

Saying It

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“DO YOU WANT to meet Sharon?” my important friend asked, as if he were offering me dessert. “Okay,” I said, although I didn’t, not ever, and certainly not at the end of a tedious dinner in a hotel ballroom to celebrate her famous company’s convoluted and entirely accidental contribution to world peace.

I followed my friend as he pushed through the crowd, toward the center of the pulsing room, to the sparkling table where Sharon sat, to Sharon’s scary left arm, which he gently touched while asking her to stand, toward the moment when she looked at me with her small and practiced smile, and I opened my mouth to comment on her recent *New Yorker* profile but instead, unaccountably, mortifyingly, self-immolatingly said:

“You’re so pretty.”

♦

Speech is an elegant, complex process that requires the brain quickly and precisely to coordinate lips, jaw, tongue, and larynx to produce coherent and targeted expressions. Control over the process is centered in the brain’s prefrontal cortex, where, as a result of intense early learning and experience, we intuitively make and constantly adapt rapid plans for the words that leave our mouths. The effort spans both hemispheres of the brain, and requires us to observe and judge our surroundings, accurately associate words with perceived sensations and ideas, convert those associations into articulable sounds, and then vocalize them to our conversational audience.

Despite this precise biology, however, people can’t resist saying things they instantly regret. It is preferable, the Stoics opined, “to trip with the feet than with the tongue.” Unfortunately, humans are accomplished at both skills, and spontaneous blurts are an undeniable bane.



Two years into my job as a federal prosecutor in Brooklyn, I tried the biggest narcotics case of my life. Charles Fulton was a prolific, wily trafficker who'd escaped prosecution for years, and there was considerable pressure from above—from Main Justice, from my immediate supervisors at the US attorney's office—not to screw it up.

My proof was largely circumstantial and uncomfortably relied on testimony from a very smart, very slippery confidential informant who regularly purchased large and dangerously pure quantities of heroin from Fulton. Complicating my odds of getting a conviction was the judge's animosity toward prosecutors in general and me, in particular, because the Fulton trial started just as he was passing a kidney stone.

"Remember, counselor," the judge glared at me the morning of trial, "don't go throwing accusations around in your opening statement. You have to *prove* Mr. Fulton is a heroin dealer before you can *call* him one."

"Absolutely, your honor," I answered, and I meant it. I'd rehearsed the statement just moments before in my downstairs office and had memorized the first line I'd present to the jury: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is a case about large-scale, gangland-style heroin trafficking!"

The judge called in the jury.

"Counselor," he barked at me, "opening statement."

I rose and looked at the twelve jurors and four alternates, staring from the jury box ten feet away.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I announced, in direct contravention of the judge's order and my fixed intent, "Charles Fulton is a heroin dealer!"



"Do not let your tongue outrun your mind," counseled Chiron of Sparta, one of the great sages of ancient Greece.

Nonetheless, our tongues outrun our minds all the time. Ancient Egyptians deplored ill-considered speech and thought women worse

blurters than men, attributing the cause to their unfortunate natures and anatomy. Buddha considered unfortunate speech a failure of self-control; “rule your mind,” he cautioned, “or it will rule you.” St. Augustine acknowledged, “who is there who does not slip with the tongue and does not offend with words,” blaming this and all other human shortcomings on original sin. The seventeenth-century writer La Rochefoucauld ascribed intemperate discourse to vanity.

Rather than sinfulness or conceit, more recent scholarship suggests that arousal is the primary cause of regrettable disclosures. When stressed, alert to danger, pressed to perform at our highest levels, humans are more likely to broadcast inappropriate or incriminating information. Arousal numbs the self-editing process we usually undertake during conversation, exhausting the brain’s cognitive resources so that we have less ability to control what comes out of our mouths. And while stress-induced blurting doesn’t necessarily reflect inner truths, it can tank a person’s chances during a job interview, on a first date, or in a courtroom where the judge already can’t stand you.



