

Is That Your Real Name?¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words

Each person here is a unique individual, there is no one in the world just like us. Can we ever realize just how special we are? And how important it is to really live our own identity? As Unitarian Universalists we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each person. That means us. That means everyone around us. How important it is to celebrate each person, to honor their gifts and limits, to encourage them to be fully who they are. As we gather in community we take a moment to be thankful for the unique people all around us.

Readings: From *The Velveteen Rabbit* Margery Williams

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Now I Become Myself

May Sarton²

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
"Hurry, you will be dead before--"
(What? Before you reach the morning?
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)
Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!
The black shadow on the paper
Is my hand; the shadow of a word

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2 From *Collected Poems 1930-1993*. (W.W. Norton, 1993)

As thought shapes the shaper
Falls heavy on the page, is heard.
All fuses now, falls into place
From wish to action, word to silence,
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.
As slowly as the ripening fruit
Fertile, detached, and always spent,
Falls but does not exhaust the root,
So all the poem is, can give,
Grows in me to become the song,
Made so and rooted by love.
Now there is time and Time is young.
O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move.
I, the pursued, who madly ran,
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!

Sermon

When we meet each other, we tell each other our names. When I don't know your name, it is harder for me to remember the stories you tell me about your life. They slip out of my memory, like water pouring through a colander. But when I know your name, it becomes a container to hold the details which enable me to begin to know you as a person.

Every name has a story. I think about the stories of names, because all my life I have been asked about mine. When I say my name is Myke or Mykel, people ask, "Is that your real name?" My own name is like a strangely colored pottery bowl. It attracts attention to itself, and becomes a conversation piece, instead of a simple container. The name *Mykel* breaks a rule. This name is usually reserved for a man, but I am a woman. And so the questions spring up: How did I get my name? Did my parents want a boy? Is it my real name? Why is it spelled so oddly? Does it tell you something about who I am? To answer these questions, I need to tell two stories about my name.

The first is a story about family connections. My mother chose my name. When my mother remembers the story, she says she wasn't trying to break any rules. She did not hope I was a boy. In fact, she tells me she felt lucky to have a girl. Perhaps it is wishful thinking on my part to imagine some rebellious streak in her often compliant soul that inspired her to break the rules for my name. What she says is that when she was in sixth or seventh grade, she used to walk to school with her friend Cynthia. Cynthia had the task of taking two little girls to pre-school. Their names were *Michael* and *Chris*. My mother thought the name *Michael* was beautiful for a girl, and decided that if she ever had a daughter she would give her that name.

I am the oldest child, and first daughter of my parents. And so, when I was born, she decided to call me *Michael*. There was immediate controversy. My dad's mother, speaking up for the rules, said, "You can't name a little girl *Michael*!" Somehow they reached a compromise, and the spelling on my birth certificate reads "*m-i-c-h-e-l*." I was always called "*Mike*" or "*Michael*" at home, and "*Michele*" at school.

And so it began, as simply as that. My mother thought it was a beautiful name. There is a second story, about how I have been spelling my name for the last thirty years. “*M-y-k-e-l*.” But first I need to say more about the power of names.

Have you ever known a child who is learning the names of things? Mama, daddy, cat, dog, blue, flower, two... Each word, each color, each number is a marvelous new discovery. Suddenly it is as if all the world will fit into her hands and mouth, touched and eaten and spoken. In the Hebrew book of Genesis, we read the story of the first human naming all the animals. When we name something, we can be connected. Naming is a power of relationship. In the Semitic world, to know someone’s name meant they were obligated to you. You had the power to call them, to ask a favor of them.

Among the Ojibwa or Anishnabi people, according to Edward Benton-Banai, it is through the power of a name that the Spirit World comes to accept and recognize a young child.

It is said that prior to the Naming Ceremony, the spirits are not able to see the face of the child. It is through this naming act that they look into the face of the child and recognize him [or her] as a living being. Thereafter, the Spirit World and all past relatives watch over and protect this child. At this ceremony the parents of the child [also] ask four women and four men to be sponsors for the child. ...After the child is given a name, each of the sponsors stand and proclaim a vow to support and guide this child in his [or her] development. In this way provision is made by which the child will always be cared for.³

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we have child dedication ceremonies. We celebrate the children by their own names, and welcome them into our circle of care and concern. To be named is to be known and cared for. The stories of names are the stories of relationships. Each of us desires to be seen and understood, to be accurately named. To be named is to be connected. Our names link us to our ancestors, and to our families.

