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A Name is for Life not just for Christening!

O SON OF MAN! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life.
(Arabic Hidden Word No 4)

IF YOU ARE ever stuck for a conversation piece with a stranger ask them how they got their first name. Most people have a story about the decision process that went into finding their name. Thinking about it takes people's minds back to a time unremembered when those who made them went through the process of identifying them with a name. Some people relate that they went through a period in their life when they wanted to be called something else, and some will say that the name they use is not the one they were given at birth.

Whatever we feel about it, our name is the way we are identified by others. When others use it a character picture of us appears in their mind. It's a picture we are not privy to. It is not uncommon to hear lady teachers of experience who fall pregnant, remark that they are having difficulty choosing a name because whatever name they think of they are reminded of an obnoxious pupil!

Fiction writers struggle hard to find the right name for each character. In comedy and parody it's not so difficult. Consider, for example the delightful names Roald Dahl invents in order to convey instantly to young readers the nature of the character – Augustus Gloop, overweight and greedy, Veruca Salt, selfish and spoilt and Violet Beauregard, vain and loud, all contrasting nicely with the humble and unassuming Charlie Bucket. In Britain the tradition of naming after qualities has long since ceased. Faith, Felicity, Modesty and Prudence are rarities both as names and characteristics, replaced by the names of television and pop heroes and heroines. A modern day Victoria is unlikely to be inspired either by the concept of triumph or the staid queen but more probably the wife of David Beckham.

One of the first obstacles for western Bahá'ís in reading the history of the Faith is coping with the names. It's not only the unfamiliar spellings and pronunciation it is also the lack of identifiable surnames and the repetition of names due to them being inspired by a small number of heroes of the early days of Islam. It is interesting to reflect that in the culture of the history of the Bahá'í Faith names had more connection with what people did or had done rather than who they were. Hájí – signifying a pilgrim, Mullá – a priest, Siyyid – a descendent of Muhammad.

There was a time when Britain, too, did not have a tradition of surnames. As the population grew, lack of surnames lead to confusion and so "John the smith" became John Smith, "Tom the carpenter" became Tom Carpenter and "Peter the barrelmaker" became Peter

Cooper because his wife refused to be Beryl Barrel. At that time too, first names were generally taken from the Bible (you must remember the story of Beryl at the well).

Thus it is we have two, commonly used, names – one chosen for us – and one that connects us to our wider heritage. Both are significant in different ways and both significances are, in essence, spiritual. Traditionally the first name in this country has been called the "Christian

name”, (less so in these politically correct times) the assumption being that this name is consecrated at baptism and is part of our identity in the spiritual world as well as the material. In or out of religion, the act of choosing a name by loving parents is a spiritual act.

Our family name connects us to our parents and, traditionally, our father’s parents and so on. Our parents and close relatives shape much of our physical appearance and character, initially. However, as we grow and enter school, form friendships, select heroes and make choices, we can build our own character. Some people are changed a lot through their life experiences and others not much at all.

Evidence of this could be seen in a programme that in the sixties filmed a group of seven year olds and then revisited them every seven years. Some of those filmed changed very little, while others changed enormously. A particular character changing experience was having children. Another character changing experience, particularly those from the poorest backgrounds, was education and seized opportunity, which led to raised self-esteem and wider vision.

When I visited Isfáhán in 1973 I was surprised to discover there was a Bahá’í Avenue. I had assumed because of the long history of persecution in Iran there would be no public acknowledgement of the Bahá’í Faith. However, it was explained to me that the name was not connected to the Faith but named after Sheikh Bahá’í, a mystic and a scholar who had meditated on the nineteen “names of God” listed in a prayer for the fast in Islam. He had decided that the greatest name of God was Bahá. Thus, he had adopted the name Bahá’í to signify that he was a devoted follower of God as designated by His greatest name. If you are curious to know what the other eighteen names are you simply have to look at the Badí calendar as the names are the same, but in a different order. It is no surprise that the first month is named after God’s “greatest name” Bahá! In Bahá’í prayers we are able, in our devotions, to address God, by a huge range of names. Rúhíyyih Khánum catalogued these names in her book “The Desire of the World” (p. 170-174). In our adoration of God, through His intermediary for this age, Bahá’u’lláh, we are able to recite many of the “names of God”, but by what name are we known to God? To even achieve a name from God there is a condition.

The Arabic Hidden Word number 4 says “... love Me, that I may name thy name...” It does not take too much study of the Bahá’í writings to surmise that good action and sincerity are effective ways of demonstrating love for Bahá’u’lláh and God. Perhaps when we accept Bahá’u’lláh and set about trying to demonstrate our love for Him by acquiring virtues we, through this love, afford Him the opportunity to “name thy name” and by trying to live virtues our souls will be filled “with the spirit of life.”

Perhaps our “God given” name will be the virtue that is our personal greatest gift to the process of bringing about the kingdom of God on earth. Interestingly, through the principle of unity in diversity the God given names of all the members of any given Bahá’í community will be diverse. We cannot and should not expect that everyone in our community will be called “humble” or “gentle”. There will be Bahá’ís whose God given title is “audacious” or “forthright” or “dynamic”. Initially “humble” and “audacious” and “gentle” and “forthright” may find loving each other difficult and each might think the other not a proper Bahá’í, but as realisation comes that each attribute has been evolved through devotion to Bahá’u’lláh then each will love the other because of these qualities, not in spite of them.

I personally will be quite content, if on passing through the pearly gates I am hailed with, “Hello Percy”, Percy being an endearment of perseverance!

Kevin Beint