In the 1980s, federal crime was a constant occupation in New York’s Eastern District. At the US attorney’s office, prosecutors were on call twenty-four hours a day for federal agents who needed help securing search or arrest warrants, while judges and magistrates took reluctant turns reviewing and authorizing our regular, predawn applications.

Which is how I found myself at 2:00 a.m. on a frigid February morning sitting with two FBI agents around the kitchen table in Judge Corcoran’s Brooklyn apartment, asking him to approve an emergency wiretap. The targets were serious mobsters who were planning an imminent hit on a high-ranking member of a rival crime family. The agents were jumpy and irritable, as was the judge, then eighty-three years old and wearing a muted silk robe over striped pajamas while he read the lengthy affidavit supporting our request.

I’d had a cold for what seemed like months, with a nagging and reverberant cough that raised the judge’s hackles, rattling the papers

scattered over his table and interrupting the tense flow of his questions and our answers. After one prolonged display, the judge scowled over his glasses at me.

“You’re not long for this world,” he snapped.

“Neither are you,” I answered, to my complete shock and the certain defeat of our wiretap request.



Rhetoricians have long recognized that spontaneous utterances invariably contain inappropriate witticisms, angry insults, profane expression, and other lamentable information. “The tongue,” noted Meander in the fourth century BCE, “has led many men to destruction.”

The ancients were famous for unedited outbursts and dangerously provocative invective. Cicero publicly accused his enemy Clodius of incest with his brothers and sisters, while Aristophanes labeled the Athenian general and dictator Cleon a thief and ass kisser. The Roman poet Martial called his rival Vaccera “an informer and a muckraker, a con-man wheeler-dealer, a gigolo and an educator in evil. . . and, amazingly, still broke.” Those insulted were honor bound to exact revenge, but rarely resorted to violence in the process.

Two thousand years and vastly more insults later, however, things were different in both the Old World and the New. After Hamilton fulminated over Burr’s foibles during an 1804 dinner party, he died from the bullet Burr subsequently shot through his liver and diaphragm. Because both had poor aim, John Randolph and Henry Clay survived a duel they fought in 1826 after the hot-headed Randolph accused Clay on the Senate floor of cheating at cards. Andrew Jackson was forever insulting his enemies and their wives, fighting and surviving over a hundred duels in his lifetime.

Modern sporting arenas are equally rife with arousal-spurred blurting. Andy Roddick is a courtside ranter and tennis-racket thrower. The legendarily foul-mouthed Mark Cuban has been fined fourteen times and thrice suspended during his ownership tenure with the Dallas Mavericks. Serena Williams once threatened to shove a ball

down a linesman's throat. Gennaro Gattuso was famous for his short fuse and stunningly deployed insults while a defensive midfielder for AC Milan. Tiger Woods swears with abandon after disappointing line drives, despite an ardently professed desire not to do so.

As Horace cautioned the ancient Romans, "once a word has been allowed to escape, it cannot be recalled." But, then, Horace himself was famous for talking smack despite his own best advice.



Mookie Zantz was a strikingly inept prosecutor, who left government service to become an even more useless defense attorney. When I transferred to the US attorney's office in San Francisco in 1990, Mookie represented my defendants in more cases than I could bear.

"Ask around about me," Mookie would tell me every time we met. "I'm very good at what I do."

Because it's virtually impossible to move a criminal case through the system when you feud with defense counsel, I kept my head down around Mookie until one particularly testy hearing in a narcotics case.

"Women get *so* worked up," Mookie remarked as we left the courtroom. "Whereas, ask around about me. I'm very good at what I do."

"I *have* asked around about you, Mookie," my loud voice answered, even though my brain begged me not to. "And I've found that you're a complete, fucking idiot."

"Typical," Mookie sniffed.

Thereafter, he insisted that because of my "intemperance," I only communicate with him in writing.



Aristotle believed that women were "utterly useless," inferior to men both physically and intellectually, and lacking complete control over their emotions and their mouths. Fourth-century Chinese culture deplored assertive women, equating female passivity with virtue, while in Ovid's "Metamorphoses," Jupiter turned Io into a cow

with the sanguine result that she moomed rather than talked ever after. In the classical world, writes Mary Beard, “the tone and timbre of women’s speech always threatened to subvert not just the voice of the male orator, but also the social and political stability, the health, of the whole state.”

