or “intellectually disabled,” the current euphemism, because it’s ambiguous—is the person schizophrenic? autistic? have Down syndrome? And even worse, I think, is “mentally challenged,” which has justly become a joke. “Special needs” sounds to me like some corporate or government department.

I believe the phrase *mentally retarded* still has descriptive value in referring to people afflicted as such. It was the preferred term for almost half of the past century, but in the early third millennium has been abandoned to the philistines.



I learned this a decade or so ago when a woman who was a group home aide once checked me when I referred to the “mentally retarded,” which is how polite people would’ve said it when I was a kid in the 1960s and ‘70s. And this woman was older than me. The agency she worked for calls the mentally retarded people under their care “consumers,” which only a hopeless bureaucrat, one not only in body but soul too, could say without bursting into laughter. I asked her what she called them and she said “the folks,” which also makes me laugh. This is the torturous, ludicrous result when useful words and phrases are surrendered to political and cultural militants.

Until 2010, New York state had a division called the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. I think it

was aptly named; someone who is developmentally disabled may not be mentally retarded. Today it's known as the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities. I've also found it to be inaccurate in another sense: the people it's mostly *for*, in my experience, is not the people with developmental disabilities but the ones who are paid to serve them.

My opinion comes from having a younger brother who was born with Down syndrome who became enmeshed in that system. But I also care about all this because I value words. I don't want to ban the so-called r-word, as some well-meaning but misguided people have tried to do. I think that just has the opposite effect and makes the word even more attractive to the malcontent. Besides, the word *retarded* has precision. The verb form comes from the French and means the same thing as it does in English, to delay, and that in turn comes from the Latin *tardus*, or "slow." In fact, when I was a kid people sometimes referred to a mentally retarded person as being "slow," and there was no mistaking what that meant.

For the record, I'm not walking around with some sensitivity meter. I am no social justice warrior by a long shot. Saying matter-of-factly that so-and-so has a retarded son, meaning a son with Down syndrome, doesn't rouse me in the least. I'm not trying to censor anybody, Mr. Jefferson forbid. I am all-in on the First Amendment, but the courts decided long ago that that comes with responsibilities, which especially younger people these days seem to be oblivious to.

But when it comes to *retard*, you can count me out. I don't want to talk to or read the writing of anybody who thinks that *retard* or *retarded* is clever or cute or, even more pathetic, an act of courage against tyranny. By all means, blurt it till

you're blue in the face or your brain, however much of one you have, explodes. It tells me as much about you as I want to know.

Among literary writers especially, it shows not merely a poverty of empathy but of artistry. William Kennedy, who won the Pulitzer Prize when he was fifty-six, once wrote that a "retarded orangutan" could've written a better short story than the first one he wrote. He said this in an essay, mind you, not in an interview, long after he wrote the short story in question, and in fact even after winning the MacArthur "genius grant" and the Pulitzer; in other words, he didn't say it when he was young, or off the top of his head. At the time I remember thinking, *That's the best a Pulitzer Prize winner in fiction can come up with? something a bunch of junior high punks would think is clever and cool?* Interestingly, Mr. Kennedy came up with this gem around the same time my friend's father the mailman was ready to ream his soccer coach son out for calling somebody (or so he thought) something similar.

To me, people who brandish *retard* or *retarded* as an insult may be much closer to what they mock than they may imagine. As for the legalistic types, I say that calling a person *retarded* who clearly is not is not any better.

The latter types can be almost comical in their sophistry. I remember a columnist in San Francisco writing that calling someone a *retard* or *retarded* was no different than calling them an *idiot* or *idiotic*. The argument, if you can call it that, went like this: *idiot* used to be a medical term to describe people with Down syndrome until it was replaced by *mentally retarded*, of which *retarded* is just a shortened form, and now that that has been replaced by *mentally challenged* or

mentally disabled, *retard* was now equivalent to *idiot* and therefore perfectly legitimate to use.

The only problem with this self-serving logic is that doctors never used the word *retard*, a noun, as a medical term that referred to people with Down syndrome and the like. The phrase used was indeed *mentally retarded*, and its shortened form *retarded* corresponds to *idiotic*, which was never used as a medical term. Also, the word *idiot* hasn't been used in that way for more than a half century, but the phrase *mentally retarded* was still being used into the new century.