People rarely ask me about my last name, *Johnson*. But it too has a story. On the simplest level, it identified me as one of the Johnson girls. We were a large family, and so there were often several of us enrolled in the local Catholic school. Our name was our link to each other in the wider community of our church and town. But *Johnson* is not exactly our real name.

As happened to many Germanic immigrants in the 19th century, my Frisian ancestor’s last name, *Jansen*, was anglicized by immigration authorities or local custom into its current form. And in the culture from which he came, *Jansen* was not the family name, but one name in a lineage of many names. A son took the name of his father as his last name. So the name *Johnson* is hiding a story. This name erased our link with our ethnic and cultural heritage, even as my ancestors themselves gradually lost that ethnic and cultural heritage and became “American.” *Johnson* is one of the most common surnames across the United States, but I am not related to most other Johnsons.

The stories of names are the stories of relationships. Names have the power to evoke relationships, but also to hide other relationships. When we speak of inheriting the names of our ancestors, we have already omitted the majority of our ancestors, the mothers and grandmothers whose marriages signaled

3 Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway*, Chapter 2

the end of their participation in the name stories. While my Frisian German great-great-grandfather, Heinrich Jansen, was coming to America, my indigenous Innu great-great-great grandmother had already lost her Montagnais Indian name for the French Christian name *Marie-Madeleine* and the Scottish surname of her husband Peter Macleod.

In this culture, we all have men's names: the names of our fathers and their grandfathers. We have to work much harder to uncover the links to our female ancestors, if we can find them at all. A name can never capture all of who we are. It reveals one thing and hides another.

I probably couldn't have understood this as a child, but in my own way I was learning about the power and the limits of names. I was "*Michele*" in one context and I was "*Michael*" in another. Part of me tried to fit in and be like everyone else. I remember worrying, on the first day in a new school, that a teacher would call me "*Michael*" by mistake. I would quickly correct her or him, and say "It's *Michele*." But the name "*Michele*" was not all of who I was. There was a hidden me who was waiting in the wings, the me with a strange name, not quite sure that I really belonged. That question stayed with me in different forms through different times in my life. Who knows my real name? Can I be all of who I am, and also belong to community?

Is "*Michael*" my real name? It is the name my mother called me. When I left college, I stopped using "*Michele*," and reclaimed her original pronunciation. For her, it signified something unique and beautiful, and so I am unique and beautiful to her.

Thirty years ago, I changed the spelling of my name. This is the other story I want to tell. To begin this story I need to talk about the names we have learned for God. The Hindu people say there are ten thousand names for God. The Tao Te Ching says "The name that can be named is not the eternal Name." But in the church in which I was growing up, God was named Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. I know some of you also grew up in churches that had strict dogma about the name of God. We prayed only "in Jesus' name," or "through Christ our Lord."

These names revealed many things about who the divine might be. But like all naming, they also kept other things hidden. As I grew in my spiritual journey, I knew intellectually that God could not be fully named, but I didn't realize how much of my spiritual experience was influenced by all of these names being masculine names. When I was in my mid-twenties, I began to hear about women who were challenging the idea of God the Father. At first I didn't understand. Why was it a problem to call God "*Father*?" In my life it had called to mind a loving caring presence who was both intimate and powerful.

But names have the power to hide as well as to reveal. Like the surnames we take for granted, linking us only to our male ancestors, this masculine name of God was hiding something female. By calling God "*Father*," we were losing something as much as gaining something. This name was hiding the possibility of female sacredness and divinity. It was hiding a female relationship to ultimate value.

And so I began, with many other women, to try to see how different names would sound in our ears, taste on our tongues. Like the young child, just beginning to speak, we began to learn new names: Diana, Demeter, Freya, Oya, Isis, Hecate, Kali, Kwan Yin. We began to call her Goddess. And something new was invoked into our lives, and something changed. It was as if God had two names, like me, one for school, and one for home, and we women had just come home. Goddess.

