

You can't unring the bell

Margaret Stephens | Oct. 14, 2010

VIEWPOINT

"Mom, can I talk to you?"

What mother doesn't immediately halt whatever she's doing at those words, especially when the child is a son who hasn't requested all that much mom-talk in recent years?

I shake dishwater from my hands and follow my 21-year-old out of the kitchen, out of earshot (his request) of his teen sister. Something up with his girlfriend, maybe, or second thoughts about the heavy academic load he's scheduled for his junior year? As I settle cross-legged onto the couch, I'm feeling pretty good about my parenting skills: My independent college son still wants my attention, my obviously stellar advice!

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Instead he turns on me that high-intensity glare that immediately reminds me why my mother nicknamed him "the Judge" when he was 4 months old.

"I don't like to hear you using that word," he begins.

I rewind my mental tape of our last half hour. I don't recall cussing, can't think why he'd object if I did.

But it's not profanity he's taking me to task for. It's because I called his 14-year-old sister "lazy."

"I didn't! I protest. I would never do that!" I had learned well in Parent-Child Communication 101: Attack the sin, not the sinner. "What I said was, 'It's not that I think you're lazy, but ...'?"

He allows a moment of silence, just long enough that I begin to squirm. Where did he learn this timing? It's been years since he's watched his lawyer-father question a witness on the stand, but his level stare would silence the most self-deceiving meth addict's rationalizing burble.

"You know that by even *mentioning* the word 'lazy,' you've introduced the concept. It doesn't matter if what you were saying is you don't think she is. You've brought it up. 'Lazy.' So now it's there. You've made it an issue."

In other words, I'm guilty. Bad mother: I've attacked my daughter's fragile adolescent self-esteem at an age when she -- when any adolescent -- most needs building up.

Before I crumple completely, I agree with him that, yes, OK, what I did is like in a jury trial when a prosecutor

sneaks in a question with a potentially damning answer. The defense attorney can object, the judge order the question and its answer formally stricken from the record, but the words linger. Like that faint brown smudge on my favorite pink shirt: I've "shouted" it, washed it, washed it again, and now you can't quite discern the actual drops of the coffee I dribbled. But ain't nothing going to remove that stain.

The judge can order the jury all she likes to disregard what was just said, but short of a lobotomy, you can't erase what's been put in a mind.

Not for nothing do judges call that instruction to disregard as "unringing a bell." Can't do it.

Now, no matter how fluently I describe to you the eight-hour ballet rehearsals on excruciatingly painful pointe my daughter endures as the ballet company she apprentices with prepares for performance; list until my printer runs out of ink the household chores she's done since she was old enough to reach our kitchen sink -- the damage is done. From now on, lingering somewhere in the back of your mind is that derogatory word, that potential accusation. You're going to associate the image of my daughter with the word "lazy."

Which is exactly what the Vatican achieved with its release last summer of a document containing revisions to what it considers *delicta graviora*, the church's most serious category of crimes. As it was expected to do, the document discusses the sexual abuse of children by priests.

But the same document also categorizes as *delicta graviora* -- not exactly in the same breath but certainly in the same pages -- discussing the attempted ordination of women.

Vatican officials quickly explained that this unfortunate conjunction was not to be interpreted as meaning they view the two crimes as in any way equivalent. They clarify that one is a moral crime, the other a crime against the sacraments. But for all intents and purposes, the two are now irretrievably linked in the public mind. Our minds. Those uppity women and the pedophilic priests preying on our children ... "Objection, your honor."

"Sustained. Please disregard."

But the jury's heard the words; that bell can't be unrung. Women who believe themselves called to the priesthood, women who support those women who have such a call -- they are now tangled in our news-drenched minds with those priests guilty of child abuse at its most manipulative and perfidious, criminal behavior so heinous that imprisoned perpetrators are scorned and threatened by run-of-the-mill rapists and murderers. Every time the church says, "Oh, no, no, no! That's not at all what we meant! How can you even think the church believes that the two are equivalent?" and every time another news article repeats the church's denial of any such intent, the association is only driven deeper into our minds.

The bell is rung again.

"It's not that I think you're lazy ...?"

Those sound waves are going to linger for a long, long time.

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