



Censorship and the Student Voice

Tom Romano

About ten a.m. I call the county vocational school, where the graphics students are printing our creative arts magazine. Only a week and a half remain before our seniors finish the year and I am concerned about the magazine's completion. I ask for Mr. Gent in the print shop and the secretary connects me.

A girl answers.

I tell her who I am and why I'm calling. I hear her voice catch, become guarded. She hems, she haws, clears her throat and says, "you're sup-

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posed to call Mr. Harmon."

"Why?" I inquire. "Who's he? What's he have to do with the magazine?"

"He's higher up," she blurts.

"OK," I say, laughing lightly.

I call Mr. Harmon (the assistant principal, I later discover) and tell him my name.

His voice does not catch. He neither hems, nor haws, nor clears his throat. In a dry, even, ominous tone he says, "There's a problem with the language in your magazine—the four letter words."

"Oh," I say and it is my voice that catches, my breath that quickens.

Mr. Harmon reads me part of a story, says that the *intuition* of the story is sex.

Intuition, I think. That was something women had before the feminist movement.

I say to Mr. Harmon, "You mean *implication*."

He's not concerned with semantics at this point. "The intuition," he repeats, "is sex."

Suddenly some of my composure returns, "I'll come out and talk to you tomorrow."

In a tone reeking of self-satisfaction, he confirms what I've said, "Fine, see you then."

Within minutes of hanging up, the seriousness of the situation corners me: The writing and artwork of forty-five students in jeopardy of not being published after weeks of hard work. Scenes only recently enacted are fresh in my memory: Joy, Becky, and Jeff poring over manuscripts, discussing the work we would use, hunting errors, making editorial decisions; the young writers listening carefully when we asked them to add detail to a passage, or to dramatize a scene, or to cut some unnecessary description; the young writers who had gone out and worked on their pieces and had then brought them proudly in; the four girls from the intensive office education class who had spent countless hours typing and retyping the manuscripts until they had clean finished copy, ready for the printer.

We have a problem? I took the writing and artwork to them a month ago. They have a problem!

I call again. "I'll be over today at two."

"Fine," Mr. Harmon says. "See you then."

My mind begins a frantic vaudeville act. I juggle the titles of scores of poems and stories. Which ones would he find offensive? Joy's "damn detention" and "oh shit"? Bobby's "my ass grounded" and "to hell with him"? Of course. The story containing that horror of horrors—sexual intuition? Certainly. Another piece flashes into my thoughts. Kim's story titled "The Battle." No, I decided. Parents would applaud this story which reveals the naive expectations of a starry eyed girl when she finally gets a date with Mr. Popular, an all around athlete, selfish, spoiled, and crude.

The rest of the day my mind dwells upon the forthcoming meeting with Mr. Harmon. I can talk to him, I figure, explain to him why the stories must contain those words, what the young writers are doing. I rest easy, gaining confidence.

Later in the afternoon, I sit in a chair with a loose armrest. Mr. Harmon sits forward, his arms folded on his big desk, and says flatly, "We at the vocational school can't associate ourselves with a publication that contains four letter words."

He snaps together his pen and leans back in

his chair.

I realize immediately he will not be swayed, but decide to talk to him anyway.

We are polite to each other. I imagine Harry Crews meeting Billy Graham.

Harmon goes on, "A girl in the print shop brought this to our attention. A girl mind you. I punished her for saying 'oh shit' to a teacher just last week."

Oh, Jesus, I think.

He picks up a manuscript, points out the word *damn* in Kim's story "The Battle," and two incongruous thoughts strike me at once: *This will be a breeze to explain/This will be hopeless to explain.*

"Do you see the context it's used in? The guy gets kicked in the shin. He could have said a lot worse."

Harmon agrees.

"Do you see what the story is saying?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter," he says. "How can I justify giving that girl punishment for saying 'oh shit' and then turn around and print four letter words?"

"Isn't there a difference?" I offer.

A case history he tells me: A boy was kicked out of the print shop program for intentionally misspelling the name *Thomas Birch*. Five hundred business cards carried the neatly lettered name *Thomas Bitch*.

For a mad instant I consider guffawing, "So ol' Thomas bitched about that, huh?"

But instead I say to Harmon, "You can't possibly tell me we're talking about the same thing."

