

# *What's in a Name?*

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**October 11, 2004**

## **Reading:**

from *The Language of Names* by Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays

Every American citizen, and every applicant for citizenship under the immigration laws, has a common-law, free-speech, and pursuit-of-happiness right to take and use a new name so long as it isn't offensive, confusing, inciting to violence and racial hatred, or taken for some unlawful purpose such as fraud, flight from the law, evasion of debt or bankruptcy, or the commission of a crime. ... The reasons applicants give for taking a new name range from habitual usage, marital breakup, embarrassing mispronunciation, religious conversion, and ethnic pride. ... To just plain convenience (like the Michigan man in 1935 who took the name Pappas in place of the original thirty- seven-letter Papatheodorokorokomoundoronicolucopoulos). ... Another beneficiary ... is the former Hassan Romieh, a publisher and twice self-nominated presidential candidate. He's now known as George Washington America. This may not get him elected and his wife may never be First Lady, but, he says, at least she can "be called Mrs. America without having to go to Atlantic City ..."

Name-changing is as American as a basketball hoop over a garage door, as green money, as sliced bread, as competitive overeating ... It's one of the overlooked freedoms ... part of the culture. This has been true ever since the first adventurers came to the colonies to start from scratch and the colonies decided to call themselves the United States of America" (pp.189, 190, 193).

## **Sermon:**

Before my husband and I had a child, before we were even married, he told me he had a clear idea of what he would like to name our firstborn: "Banana Fruitbasket" was the name. I had to admit it had a nice ring to it. It was original. It certainly would ensure the child got lots of attention and had a lot to talk about during her many years of psychotherapy as an adult. However, once our daughter became more of a reality and less of a flight of fancy, my husband and I were less and less sold on that name. Indeed, what to call our child became for us what it is for many people, a very challenging endeavor.

You see, for my husband and me, names mean a lot. Our names, like many of yours, I'm sure, tie back to people in our families, or sideways to men or women our parents admired, or perhaps connect to no one in particular but in that way speak of our power to create a unique destiny for ourselves. No matter how we are named, those names offer us clues about who we are and who it was hoped we would become. My husband and I wanted our daughter's name to be like what our own names had been -- breadcrumbs on a

trail that can lead a child back to where he or she has come from and forward to where he or she is destined to go.

So I suppose Juliet was right that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," but *there is something about a name*. It can have pull and weight, offer guidance and grounding. And that makes the changing of a name or the choosing of a name serious business.

Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays, in the passage we read this morning, note that although it is rarely discussed, the changing of one's name and the choosing of a name is a fundamental right and freedom that is as American as apple pie. We are a people who believe in the power to create and re-create ourselves. We can be quick to shed the past -- perhaps too enamored of that freedom.

After all, in what other nation would you have the stories like you do here of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island only to have their names changed for them simply because some official couldn't decipher the name the immigrant struggled to articulate? A professor I had in divinity school, an Orthodox Jew of Eastern European background, seemed to want to reverse this historic wrong in his classroom. To begin with, you should know that he insisted on calling us each by our last names. He believed in formality in the classroom. So, in the early weeks of the class, he'd call on us and ask our name. If we said some difficult-to-pronounce or long or foreign name, he'd struggle to hear and articulate it, and he'd get it right from there on out. He had an amazing memory. However, if a student was unlucky enough to have a common American name, like Smith or Jones, he'd pretend to be stumped. "What kind of a name is that?" he'd ask, and then he'd assign them a new name that he said he could remember more easily. So one guy in our class who was probably named Mr. Miller ended up being Mr. Shakatovich for the rest of the year. The worst part was that those of us who only knew Mr. Shakatovich through this class only knew to call him Mr. Shakatovich when we saw him around campus, so the repercussions rippled out beyond the lecture room.

We are a nation of people who rename themselves or have been renamed. It is part of how we declared our independence and continue to do so. It is a bias we have toward the power of the new over respect for the old. However, it is not a freedom that has been without its detractors.

Ted Morgan, for example, was a man born of French ducal heritage, born to the name Sanche de Bramont. He was a reporter by trade, and had been the only Frenchman to win a Pulitzer Prize. Yet when he moved to the United States, he chose, like many others before him, to change his name. The name he took was an anagram of his original name and it was the most ordinary of the variants he came up with. With it he intentionally shed his European background with his inherited title of count and became, in his own words, "an ordinary American citizen."

Morgan's brother, a psychoanalyst, was concerned about this decision. He warned his brother, saying, "Your name is like a part of your body; it is bound up with the

development of your psyche. It is an abbreviated way of stating your relationship to your family and society. To tamper with that could be dangerous ... Psychoanalysts' offices are full of name changers" (Kaplan and Bernays, p.194). Morgan's reply was to point out that analysts' offices were also filled with people who hadn't changed their names.

Morgan went on to a celebrated career as a biographer under his new name, but the controversy he stirred up in his own family is one that, I think, has resonances with what we are grappling with in this community. A name, as we have noted, is never just a name. It is not just a simple neutral label, innocuous and without meaning. As Morgan's brother said, it does connect us to our past. Naming is a central thing we do as human beings. That's why Adam's first assignment in the Garden of Eden was to name all that God had created, and it is why it is such a central freedom in this country to choose and rename ourselves. So what we call this place, this religious home where we gather to ask and answer the larger questions of life, is understandably also going to be a complicated question.

It seems to me that part of what I hear being voiced on this question parallels Ted Morgan's debate with his brother.

