

Inappropriate? Or wrong?

Steve Sorensen © 2004
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By the way...

Is anything actually "wrong" anymore? To put it another way, has our morality become so relative that just about the only thing that is "wrong" is believing that something is absolutely and categorically wrong?

I ask because in our culture we seem to favor replacing "wrong" with "inappropriate." For example, in saying that the Janet Jackson fiasco at the Super Bowl was "inappropriate," we seem to be denying that anything was "wrong."

"Inappropriate" is a weak, weasel word. I don't think it's very useful. In fact, it's overused, and I'm getting tired of it. But it's more than a pet peeve of mine. The word is a moral catchall. It's a word we use when we don't want to address an issue head-on. Using it is like shooting an arrow at a target while consciously avoiding the bullseye.

Surprisingly, politicians often seem especially afraid to declare something wrong. Thirty-three years ago John Kerry said on "Meet the Press" that he and other troops in Vietnam committed atrocities. He has never specifically said what atrocities he committed, but today he says the word "atrocities was an

"inappropriate" word. So, am I to understand that in accusing fellow troops of committing atrocities he didn't do anything that was wrong? And note that he doesn't even admit to using the wrong word -- just an "inappropriate" word.

This candidate for President is by no means the only

politician at fault, but I'm going to pick on him again. Kerry, in referring to Vice President Dick Cheney, also thinks it's "inappropriate" for someone who had a military deferment to criticize Kerry's own military record. And he believes that President Bush's response to the Nicholas Berg execution was "inappropriate." Apparently Kerry doesn't feel comfortable actually calling anything "wrong," whether he did it himself or someone else did it.

Speaking of Nick Berg, a morning radio guy in Portland, Oregon who calls himself Marconi was fired for airing the audio of the Berg execution, accompanied by a stream of his own tasteless remarks. By way of apology said, "My comments on this were inappropriate." Nothing he said or did was wrong, mind you, just

inappropriate.

And, while we're on the subject of things that happened in Iraq, the notoriety of the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad continues under American control, thanks to abuses of prisoners by U.S. soldiers. These abuses have been called "inappropriate." Of course,

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soldiers don't get court martial for doing something that is merely inappropriate.

By using the word "inappropriate" when we mean "wrong" we have confused etiquette with ethics. It's time we clear up this confusion. Inappropriate acts bring social embarrassment. Like serving white wine with red meat. Mixing plaids with stripes. Serving yourself first. Bringing uninvited guests to a party. Other things are just plain wrong. Like abusing people. Lying. Cheating on income taxes. Being mean.

The use of the word "wrong" implies absolutes. It has to do



with truth. Oh, but you say, "There are no absolutes. There is no such thing as truth."

Would you say absolutely that there are no absolutes? Would you say that it's true that there is no such thing as truth? Only if you don't mind contradicting yourself.

"Wrong" is still in the dictionary, and its definition bears no relation to what is inappropriate. "Wrong" has to do with justice and morality. We'll never move toward a more just and moral society when we fail to identify things that are wrong. Yet, we continue to use the word "inappropriate" when very often it's, well, inappropriate. Let me rephrase that and say, it's just the wrong word.

Steve Sorensen lives in Russell with his wife and Greta. He has been a puppet, a pauper, a preacher, a poet, a pawn, and he knows a king. He pounds on the keyboard because he thinks that a word is worth a thousand pictures. He's seen it done, but hasn't yet succeeded in writing that word himself. Maybe next time. Greta, by the way, is a miniature dachshund, just to clear up the pictures that word created.