



What's In A Name?

"Be yourself rather than worry about defining yourself."

"And God said, 'Let there be Light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night."

In these three separate acts, God sets the stage for a world of polarities. As soon as God *separated*, He created duality, just as He did when He labeled the light *good*. Darkness scares us. Vampires and other monsters come out in the dark. We call a major life transition that catapults us out of our comfort zone a Dark Night of the Soul. "He's gone to the dark side," conveys a sense of embodied evil. The *good* guys wear white. Except for Zorro, the *bad* guys wear black.

Later in Genesis, God empowers Adam to name his world.

God used words to create the world. He spoke the world into being. Dictionaries *define* and attribute meaning to words. They are word gods.

Words create our thoughts. They coalesce into belief systems, and form our reality. Naming and labeling solidify an identity. They also fix it in time. For example, one of the three branches of Judaism is called Reform. Unwittingly, many people refer to it as Reformed, implying that it is done reforming itself; it has ceased to evolve. Minus the "ed," it is an ongoing work-in-progress.

Naming is a heady experience. When we label, it feels permanent. It's one way we attempt to minimize the discomfort of ambiguity and uncertainty, maximize predictability, and keep alive the illusion that we control our lives. We name our children after relatives or individuals we admire and respect, hoping they will inherit their cherished qualities. Rabbis change the Hebrew name of individuals with life-threatening diseases so the angel of death can't find them.

Parents pigeonhole children with derogatory or favorable labels. Because I was rambunctious, curious, and feisty, "into everything," I drove my mother crazy, especially after the birth of my brother. My adventurous spirit was not easily tamed. My overactive curiosity mandated constant surveillance.

Today I would be identified as high maintenance. To my mother, it was problematic, though my husband finds it charming.

Likewise, I was designated as "selfish," just like my father. Only in my late thirties was I disabused of the negative connotation of "selfish." My therapist jumped up and cut me off



when I parroted my mother's opinion of my father. "Jill," he ranted, "You have to be selfish enough to take care of yourself. If you aren't, you have nothing left to care for anyone else. The key is balance."

That eye-opening session marked the moment I began to challenge and debunk the labels and judgments from my childhood that shaped my poor self-image. What differentiated me from my parents, those qualities they neither understood nor related to, they maligned. They tried to fit me into their mold. I tried to conform. I really did. That I couldn't left me feeling like an misfit, an alien, an outsider, not enough, and just plain wrong.

It took a wise Spiritual Director to upend that script and to show me that I was never "not enough." I was too much. The fact that I was different wasn't bad. It meant I had different gifts and talents and proclivities than the rest of my family, a mess of gifts they didn't have, doubted their usefulness, and so rejected them.

My father, a man to whom math was second nature, couldn't fathom a daughter whose eyes glazed over regardless of how he tried to explain story problems. Frustrated by repeated attempts to explain what was so simple for him, one day he lost his cool and branded me "stupid." That five-year-old girl accepted that identity until she excelled in school as a returning forty-five-year-old. It took that many years of limiting myself before I was willing to risk challenging that identity. The truth was the incentive I needed to apply to graduate school, be accepted, excel, write a dissertation, and earn a PhD.

The downside of naming has less to do with the definition or the label, than with our judgment or interpretation of that label and the value we assign to it. There is no such thing as a value-free label. Once labeled, the identity sticks like Crazy Glue, often taking decades of therapy to heal the wounds it caused.

The power to name is a double-edged sword, a blessing and a curse. Steadfastly refusing to entertain the possibility that labels, values, and belief systems might need to be examined keeps us stuck in time, unable to evolve. Yet, the discomfort of chaos, uncertainty, and confusion that examining our constructs brings is an anathema to many who prefer the false security of certainty.

Personally, I believe God endowed us with the power to name our world to see what we'd do with it, and to teach us how powerful we are. The consequences of wielding that power unwisely is reflected in the polarized world we live in.

Richard Rohr, a Jesuit Priest, relates the following parable. A couple arrives home with their new baby. "I want to talk with my little brother," declares their four-year-old son.

"Go ahead," they say.



“I want to talk with him alone,” he responded.

Though surprised, they cup their ears to the closed door.

“Quick, quick. Tell me who made you, where you came from. I’m beginning to forget.”

What were the messages from your family? Did you accept their labels? How did they adulterate your self-image? Have you debunked the negative ones and come to realize that the ones they affixed to you really say more about them than you?

We know from the beginning “who” we are. In giving us the power to name our world, God also gives us the power to challenge the external authorities whose truths we’ve blindly accepted. In our heart of hearts we know.