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Dear Colleague:

A plumber came to fix my dripping toilet bowl. As he was about to leave he paused and said, after several false starts, "I hope you don't misinterpret my meaning, but, you know, we used to call the problem you had with the dripping bowl the Chinese water torture." "Yeah," I responded, "We are kind of subtle in our tortures. You guys never could go beyond the rack-and-the-wheel." With such ethnic stereotyping, we--total strangers--moved to the edge of friendship. We were starting to communicate. He could have said nothing and just sent me the bill, making his bill and my check be the extent of our exchange. But no, in the safety of a private home, he took a risk, and I am very glad he did.

And what a risk! This man had been kneeling beside my toilet bowl for half an hour while I stood by with arms folded across my chest. But he is a white man. He has to be sensitive to my feelings as an Asian American.

All genuine human relationships involve risk--in large part because such relationships are necessarily founded on words and gestures, which are invariably ambivalent and can be misconstrued. As anthropologists have told us, mud-slinging and swearing can actually be tokens of affection. A punch on the chest that makes one reel is almost as good as a kiss. Siblings and intimate friends cement their bond by calling each other names--"you slob," and even "you dog." Under certain circumstances, slurs may bring about inclusion; without doubt, an excess of politeness excludes, and, I would add, the same applies to an excess of sensitivity. Thanks to the PC nannies of our world, soon the only safe words one ethnic group can use with another are--"Have a good day!"

Best wishes,

*Ji-Fu*