Similarly to the San Francisco columnist, a friend of my wife's and mine in New York City once described something as "retarded"—she has a master's degree from a top-tier university. I purposely used the f-word right after that to test her reaction, and she passed with flying rainbow colors. I tried to point out to her the contradiction of her holding the f-word in contempt and not *retarded* in the way she blithely used it. She was not only unconvinced but mystified.

Another justification for the emancipation of *retard* is one that only a sadistic mother could love, one that I've read in comments on articles and forums. It concludes that because mentally retarded people don't know they're being insulted or mocked, it's not wrong to insult or mock them. The only problem with that logic, which its believers apparently don't realize could be turned around on them by their own intellectual superiors, is that mentally retarded people are indeed human, though many well-known people now and in the past, like eugenicists Margaret Sanger, Alexander Graham Bell, Peter Singer, and even Helen Keller, of all people! hardly think so. Not to mention that the mentally retarded have

different levels of intellectual understanding, just like all the rest of us, and some even work at jobs, and are happy or sad or even lonely.

As a kid, I remember seeing the 1968 movie *Charly*, which is based on the science fiction novel *Flowers for Algernon*. Charlie Gordon (who can't spell his own name correctly) is a mentally retarded man who is the subject of an experiment that eventually makes him a genius. At the beginning of the film, he's working in a bakery and is mercilessly ridiculed by a trio of coworkers. Tellingly, when Charlie shows up his tormentors with his new intelligence by operating a complicated machine that the leader of the gang runs, they sign a petition and get him fired. (When the scene starts, they see a paperback about the English constitution sticking out of Charlie's back pocket and one of them snatches it, opens it to a page, and says in his Brooklyn accent to the leader: "Hey Gimp . . . you know what a, uh, Magna Carta is?" Gimp: "Yeah, that's a cigar, ain't it?")

I suppose today there would be memes of Charlie on the internet, and great fun had by all the people like the guys he worked with at the bakery.

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Unlike most viewers, it hit especially close to home for me. I was four and a half years old when my brother Mike was born,

and he not only had Down syndrome but a congenitally dislocated hip that prevented him from ever walking. Growing up with someone like him—he lived at home until he was thirty-seven—makes a philosopher of you fast; I started asking questions most don't ask until they're much older, if they ever ask them at all.

My brother, needless to say, had a profound effect on our family. My mother took care of him full time, and at age seventy-five fought his moving to a group home. My father didn't fare well for the most part after Mike's birth; seventeen years later he died of a heart attack at fifty-six. He hadn't exactly taken care of himself physically, and there are other things that have since come to light that suggest that he was under great psychological strain, though it was of his own doing.

Albert Einstein had a friend who suffered a similar but more violent fate. Paul Ehrenfest was an Austrian physicist who met Mr. Einstein when he came to Prague looking for a job and both men were in their early thirties. Two decades later, in 1933, Mr. Einstein received news that Mr. Ehrenfest, having recently gotten divorced, visited his 16-year-old son with Down syndrome in the institution where he was living and shot him in the face, then turned the gun on himself. By a miracle, the boy survived (though he lost an eye); his father didn't fare as well.

Walter Isaacson, who recounts the anecdote in *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, says Mr. Ehrenfest's suicide "deeply unnerved" his old friend. I'm not saying that Down syndrome caused Mr. Ehrenfest's death or my father's, only that it may have been a contributing factor among others.

I don't discount the good things—even joys—that such children bring their families; I know that firsthand too. But I can imagine all too well what both my father and Mr. Ehrenfest may have heard in the course of any given day that painfully reminded each man of a son who not only would never graduate from school, who would never get married, who would never have a family of his own, but who would always be a dependent and who would require more care as the years wore on, not less.

Of course another implication, maybe the most malicious of all, is that the parents themselves are somehow deficient or to blame. And even if it wasn't their fault to have conceived such a monstrous birth, why didn't they abort it? Mike was born several years before Roe v. Wade, but I have no doubt that my parents, who were Catholic but very rarely attended church, would never have considered killing their unborn child even if they'd known before he was born how imperfect he would be.

But I wonder if such accusers would be surprised to learn that not only Mr. Ehrenfest, whom Mr. Einstein considered a gifted physicist and teacher, but that such luminaries of modern history as General Charles de Gaulle had a mentally retarded child. In M. De Gaulle's case, it was his youngest of three children, Anne, who was born with Down syndrome; she died at age twenty, and M. De Gaulle reportedly doted on her. In contrast, Rosemary Kennedy, the oldest sister of President John Kennedy and Senator Robert Kennedy, was mentally retarded but you would never know it to look at her—she was quite pretty, perhaps the best looking of the sisters (one of whom created the Special Olympics as a result). But apparently Rosemary didn't please her Machiavellian father; at his behest

she underwent a lobotomy when she was twenty-three that left her incapacitated and having to be institutionalized for the rest of her life, until she died at eighty-six.