If anecdotal evidence is any guide, however, men do the majority of blurting in the contemporary world. Prince Phillip, the consort to Great Britain’s fanatically discreet Queen Elizabeth II, was perhaps the most famous gaffer of the modern era. “Deaf?” he announced to a group of hearing-challenged schoolchildren who were standing next to steel drums at a music festival, “If you’re near there, no wonder you are deaf.” “Do you still throw spears at each other?” he asked an indigenous peoples’ assembly during a 2002 visit to Australia. “You look like you’re ready for bed!” he informed the president of Nigeria who was dressed in traditional robes for the English monarch’s 2003 visit.

Phillip is not an isolated example. After touring the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, Justin Bieber opined that “Anne was a great girl,” and wrote in the museum guest book that had she not died in a Nazi prison camp, “Hopefully she would have been a Belieber.”

At a campaign stop in Missouri during his 2008 run for the presidency, Joe Biden exhorted Senator Chuck Graham, wheelchair bound since the age of sixteen, to “stand up. Let the people see you.” During the 2019 primaries, Biden assured Des Moines voters that “poor kids are just as bright and just as talented as white kids.”

Even the stunningly measured Barack Obama blurts on occasion, most notoriously when Jay Leno asked about his bowling game during a 2009 *Tonight Show* appearance. “It’s like Special Olympics or something,” Obama gaffed, then called Sargent Shriver from Air Force One to apologize and invite Special Olympics kids to the White House for some basketball or bowling.

“Nothing is often a good thing to do,” wrote Will Durant, “and always a good thing to say.” I wonder, though, if Will Durant was ever aroused.



Law students frequently aspired to intern at the US attorney's office, and line prosecutors were assigned to mentor them in turn. Scrambling to stay on top of my caseload, I had no interest in shepherding students around courtrooms, and dodged the obligation for years until the chief of general crimes cornered me in my office one morning with "Jeff, from Yale."

Jeff was a sweet kid, but after three days of my benignly neglectful supervision, he judiciously got himself reassigned to a far less self-involved attorney.

Weeks later, I was taking the back stairs up to the office from court as Jeff was coming down them, and stricken with rare and fleeting remorse I gave him a big wave.

"Hi, Jean!" he called out.

"I'm not 'Jean,'" I corrected him, "I'm 'Joan.'"

Which was nuts, because actually I'm "Anne."



The ancients believed women were predisposed to emotional and behavioral disturbances and coined the condition *hysteria*. The physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia and his like blamed the uterus, which he compared to

an animal; for it is moved of itself hither and thither in the flanks, also upwards in a direct line to below the cartilage of the thorax, and also obliquely to the right or to the left, either to the liver or the spleen, and it likewise is subject to prolapsus downwards, and in a word, it is altogether erratic.

Early and medieval Christians assumed female hysterics were possessed by the devil and utilized a combination of prayer, exorcism, and torture to cure them. Beginning in the sixteenth century, however, scholars and physicians more benignly concluded that hysteria was a mental disease, properly ameliorated by regular marital sex, frequent pregnancy, childbirth, daily orgasms, and the occasional rest cure.

By the early twentieth century, female hysteria encompassed a burgeoning range of symptoms, including compulsive speech or

muteness, inappropriate movement or paralysis, deafness, hallucinations, anxiety, insomnia, fainting, amnesia. Severely affected patients were hospitalized or institutionalized, treated with hypnosis, physical restraints, and pelvic massage to induce climax. Only in the latter half of the twentieth century did mental-health experts abandon hysteria as a viable medical diagnosis. For one thing, manifestations of the purported disease were equally evident in male *and* female patients. For another, the myriad emotional disturbances once confidently attributed to hysteria deserved more nuanced and specialized investigation.

Clearly, not all hysterics were women.

And not all trash-talking women were crazy.