The power of naming is the power of relationship. By naming God, "*Goddess*," we were opening the door to new relationship with the divine. But we were also opening the door to new relationship with each other, with ourselves, with society.

I want to share with you one tiny example of what I mean. I stand before you as an ordained minister leading a congregation in worship. Years ago, when I was in college, I remember once thinking that I would like to be the wife of a priest. Of course, Catholic priests could neither have wives, nor be women. But all I could imagine then was a kind of vicarious closeness to this calling. I couldn't imagine that women could be priests or ministers. For me, calling the divine "*Goddess*" and gathering with other women to affirm our sacredness, opened a whole new option: I was no longer content with vicarious fulfillment. I could imagine following my own calling.

This feminist awakening uprooted the foundations of my life and spirituality. In the process of this transformation, I went to divinity school. I separated from a six year marriage. I came out as a lesbian. But deeper than all these changes, I glimpsed a vision of new possibility for women.

During my last year of seminary, in 1985 and '86, I lived for a time at the Seneca Women's Peace Encampment. This was a woman-only camp to protest the presence of nuclear weapons at an army base in upstate New York. It was also a place of profound personal transformation. Perhaps you've experienced something like this too: a conference or a camp or retreat where the rules have changed. Where suddenly love and community become tangible. Where you feel at home, and yet, in a whole new world.

At the women's peace camp, we were learning to believe in ourselves and in each other, as women. We didn't hate or reject men. Rather, we were relying on our own strengths and skills instead of turning to men. For that time and place, we were creating a new country: a women's land where our own female lives were the measure of value, and our focus was on liberation. It was in this space of female focus, that I experienced Goddess. Not as an abstract idea, but as the power being born within us. Or perhaps the power giving birth to who we were becoming. We had called Her name, and she was manifesting herself in our midst.

In that experience of being born anew, women were playing with new names--not only for the divine, but for ourselves. We used the letter "y" to create a new spelling for the word *woman*: "*w-o-m-y-n*." This "y" was poetically drawn from the Greek word for woman, "*g-y-n-e*," as in *gynecology*. By spelling *woman*, "*w-o-m-y-n*," we were affirming symbolically how it felt to be experiencing ourselves as full of inherent worth and value, rather than as adjuncts of men. A new name was the symbol of a new relationship.

It was in this context that I decided to spell my name, "*m-y-k-e-l*," or "*m-y-k-e*," using the same "y" which symbolized our liberation. I kept the pronunciation that my mother loved, but I wanted to record some sign of transformation. I wanted a marker to help me remember that I had glimpsed a vision of a world where women were empowered. I needed a token to help me remember, when I was once again living in the day-to-day world, where sexism lingers even in the tension women hold in our bodies when we walk alone at night. In my name I would remember how it felt to walk in freedom. In my name I would remember the Goddess.

So that is the story hidden in my name. Perhaps I am taking a risk when I tell you this story. You might misunderstand. You might wonder if there is room for you to have a really different experience of names or God or gender. Any telling both reveals something and hides something. A name or a story of a name cannot hold all of who we are. What does it mean to name the unnamable? Neither who we are, nor who the divine is, can be fully contained in a word or a symbol. And yet, we do need names, we need symbols. The name is the power to call each other forth. It is the doorway into making relationship with each other.

I want our community to be a place where we can tell each other our real names, where we can share deeply who we are, and cherish the revelations each of us offers. Where being full human participants is not restricted because of our gender identity or cultural heritage or age, or any other factors. I want our community to be a place where we risk discovering new names: for the holy and for ourselves. Where the love and faith we bring to each other invite us to grow beyond who we have been, to risk transformation through love, to become more fully who we really are. May it be so.

Conversation

Today, I would like to invite you to have a conversation with another person sitting in the congregation, someone you didn't come in with. Introduce yourself by name, and say one or two sentences, if you would, about the story of your name. Or if you don't have a story like that, tell them one thing about yourself that might not be apparent by just looking at you. We'll take about 3 minutes for this, and I will ring a bell when it is time to come back together to sing our closing hymn.

Bell

Closing Words

Each person here is special, a unique-in-all-the-world being.
Let us remember to cherish the real self within,
and to cherish the real self in each other.
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.