



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Ear Pollution

Words



I guess if anyone has the right to cuss, it should be a woman. That's exactly what Judge Howard Rubin of Chicago said in his recent profanity decision. He ordered the Illinois Department of Revenue to stop discriminating against Pearl K. Fox, an employee, who complained the department was trying to fire her because she uses filthy language in the office, when no one seemed to complain that the men in the same office talked just as nasty.

I guess it's hard to live in Chicago. Especially if you work for the income tax department.

The case is landmark, however, because it points out that Americans are swearing more and enjoying it less. It used to be that profanity had only two purposes: to accent an oath or to shock. Now profane words are so numerous that even people who don't believe in hell or damnation use the terms as meaningless syllables to plug the holes in their faltering vocabulary.

It's one thing to hear a theologian exclaim "By God!" or as I described last week, a Shakespearean scholar use that unmentionable word to describe the condition of a mid-term paper, but

when some lout who doesn't even believe in God burps the name of the founder of Christianity in some bar-room brawl, it loses its meaning.

And so Pearl Fox and her male companions in the income tax office in Chicago do nothing more than exhibit what someone has called our inflated gross national grossness. The question is not whether women have the right to cuss. It's whether anyone has the right to cuss unless he's using the terms the way they ought to be used — to accent or to shock.

Even obscenity doesn't seem quite so obscene any more, now that it's for sale on every newsstand. Like the exposure of flesh. There is nothing less sexual than everyone walking around in the nude. Words which used to be reserved for once or twice in a lifetime when a man was angry enough to claw down walls or fight an army single-handedly, now come flowing through our TV sets, appear with regularity in print and even infiltrate the music our children listen to over "family" radio.

We live in a lazy generation — a generation too shiftless to search for just the right word. The problem we

face now is an acute shortage of words with power to shock or authority to rebuke. There are times, indeed, when men and women need not only to cuss — but to curse. There are atrocities, such as those in Cambodia, which deserve to be damned. There are hurts so deep that our everyday vocabulary just won't do. There are times when righteous men need to stand and curse all which is unholy. There are occasions, when a man is speaking to God, that he needs to forget all the plastic and phoney "thees" and "thous" and reach into the depths of his soul and dredge up whatever there is in the mire, and sling it through the windows of his confessional so he may be healed.

But when every word a man or woman might use to rebuke, shock or legitimately curse is now on the tongue of every housewife, teenager or TV comedian, there's not much left to be called sacred.

Sure, Pearl K. Fox has as much right to cuss as a man. The question is: Does anyone have the right to pollute all the air? If so, then who's going to believe you when the sky really is falling? Answer that, Chicken Little. This is JB saying