"Yes, both your student and our student used an obscene word to express himself."

"It's not the same." And suddenly I sit up in my seat, growing angry at this small, gray haired man with so much power. "You're talking about a student who is disrespectful to a teacher and another who pulls a juvenile, low humor joke. I'm talking about a girl who has created something, who has looked at life around her honestly and has made a statement about one aspect of it."

I go on about this.

Harmon says he sees my point. He is no longer leaning back. He shifts in his chair. "But what am I going to tell the girl who wants to know why we punished her and then printed a four letter word?"

"Tell her the same thing I told you."

He backs off. "There's no difference," he says, his eyes gazing upon some papers to his right.

"There's no difference between reading a list of these words aloud and considering them in the context of a story?"

"No. These words should never be used. I

wouldn't want my daughter writing a story like 'The Battle.'

"At seventeen," I retort, "if my daughter writes something like 'The Battle,' I'll be delighted."

Mr. Harmon wants our conversation over. "The vocational school cannot be associated with a publication that contains four letter words."

"Can the vocational school be associated with a quality creative arts magazine?"

His reply to that is unclear.

"We were hoping," he says, "that you would strike all the four letter words so that we could print it."

"And I thought we might be able to compromise. But now that I see your radical stand, there's no way. I've been telling my students to write honestly. I couldn't go back and face them if I gave in to your demand."

"I wouldn't expect you to," he says.

Then why, I think, did you bother to ask?

He rises. I stand and from his desk pick up the folder that contains all the negatives which have been shot from the cleanly typed manuscripts.

I leave, dejected and angry, just a week and half before the seniors leave.

Back at school I tell my colleague Debbie the whole story.

"That's really conservative and middle class," she says.

"There must be stronger words for it than that," I say "It's narrow minded. It's provincial."

"It's shitty," says Debbie.

Soon Phyllis, our department head, pops into the room. I tell her the story. She is astonished and excited.

"I'm going to try to get it printed privately if we can handle the cost," I say.

"First," says Phyllis, "you must tell the principal what happened."

"He'll nix it. We'll never get it published."

"You have to tell the principal. You have to protect yourself."

I'm more dejected than ever.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Phyllis asks.

"Yes."

We catch the principal after he finishes a lengthy phone call. Even at the end of the day, his gray suit and white shirt are unruffled. His tie is snugly in place. On one wall hangs the famous print of an old man praying before a meager supper. The principal's desk is cluttered with notes, papers, pens, and pencils.

"We need your help with a problem," says Phyllis.

He raises his eyebrows.

Quickly I say, "Mr. Harmon at the vocational school told me today that they wouldn't print the magazine because it contained some four letter words."

His eyebrows stay aloft.

I mention the names of three of the students involved, students whom he admires and respects.

His eyebrows come down and before I can tell him what the words are, he is dialing the number of a printer.

Minutes later we leave the office. Phyllis is smiling.

"How," I ask, stunned, "did that happen?"

"We engaged him as an ally, not an adversary."

"But he didn't even ask what the words were."

"He trusts us."

Five days later the magazine is on sale.

Three days after that the principal catches me in the hall. "We're going to have to talk about the future of the magazine." This time his eyebrows are pushed together.

"What?" I say. Oh, Jesus, I think.

"We need to talk about the students' writing—some of the words." Then he strides off on his principal's way; I return to my room, and, as my students read, dash off an impassioned letter to the principal. In it I thank him for his support of the magazine and then I respectfully argue the case of context. Some girls, I tell him, are permitted to violate the dress code and wear skirts that barely cover the tops of their thighs, when, that is, they have donned their cheerleading, majorette, or drill team uniforms. And some boys are permitted to square off and roughhouse each other for more than an hour, when they contain that violence within the context of a Friday night football game.

I drop the letter on his desk.

And never hear another word from him.

Months later, however, deep into the next school year, Debbie tells me a story which she has overheard an assistant administrator relate during lunch. An indignant parent called the principal and demanded to know why his son received a detention for swearing, when the school had approved the publishing of the very same word in the creative arts magazine. The principal calmly dispatched of the matter. He explained to the man that the difference in the context of the two usages was a significant one.

"What do you think of that?" asks Debbie.

"Great," I answer, "because this year's magazine goes on sale in two weeks."