

Confessions of a (moderate) prude

I am finally old enough to admit something: the mysteries of adulthood, those "mature themes" we try to hide from the young, are mostly stupid.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [April 11, 2018](#) issue



Thinkstock

Middle age began for me on the day I realized my oldest child was now an AC/DC fan.

For every enthusiasm of a nine-year-old, a father has only himself to blame. We go to several White Sox games every year, and he knows that I like to get there early enough to hear “Thunderstruck” before the game. I feel giddy in a ballpark, with that excessive rock-and-roll smorgasbord thrumming through the concrete. So when I suggested he select some walk-up music, like ballplayers have, to help push himself to swallow some revolting medicine—yes, this is cutting-edge Dad praxis—he chose

“Thunderstruck” without a moment’s hesitation. Thirty doses later, he knew the song intimately, down to its insipid lyrics. And he had branched out between doses to the other high points of the band’s catalog: “Back in Black,” “Highway to Hell,” “T.N.T.,” “You Shook Me All Night Long.”

There is, of course, nothing at all unusual about a preteen learning pop music with so-called “adult themes” by heart. If anything, my kids are rather sheltered in that regard, forced by lack of alternatives to pick up music that was au courant during (or even before) my own childhood. And it’s not that we have hidden the basic facts of human sexuality from him—let alone the more traumatic basic facts of American history, or the way AC/DC’s first lead singer died. But he certainly hadn’t learned, from his parents or anyone else, what a singer might mean by comparing a woman to a “fast machine” who “kept her motor clean.” And for a moment, hovering over our new “Guys with Guitars” playlist, I wished against reason and hope that he never would. I can explain penises and vaginas whenever needed. I don’t wish to explain why a single band has written hundreds of songs about penises and vaginas without once using either word. I was finally old enough to admit, at least to myself, that the mysteries of adulthood that we try to hide from the young are mostly stupid.

Prudishness is on the march—on this, everyone in our shivering republic seems to agree. The only point of disagreement is where it is marching to. Inhibitions and prohibitions recede in one area or among one cohort and advance somewhere else. In some places, including the Oval Office, crude and vicious characterizations of ethnic or racial groups have become more casual and widespread than at any time in my memory. In other places, newly refined terminology and attitudes are being constantly deployed. In some venues and some media, sex is less and less subject to any taboo. In others, there are overdue consequences for ungoverned mouths and hands.

Critics of the #MeToo movement have accused its advocates of inviting a new winter of prudishness. Writing for the *American Interest*, Claire Berlinski, along with articulating serious concerns about procedural fairness and proportionality, warned of a sullen age when men and women won’t be able to “flirt, play, lewdly joke, desire, seduce, tease” in the workplace as they are wont to do. I confess this argument has caught me up short. Leaving aside how exactly one is to draw a clear line between bona fide harassment and innocent lewdness, I can’t find the baby that is at risk of being thrown out with this particular bathwater.

Having worked mostly in churches, it's no particular surprise that the part of the sexual revolution where people felt free to chat about pornography at the office passed me by. Still, it's the height of oddity to claim that Americans—of whatever vocational circumstance, political bent, or religious affiliation—suffer from too much bashfulness. We may suffer from too little honesty or too little courage. But our self-expression—the voice we give our opinions, experiences, and desires—is the most sacred thing left in our emptying cupboard of household gods.

This self-expression was supposed to be the spoils of adulthood. We would win it by experience, good and bad, and the ensuing wisdom that would grant both freedom and discretion. First taboo, then transgression, and eventually responsibility. First no swearing allowed, then entirely too much swearing, then swearing deployed for some purposes but not others.

But this was, for lack of a better term, bullshit. The tittering adolescent fixation that gave AC/DC's lead singer something to say over those guitar parts turned out to be no different from what happens in a TV network's green room or in the halls of Congress. Our parents and grandparents wrested all this freedom from the schoolmarms, the churches, and the censors—or had it handed to them after those people gave up—only for it to get used to defend a president who says that Africans come from “shithole countries.” Or to make a movie like *Sausage Party* and give it a disclaimer that despite being a cartoon it is not, in fact, for kids. If we segregate these movies or this president from children, it's not because they're too “mature.” It's because they are an affront to the idea of maturity. It is humiliating to explain what they mean. Children should be allowed to learn that we are running a con game on them in their own time.

One of the great privileges of adulthood is saying, “That's how it was when I was growing up, and I turned out fine.” I've probably said something like this to myself a hundred times. And until quite recently I believed it. I would have considered it reactionary, or at least unsophisticated, to believe that watching *The Kentucky Fried Movie* or *The Godfather* or listening to crude or cruel song lyrics from a rather young age cultivated some damaging assumptions about sexuality, masculinity, drugs, or anything else.

Will our children turn out all right? Did we?

I watched Anita Hill's calm, direct testimony when I was just old enough to know what the name "Long Dong Silver" was meant to convey and that workplace talk about pubic hair on a Coke can was weird and mortifying. I would have denied until now—when the stories echoing Hill's are being told with more fierceness and indignation than the Senate Judiciary Committee would have tolerated from her—that her story, its rejection by others, and the universal acquiescence to that result taught me a damaging unconscious lesson.

But that's sort of like imagining that growing up in an all-white community doesn't shape a person in invisible, harmful ways. No one has to be all that racist, just as no one has to take the analogy of female genitals to car parts all that seriously, in order for the moral and spiritual wounds to be sustained. It's an antinomian fantasy to imagine that I turned out all right. A moment's investigation makes clear that we are not a society of people who turned out all right.

Don't get me wrong: sex is good. Using Anglo-Saxon terms for intercourse and excrement can also be good, depending on context. Art and music and movies and public life can all handle these things frankly, honestly, joyfully, and irreverently. Despite my encroaching fuddy-duddiness, I saw *Call Me by Your Name* and you should too, if only to be reminded that youth and maturity are still real things you can make a movie about.

But whoever reads or listens or talks must choose from among infinite alternatives—and I will cheerfully choose prudishly whenever necessary. Many others, I suspect, will go much further to disengage. Not those older than I am, but younger, those who grew up without even the lingering scarcities and hypocrisies that screened off the "adult world" from people my age. They have been more egregiously tricked than I was. Modernity, it's been said, spreads in all directions, so we should not be surprised if enthusiasm for voluntary celibacy or banning pornography grows alongside the proliferation of sex robots.

So my own prudishness will no doubt remain relatively moderate, by which I mean my son and I will keep listening to AC/DC sometimes. But even becoming a moderate prude is a kind of liberation—different than the adolescent's escape from parental supervision, but no less a liberation. You can just let yourself be indignant that the sign for the new barbecue place in town apparently wants you to think about erections to encourage you to purchase their food. You can refuse to repeat the snickering, demeaning terminology of the president's hush-money story and

thereby resent its existence in your news diet all the more. You don't have to be cool about any of it, because being cool was a lie told to sell things and enable vile behavior. That's the road to truer honesty: Yes, this is what those words mean. That is why he says it. Yes, it's dumb.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Why I am a (moderate) prude."