After leaving the US attorney's office and, years later, the practice of law itself, I became a high-school civics teacher. The curriculum was appealing to me, particularly the opportunity it gave me to educate students about their Fifth Amendment privilege *not* to talk; their right to resist state-imposed importunities to blurt, to confess, to disclose matters they were entitled to keep close.

In my third year of teaching, the vice principal informed me that one of my entering students struggled with an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

"What kind of compulsion?" I asked.

"A very verbal one," she said.

"What would you advise?" I asked.

"Try to stay calm," she counseled.

A few days later, twenty-eight new students filed into my classroom and, as protocol required, I took attendance.

"Eugenio Alvarez!" I called out.

"Here," he answered.

"Ajah Bodein!" I called.

"Here," she responded.

And so it went down the line, until I got to a skinny, red-haired kid sitting in the back row, with a bouncy right knee and small, tight grimace.

I called his name in my calmest voice.
 “PUBIC HAIR!” he screamed, in agonized response.



Coprolalia (from the Greek words *kópros* [feces] and *lalía* [speech]) afflicts approximately one percent of the human population. Those affected involuntarily blurt obscene or socially inappropriate words, often accompanied by barking, grunting, coughing, sniffing, throat clearing, and other autonomic sounds. Individual sufferers may display behavioral tics, as well, such as jumping, head bobbing, and jerking, and can be plagued by related compulsions like echolalia (the compulsive repetition of another person’s spoken words) and klazomania (involuntary shouting).

Although it implicates a variety of neurological disorders, coprolalia is most closely associated with Tourette syndrome. Georges Albert Édouard Gilles de la Tourette was an irascible and highly astute late-nineteenth-century physician who studied “hysteria-driven” verbal and behavioral tics at Salpêtrière, the infamous Parisian women’s prison and mental asylum. Tourette compared the behaviors at Salpêtrière with information he was given about the “Jumping Frenchmen of Maine,” a community of incorrigibly intermarrying lumberjacks near the Canadian border who demonstrated jumping, shouting, hitting, and other doings that were virtually identical to those he observed in Paris.

Tourette lectured and published widely about this “maladie des tics,” and was rewarded by having the syndrome eponymously rebranded. As Tourette recognized, coprolalia and its associated tics can be excruciatingly embarrassing for both the afflicted and those around them. He could not, however, identify a cure, a condition that persists to this day.

Tourette used hypnotic suggestion to reduce verbal outbursts in his patients but met with little success. Contemporary therapeutic responses are equally imperfect. Sufferers are often prescribed antidepressants and anxiolytics with the hope that reduced anxiety levels will curtail verbal spasms. Others undergo habit-reversal therapy to

learn how to predict and, with any luck, minimize scandalous outbursts. Most recently, physicians have tried injecting Botox into coprolalia's vocal cords; the organs' resulting partial paralysis helps control the volume, if not the content and frequency, of offensive utterances.

Ultimately, therapists counsel patience and tolerance on the part of both the afflicted and those at the receiving end of their blurts. As the great seventeenth-century shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu recognized, "Forbearance is the root of quietness and assurance forever."



"Do you want to meet Nora?" offered my accomplished friend, at the glittering cocktail party.

"Okay," I said, although I really did not, having nothing in common with that remarkably talented woman who pioneered a modern science and managed an Ivy League laboratory and traveled the world regaling grand audiences with her knowledge and finesse.

I followed my friend through the tightly packed living room, toward a shimmering sofa by the blazing fireplace, toward an elegantly dressed woman holding a flickering glass of wine, to the cushion where my friend seated me, toward the moment when Nora looked at me to ask about the single acquaintance we might possibly have in common.

"Do you know X?" Nora said over the bubble and roar of surrounding conversation.

"I do," I said, and did know him as a noted linguist, a famous friend to others in his field, a warm and gifted speaker, a lovely man.

"And what do you think of him?" she asked.

"I think he's a god," I answered.

Nora paused, and then nodded.

"Yes," she agreed, "he *is* odd."

It was quiet for the brief second it took to register her blurt, and then we collapsed into helpless laughter.