

The Power of a Word

March 13, 2007

Scholars, theologians, and people of polite society, all seem to agree that words hold more potential for human destruction than the largest bomb that man has yet to manufacture. Certain words not only have the power to destroy, they also have the power to corrupt. Such is the corruptive influence of the use of the “N” word.

Although less in public use among white well educated professional adults of today, the “N” word, after being seriously challenged during the all too brief emergence of African American pride during the 1960’s, is in full force today among African American youth, and to a lesser degree, among young “hip” white teenagers and adults to express their association with the Hip-Hop generation. Perhaps everyone needs to understand the history and the cultural corruption that the use of the “N” word has caused. The Spanish word “negro” has its roots in the Latin word for Black, niger. When anglicized by the English, the word niger quickly became negar, and eventually nigger.

It was then, as it is now, a term used as a derogatory racial epithet. At one time its use was so common that the “N” word was used in popular entertainment vehicles such as plays, books, and songs. For example it was used by the Irish writer Bram Stoker of Dracula fame in his 1911 novel, *The Lair of the White Worm*, to describe the servant Oolanga. Gilbert & Sullivan’s great opera, *The Mikado*, uses the “N” word, as does Harper Lee’s 1960 novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Agatha Christie’s famous book, *Ten Little Indians*, was first published as *Ten Little Niggers*. Even the heart warming tale of personal heroism and sacrifice, *the Scarlet Pimpernel*, contains a disturbingly frequent and casual use of the “N” word. Although it’s true that the use of the “N”

word has become less popular among America's mainstream society, the corruptive aspects of the word is more evident today than it was during the time of actual slavery.

Whether it was Louisiana Governor Earl Long's paternal use of the "N" word, while simultaneously advocating voting rights for African Americans, or the 2006 meltdown of comedienne Michael Richards, in front of a black and Hispanic audience, the use of the "N" word is today still used to deny dignity to African Americans. Today the "N" word defines blacks in terms of non seriousness, emotionally driven lightweights, not capable of running a business, being mayor of a city, and certainly not capable of being the President of the United States. The effects of those beliefs keep many, although thankfully not all, young African Americans from believing that they can attain the goals that are considered an entitlement for all of America's young people. As a result of their beliefs, and the corruptive imprimatur of Hip Hop music, many young blacks have started using the word "N" word as an act of rebellion and camaraderie. However, their use of the word has had the effect of giving license to non blacks to use the word, After all whether it comes out of the mouth of George Wallace, or Billboard's number one rapper, its still the "N" word. That's the power of corruption.

On February 26, the St. Louis Clergy Coalition in conjunction with the Urban League, the St. Louis Black Leadership Roundtable and the NAACP joined together to take a stand against the use of the "N" word in our schools, businesses, communities and families. Thankfully, the Say No to the "N" Word campaign is catching on across the country. Recently, the New York City Council passed a resolution banning the use of the "N" word. The resolution also asks that songs using the "N" word be excluded from consideration for Grammy Awards. In addition, online search companies Google and Microsoft have rejected an advertising campaign from a hip hop website called RapSpace.tv, citing the use of the "N" word as the lyrical theme in a contest being held on the site.

As we move forward in the fight to remove the "N" word from our vocabularies, African Americans should remember that this was the name that was carved on the bodies of dead slaves and that it was the name that every lynching victim was called prior to his or her murder. We

should ask ourselves why we use a racial slur to define ourselves. If we can't stop using this word, how can we expect others to stop using this word? To help with this campaign we should challenge anyone who uses this word in our presence, whether they are black, white, Asian, or Hispanic.

As a family, neighborhood, community, and country, we must commit ourselves to eliminating this vile and evil word from the lexicon of our language. It must be eliminated in the same way that enlightened people don't use the word *handicapped* anymore to refer to the *physically challenged*. The "N" word is not a term of endearment, rather it is the courier of corruption that distorts the dignity of whites and diminishes the potential of blacks. Although we may not all agree on serious issues such as the war in Iraq, we can all agree on the need to improve ourselves and those around us by committing to eliminate the use of the "N" word.