Like Ted Morgan, there are people who think that a new era, like a new land, requires a new name that allows it to move fluidly in this changed milieu. For example, for Morgan, the changing of his name was not about getting rid of a name he didn't like, but about shedding something that got in the way of his work. He wanted a name that didn't need explaining, that didn't require lessons in pronunciation. In this new world, he saw the name he was given as a barrier to his progress.

Similarly, there are members of this community who think that we need a name that is fashioned for a somewhat changed cultural context -- one that doesn't get in the way of our reaching out and connecting with people. For example, some argue that we are now a community of people of many different faith traditions who gather under this expansive religious tent, in part drawn by our faith's non-creedal stance. Yet we have a name that conjures up a Christian bias, a name they see as chosen in a different era for a different context.

On the other hand, there are those in this community like Ted Morgan's brother, who are concerned about what we give up if we change our name. For some of them, like Morgan's brother, a name is like a part of our body. It is something that connects us to our heritage and our development as a religious movement, and to tamper with that, to let it go, could be dangerous. They worry, as Morgan's brother did, that we, like Ted Morgan, will set ourselves up for an identity crisis. They worry that without these moorings to our past, as William Butler Yeats warned, "The center cannot hold."

Of course, it is interesting to note how much we all share in this discussion. For both groups -- those who see reason for a change and those who wish to keep what we have -- there is a respect for the power of naming *and* there is a love for the institution in question. If names weren't important, as we know they are, and if we didn't give a damn

about this place and its future, as we do, this issue wouldn't be an issue at all, but something that happened without fanfare while everyone was busy doing other things.

The reality is we do care about this place *and* its heritage *and* its future. And so we have some work to do together on what it is best called.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he writes to the church in Corinth with various and sundry concerns and pieces of advice. Part of the letter is about the gifts of the spirit. While talking specifically about the gift of speaking in tongues, he writes: "However many the languages in the world, all of them use sound; but if I do not understand the meaning of the sound, I am a barbarian to the person who is speaking, and the speaker is a barbarian to me." What he means, specifically, is that if there is no one to translate the gift of tongues, then the sounds spoken are no gift at all, but that which alienates others from the speaker.

What stands out for me in the passage, however, is that word "barbarian." The strict translation of the word *barbarian* is a Greek word that means simply "one who does not speak Greek." It meant more than this, however: It described someone who was from a radically different culture than your own, with connotations that implied crudity or lack of refinement. (There is debate among etymologists about whether the word comes from the word for beard, implying that the non-Greek speakers are unshaven and coarse; or whether it comes from the sound of the language of non-Greek speakers, a kind of "bar-bar-bar" that is the ancient equivalent of our "blah-blah-blah.")

The words Paul wrote to his church, then, were a warning to them to make themselves understood *and* to work to understand others. He uses an extreme metaphor. To fail to make oneself understood, he tells them, is to risk being dismissed as a barbarian, and to fail to understand others is to risk dismissing them as such. Neither of these was good for the ministry.

We have two related challenges in front of us around this issue of the name change. The first is the challenge of listening well enough to those inside these walls who do not speak our language (be it religious, cultural or simply the language of divergent life experience) to understand them and help them to understand us. Rather than dismiss those whose experience makes no sense to us, we have to do the work of translating and explaining. We cannot afford to dismiss those who are different from us as foreign or lacking worth or culturally incompatible with ourselves. Paul was right -- that doesn't serve our ministry at all.

Our second challenge is similar, but more complicated. That challenge is to make sure during this debate about naming that we keep in mind those *outside* these walls too. Here too the warning is that we not dismiss those outside these walls as barbarians simply if they speak a somewhat different religious language from us, but listen to see if they are folks who can find religion among us. Likewise, that we not use esoteric language that those outside the community cannot understand and that may allow them to dismiss us as foreign and odd. Instead our goal should be to make sure that the name by which we call

ourselves, like any public declarations we make about ourselves, uses words that are as clear and as representative of who we are as possible. Anyone who needs this community should be able to tell from our name that, at the very least, this *might* be a place they could call home. To do otherwise wouldn't serve our ministry well.

There is a quote in our hymnal from the Universalist Hosea Ballou: "If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good." Through this all, love has to be the spirit that surrounds all that we do. We can find the most perfect name or decide the one we have is the most perfect name, but if we aren't loving and alienate each other in coming to this decision, *we will have lost everything worth keeping!*

In this creedless community, love is our doctrine. Love will allow us to listen to and understand those who speak a different cultural or historic language and to work to make our own language of experience and outlook understood. Love will allow us to decide what name, like our own names, offers a connection to the past while not binding us to it, and access to a bright future while not leaving us without support in our flight toward it.

If it turns out that after all of this thoughtful discernment we decide that the name that does this best is, to borrow a family favorite, "The Banana Fruitbasket Fellowship of the Planet Earth," I will be slightly bemused, a little embarrassed, but will eagerly declare this as the community I serve and proceed with our ministry to the world. Moreover, I will do so knowing we have weathered one difficult discernment together in love, and confident therefore that whatever else awaits us in our future together -- and you can be sure there will be hotter and more challenging controversies than this one -- that we can make it through these together in love also. That being true, the future is indeed ours and the name we choose will resonate throughout the ages for the good work done by a solid and unified community committed to its doctrine of love in service of its mission. This and this alone is what I hope most emerges from our discussion of what we call ourselves -- not so much the name we choose, but the spirit in which it is chosen.

So may it be. Amen.