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THE ETHICIST BY RANDY COHEN

What Can I Say?



I see my friends take discounts for which they're not really eligible, buy and wear clothes they later return, stiff waiters and in many other ways cheat the system. I find this deplorable. Then again, when I was young I used to do many of the same things. How can I justify my righteous attitude when I've been just as guilty? And what do I say when my friends brag about these dubious achievements?

—Allegreta Behar-Blau, Woodland Hills, Calif.

If the sinner speaks against sin, is it mere hypocrisy? Or worse, a formerly debauched celebrity whose public-service spots proclaim, *Just say no to what I've been enjoying for years and would still be doing if I hadn't got caught?*

You seem to have reformed years ago, so fears of inconsistency need not concern you. But even if you had not reformed, you could still speak. One needn't be a completely virtuous person to encourage virtue in others and strive for it in himself. (Otherwise how could I keep my cushy job?) In this, as in much of life, tone is all. If your friends are acting badly, you can say so — they are, after all, your friends — if you speak directly, quietly and without chastising them. A righteous attitude will only antagonize them.

In 1750, the great moralist Samuel Johnson considered this question and decided, "He that is most deficient in the duties of life makes some atonement for his faults if he warns others against his own failings, and hinders, by the salubrity of his admonitions,

the contagion of his example." Just not on "Oprah."

I had a dinner at the home of one of my neighbors, and he said grace in a way that seemed appallingly sexist. Should I have voiced my dissent or kept quiet and allowed for the possibility that he feels differently than I do?

Silently bowing your head is not a declaration of belief; if a Christian person shows up at a Jewish wedding, after all, no one will assume he's converted.

When a traveler goes up the Amazon, he joins in tribal customs, not to endorse them but to learn. And sometimes the most alien culture of all is that of the house next door. If your host's devotions had included stoning an infidel or sacrificing a particularly cute animal, you might have been obliged to intervene or at least to dissent. But as no one was being hurt, you were right to sit quietly and marvel at the variegated — and sometimes idiotic — beliefs of humanity. There is no obligation to inform your host of your spiritual views between the cocktails and the cognac. ■

Do you have ethical queries that you need answered? Send them to ethicist@nytimes.com or The Ethicist, The New York Times Magazine, 229 West 43d Street, New York, N.Y. 10036.

ON LANGUAGE BY WILLIAM SAFIRE

First and last annual sexy swimsuit issue.

Usually respectable publications — from Sports Illustrated to Vogue — regularly fling modesty to the winds and publish annual best-selling *swimsuit* issues. Because most ogling readers are more interested in an ambience of prurience — that is, nearly nude women's bodies — than in sports or fashion, these issues sell gazillions of copies.

And so I ask: why not an annual *swimsuit* language column? And when did they stop calling them *bathing suits*?

"Her petticoat, the most important part of her *bathing costume*, dropped off," wrote Frances Trollope in her 1830 "Domestic Manners of the Americans," in what was one of the most intriguing lines of the English author's tart sociological study. It was also the first use of *bathing costume*. Four decades later, *bathing suit* came along and for a time competed with *bathing dress*.

Then Annette Kellerman, an Australian-born swimmer and diving star, announced before World War I, "I can't swim wearing more stuff than you hang on a clothesline," and appeared in a one-piece outfit with short sleeves, knee-length pants and a round high neck, which was basically the underwear for the skirted *bathing dress*. Although Kellerman was arrested in Boston for appearing in public in the scandalous garb, in 1913 Carl Jantzen and his partners, John and Roy Zehntbauer, marketed a skirtless one-piece *bathing suit* for women.

In the Roaring 20's, just as *bathing beauty* was catching on, *bathing* — dipping or immersing oneself in water — began to give way to *swimming*, propelling oneself in water with the arms. In 1926, in "The Sun Also Rises," Ernest Hemingway had a character say, "I found my *swimming suit*, wrapped it with a comb in a towel." That led to the clipped *swimsuit* and the more inclusive *swimwear*. In France in the 20's, the word *maillot*, possibly based on the name of the costumier of the Paris Opera, described a tight-fitting *bathing costume*.

In 1946, after the explosion of an atomic bomb at the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands became synonymous with a great blast, the French lingerie manufacturer Louis Reard introduced a skimpy two-piece suit for swimming or sunbathing that he called the *bikini*. Eighteen long years of dreary skin coverage passed before the Austrian designer Rudi Gernreich interpreted the *bi* in *bikini* as "two" and introduced the *monokini* — one bottom, no top.

Lascivious lexicographers have closely examined *-kini* as a popular combining form. The *trikini* appeared briefly — very briefly — in 1967, defined as "a handkerchief and two small saucers." It reappeared a few years ago as a *bikini* bottom with a stringed halter of two triangular pieces of cloth covering the breasts.

The most recent evolution of the *-kini* family is the *tankini*, a cropped *tank top* supported by spaghetti-like strings. "The *tank* was the early term for 'indoor pool,'" recalls Steve Fritz, now president of Jantzen, "and you wore a one-piece suit when you competed in the tank." (Annette Kellerman, "the Diving Venus" in her one-piece bathing suit, splashed about in a huge indoor tank in the Hippodrome in New York City.)

An early *tank top* citation is an article in The New Yorker in 1968 about Suzanne Farrell, describing her as "a tall, pretty ballerina dressed in a purple

tank top and baggy rubber warm-up pants." It has come to mean a sleeveless garment, often knitted, with deeply scooped armholes.