Much has improved in the intervening years for the mentally retarded, but much has not as well, human nature being what it is. With the decline of civility and respect for language, we shouldn't be surprised that website moderators and their Big Tech overseers who have grown up with the mainstreaming of *retard* can't see or imagine anything bad about it.

I flinch when I hear it, but even more than that I'm bewildered. A couple of years ago during an annual visit to my wife's family, a niece, who has a bachelor's degree, described something as being "retarded." At the time, she was thirty years old and had a stepdaughter. During the same visit another niece, who was a senior in high school, asked my wife to take another photo of her because in the previous one she looked "retarded." My wife scolded her because that's what her own mother would have done (and then some). My wife's sister, the girl's mother, chimed in too, though lightly and only after her big sister beat her to it. Anyhow, it appeared to be of no avail.

Neither my wife or her two sisters would've ever dared to use *retarded* in that way when they were growing up in the sixties and seventies. It was just how most civilized people were brought up, especially middle-class people, who know perhaps all too well what it's like to be discounted.

I'm also bewildered that for some odd reason, the people who

play pop and rock music seem to be especially prone to *retard*, at least in my experience.

A rock guitar player I know who is now past middle age can't seem to stop saying it; one time it was in our house, and I just walked away from him until he and his wife left. To his credit, he called me to apologize the next day, not understanding why I wasn't thrilled, even though he knew about my brother, who had been going through an especially hard time during that period and which he knew about. But then he started up again when we got together another time with them. And better yet, he considers himself a Christian.

In maybe the most blatant public example, the rap group Black-Eyed Peas composed (if you can call it that) and performed a song called "Let's Get Retarded." It was so popular that it was played at the 2004 NBA Playoffs on ABC, with the title and song edited to "Let's Get It Started." The reworked version of the song was apparently even more well received, and was thus retained. After all, lip service to freedom of speech and artistic license never trumps mammon.

And then there's John Lennon, the Zeus of the gods of rock. At a concert in 1964, Mr. Lennon shamelessly mocked the mentally retarded while he was onstage, imitating garbled speech ("claph your handths") and awkwardly moving his bent fingers of both hands together, then angling one leg and stamping his foot hard, all the while making a face with his tongue sticking out. At the time, he was twenty-four. In a sort of act of contrition, perhaps, eight years later he performed at a benefit for mentally retarded children that was organized by Geraldo Rivera, who helped publicize in a TV exposé the subhuman conditions at Willowbrook State School on Staten

Island in 1972. It all eventually lead to the closure of such institutions and the creation of “group homes.”

In 1971, Mr. Lennon’s most famous solo album, *Imagine*, contained a jangling yet catchy ditty called “Crippled Inside.” It was a subject I suspect he was a firsthand expert on; if even a quarter of the things are true in the revelations about him that have emerged since his death, the guy who wrote “Give Peace a Chance” wasn’t a very peaceful or nice guy himself, to say the least. And presumably more than a few people already knew that. As Mr. Lennon sang in the refrain:

One thing you can’t hide

is when you’re crippled inside

(*Crippled* itself has come under scrutiny, and has now been replaced by *disabled*.)

In this instance, Mr. Lennon spoke the truth. The words we use betray our thoughts, or as the Bible says, “the abundance of the heart.” Indeed, the Bible emphasizes the dangerous power of words. Solomon wrote that the tongue has the power of life and death. James, Jesus’s brother, likens the tongue to “a fire, a world of iniquity” and “an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” And Jesus himself said that after we die we will all be judged by every idle word we speak—a chilling thought, for those of us who think about such things.

I think of my brother Mike, who, after my wife and I used to drop him off at his group home after taking him out for pizza and singing his favorite songs in the car, would always say to me “T’ank you.” He did not have much of a brain (though he was much smarter than you might think, and had a keen sense of humor—just ask my wife, whom he liked to tease). But his heart, which finally gave out just shy of fifty-two years, was as big if not bigger than many of his supposed betters.

As Jesus said, when all is said and done: “So the last shall be first, and the first last.”

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