

Random Notes on the Names of People

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THE WORD NAMELESS, especially in poetry and in much prose, signifies an alien, unknown, and almost always unwelcome condition, as when, for instance, a writer speaks of "a nameless sorrow."

Human beings are, for the fact of being named at all, however meaninglessly, lifted out of an area of mystery, doubt, or undesirability into an area in which belonging to everybody else is taken for granted, so that one of the first questions asked by new people, two-year-olds even, whether they are speaking to other new people or to people who have been around for a great many years, is "What is your name?"

An unfriendly answer to the question which I haven't entirely forgotten used to be, "Pudding Tame. Ask me again and I'll tell you the same."

Now, even among adults, the stating of names, or the asking after them, is rather cluttered with awkwardness, so that one is never quite sure how to obtain from another his name; and the uttering of them, either by their owners or by friends of them, is swift and unclear. Apparently people either believe their names are as well known to strangers as to themselves, or that it doesn't matter. Both theories have an element of truth in them of course, for a name is a name and not much else, and when you meet somebody you don't meet a name, you meet somebody. It is just that a name can begin to help you guess who it is that you are probably meeting.

One day in Paris in 1939, a few months before the beginning of World War II, as it is called, a friend of James Joyce's put a call through to Joyce, and handed me the receiver before I could protest. As I had no choice, I stated my name. I expected the conversation to leave this matter immediately, but Joyce wasn't satisfied with what he had heard and wanted to get the matter straight.

How had I said the name? Wasn't it also said another way? What was the origin of the name? Had it ever been unlike what it was now?

Joyce wasn't making small talk. Had we met (I left Paris several days before the day on which we were to have met) I have an idea he would have pursued the matter still further: What about the *first* name, for instance? Had I another first name which I had disliked and had put aside? What about the first names of the men of my family? Weren't they such names as Aram, Dikran, Haig, Vahan, Vartan, Krikor, Ara, Melik, Hovak, Hovsep, Mihran, Armenak, Petrus, Minas, Gourken, Khatchik, Sahak—to name a few I suspect Joyce might have known.

The influence of a given name on the character or personality of anybody is enormous if subtle. It is difficult to measure or to weigh against other enormous and subtle influences, but I have lately heard from those whose business it is to look into such matters in connection with social and educational work that the kindest thing parents can do for a new man is to give him a common and popular first name.

There is an argument here, I think. To differ or to seem to differ, whether in name or in nature, appears to be considered by many intelligent and earnest educators an unnecessary burden for a person to carry. The flaw, however, appears to be in belittling the probable worth of having a burden, and of differing.

My own son Aram came home from school one afternoon when he was in the second or third grade and said, "I don't want my name to be Aram any more. I want it to be Bill." (His name is still Aram, and I don't think he particularly minds any more. It may even be that he somewhat prefers it to any other name, including Bill.) He and I discussed the problem at that time and he revealed that a boy named Walter had made fun of the name Aram, deliberately mispronouncing it and bandying it around in front of others, so that it had been necessary for him to seek to stop Walter in a fight.

I pointed out that if Walter liked to bandy names around he might enjoy doing so as much with a name like Bill as with a name like Aram, and that if Aram changed his name every time Walter or somebody else made fun of it he might be changing his name the rest of his life, and the matter just wasn't worth all that concern.

"There's not one other boy at that school named Aram," he said.

“Or Saroyan, either,” I said, “but the two names are your names and *do* mean you.”

The custom of changing family names is a sound one, though, for anything is sound that comes to pass because somebody needs to be freed from a difficulty of some sort or wishes to improve himself or his chances to improve himself. And yet Ickes, for instance, was not prevented by the sound or appearance in print of his name from being precisely who he was or wished to be or could not help being. Thus, the hanging onto almost any family name is probably as sound as not hanging onto it.

Nicknames have attached themselves at one time or another to practically every man who ever lived: The Sea Walker, Richard the Lionhearted, Gregory the Illuminator, Jack the Ripper, El Greco, and so on: Shorty, Big Boy, Happy, Red, Fat, Slim.

It is often said of somebody, “He has made a name for himself,” which of course means he has given his name, whatever it is, a value it had not always had.

A friend of mine once asked a waiter in New York his name. The waiter said his name was what I took to be Racker, but it turned out that the waiter spoke with an accent, and that he meant Wrecker, because he was such a devil with the girls.

The name of any man is fascinating because it seeks to identify or even to define that which simply *cannot be* identified or defined—a man.



For all parents fit names to their children as soon as these are born, so that there is no one so poor or so gentle that he is nameless.

—*Odyssey*, Book viii, Shaw translation



In general, one may distinguish two principal cases of name-forgetting; when the name itself touches something unpleasant, or when it is brought into connection with other associations which are influenced by such effects.

—Sigmund Freud