Stripping to essentials, if the *trikini* is three pieces, the *bikini* two and the *monokini* one, when will we see the *zerokini*? We have, and it is a practice, not a garment, called *skinny dipping*, from dipping one's naked skin in the water, a locution cited in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1966. (I remember it being used in Camp Copake, N.Y., much earlier, but will name no names.)

SHAPEWEAR

On a related subject, what's going on in underwear nomenclature?

Remember *undies*? Or *unmentionables*?

They are now mentionable, sort of. These are euphemisms for *foundation garments*, or *corsets*. Ignored politicians complain that their story was "buried in the back of the paper with the *corset* ads," but has anybody recently seen an ad anywhere for a *corset*?

"*Shapewear* — *Bodyslimmers* — is the most prominent thing in the market today," says Tom Wyatt, a former president of Warnaco Intimate Apparel. In 1984, the Olga company of Van Nuys, Calif. (there really is a Van Nuys), came up with *shapesuit*, which it also called a *Secret Hug*. (It was not to be confused with a *panty girdle*, which has legs.) *Shaping* in this context has a history; it was first used in 1564 in an English archdeaconry: "His *shappinge apparell* was a yowlowe sattanne dublet and a payre of housse."

Bodyslimmers, with the "emancipating *Hipslip*," are trademarks of Nancy Ganz, who is not only creative in the naming of her products but would — long ago — be hailed as "the Girdle Queen." More recently, she would be considered a leader in the field of *intimate apparel*. But as we all know, things formerly intimate have been outed, and intimacy has become outimacy. That is why we refer to Ganz, and to legions dedicated to helping men and women tuck it in and tighten it up, as *shapewear* executives. ■

SALIENT FACTS: CONTAMINATED SEAFOOD

Sea Sickness

Raw fish are never so tempting as in summer. But are all the health warnings sufficient? Or just so many fishwives' tales? By Andy Newman

WAITER, HOW'S THE *VIBRIO VULNIFICUS* TODAY?

With months containing the letter R on seasonal hiatus, this is the time of year when many wary diners — especially those with compromised immune systems or livers — steer clear of raw shellfish and the health hazards that warm weather tends to heighten. The best-known hazard is oysters, which in summer are especially vulnerable to *Vibrio vulnificus*, a bacterial disease that flourishes in warm waters and kills 10 to 15 liver patients a year. But that's only one of a tankful of marine pathogens. Together they cause well over 100,000 cases of food poisoning annually in the United States (though billions of servings of seafood are safely consumed). And of those, many are a year-round presence.

WHAT ELSE MIGHT BE LURKING IN MY PLATEAU DE FRUITS DE MER?

There's *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, rarely fatal, but "an equal-opportunity gut-wrencher," in the words of George P. Hoskin, a marine biologist with the Food and Drug Administration. The Norwalk virus is a relatively common risk in oysters harvested from sewage-tainted waters. (In January 1997, a Louisiana oysterman who was himself suffering from the virus dumped his sewage into the very waters he was fishing and sickened 432 people in five states.) And amnesiac shellfish poisoning, which is less common, causes short-term memory loss, facial grimace, disorientation and coma.

ON SECOND THOUGHT, HOW'S THE FISH?

Don't ask. If members in the scombroid family, like tuna and mackerel, are not kept ice-cold, bacteria can break amino acids down into histamine, causing itching, hives, swelling of the throat or nausea in those who eat them. Reef-dwelling fish, like grouper or barracuda, that have consumed toxic plankton can contain ciguatera, a neurotoxin that can leave diners with years of joint pain, pins and needles or the always-jarring confusion between hot sensations and cold. After that, there are any number of rarer threats like tapeworm larvae, hepatitis and mad-fish disease, which causes fever and shaking.

HOW PREVALENT ARE THESE ILLNESSES?

By far the most common is the Norwalk virus, which the F.D.A. blames for about 100,000 of the 113,000 cases of seafood poisoning reported a year. Scombroid poisoning, the next-leading contaminant, hits about 8,000 Americans a year (and in 1997 sickened 26 World Bank employees who ate blue marlin in the company cafeteria), while ciguatera strikes 1,600 people. *V. parahaemolyticus* and Hepatitis A affect about 1,000 people each.

HOW CAN YOU SPOT TOXIC SEAFOOD?

You can't, for the most part. The major seafood-borne illnesses don't change the appearance or taste of seafood at all, and seafood that looks, smells or tastes off is not necessarily ambulance bait. Seafood that has been cooked thoroughly is safe from *Vibrio* and the Norwalk virus (freezing or cooking will kill parasites, too), but heat has no effect on scombroid toxins or ciguatera. Some Gulf oyster suppliers pasteurize their oysters by heating them briefly, which offends purists but dramatically reduces *Vibrio*. And lemon juice can kill bacteria, but only on those surfaces it touches. Other than that, you take your chances.

ISN'T THERE ANY WAY TO BETTER THE ODDS?

Caroline Smith DeWaal, the director of food safety at the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, advises sticking to restaurants or fish stores that know their suppliers and know how the fish has been handled from the time it came out of the water — as difficult as that sounds. And obviously, seafood is likely to be fresher at places that sell a lot of it.

THEN ARE POULTRY AND RED MEAT THE ONLY SAFE BET?

Hardly. "We don't like to get into this contest, quite frankly," Hoskin says, "but on an illnesses-per-pound basis, fish and shellfish are as safe as beef and poultry, and fish are safer than hamburgers." Doughnut, anyone?

