

What's in a name?

Many years ago – at age 20 – I became a novice in a religious order, a Franciscan community in New York State. Their novitiate was way up at Saranac Lake near the Canadian border – beautiful amid the autumn foliage but icy cold once winter arrived. It was a great climate if you had tuberculosis and there were several sanatoria in that region.

To become a novice the candidate had to go through a “clothing” ritual. He stood before the chapel altar wearing his civilian suit and - in a formal way – removed his suit coat, while the acolytes covered him with the brown, hooded robe of the order. Which meant he had commenced a radical change in his life. He was also required to take a new name as symbolic of his commencing this new life. This created a problem because most of the well-known saints' names had already been taken by earlier classes of novices. And so, a candidate would have to fish around among the odd names of saints that remained. For instance, William Murphy became Theophane Murphy; Edward Von Essen became Vitus Von Essen; James Brady became Chrysostom Brady; Gene Micali became Cuthbert Micali . . . signatures that always made desk clerks do a double take.

Yet there was a profound meaning in adopting a new name in so far as that too meant the candidate's calling was to become a new being, acquire a new character - something to which even modern scholars have given serious thought. It raises the question of *who* one really is. Sure enough, you are given an “identity” you carry with you all through life: a baptismal record, social security number, licenses, an e mail address . . . quantifiable, shorthand ways of being tracked down. But do such “identifiers” actually reveal *who* you are? They indicate *what* you are: citizenship, age, height, credit rating . . . – but not *who* in terms of your innermost thoughts, your loves, your concerns. Nor are you simply the *who* you were at age 20 or maybe 40 or 70. Am I the same person I was 70 years ago or even 10 years ago? I look back at myself - at my current age - and in some way I see a distant stranger who *ain't* the me I am this moment, who wouldn't even comprehend me.

Why is that? Well, as Hannah Arendt has said, there is the biological account of my life and then there is the story - the unfolding of our consciousness in often unpredictable ways that from year to year read like chapters in a book. In this we're not unlike Alice in Wonderland who, having slipped down a rabbit hole as through a birth canal, found herself in a long corridor of locked doors about to experience so many things as to say *How queer everything is today! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed . . . Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? . . . But if I'm not the same, the next question is, "Who in the world am I?"* Which question might have been raised by Huckleberry Finn after his long journey carried by the flow of the Mississippi River. How did he change?

And what is the Bible but a long account about patriarchs – like Jacob, running away from a vengeful brother only to discover Rachel and Leah and father twelve sons out of whom came the whole nation of Israel . . . where do such surprises stop for such characters and for yourself. Maybe the question is wrong. It's not a matter of: *who* are you – but from day to day: *who* are you *becoming*. Hopefully closer to becoming like that character in our Gospels – whose name was Christ.

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