

Taking a *new* name

The close link between name, identity and function means that people can change their names (in our culture usually only the surname) to reflect a change in status or as part of a rite of passage from one stage of life to another. Many of the earth's sacred books give specific advice about this. In the *Satapatha-Brahmana*, a Soma ritual of the late Vedic period, it is said: *Wherefore let a Brahman, if he prosper not, take a second name, for verily he prospers, whosoever knowing this, takes a second name.*' So in keeping with tradition, Mahavira (the founder of Jainism) was given three names: *Vardhamana* – which rendered him free from attack and was the name by which he was known to his parents; *Sramana*, his second name, which meant 'ascetic' because of his ability to courageously pass through great fear and danger and because he went naked and endured severe austerities; and *Mahavira*, his last name, which was given to him by the gods.

From baby name to adult name

If you are having trouble deciding on the right name for your baby, you do not need to rush. One option is to give the newborn a temporary 'baby' name by which he or she will be known until s/he begins to indicate what name would be appropriate. You could have a private name by which the baby is known among family and friends and wait to name the child officially until the more permanent name has been chosen.

Spiritual names

Most religious and spiritual traditions have name-changing rituals associated with being born anew into a new way of life, or clothing oneself in a new spiritual identity.

The term 'Christian name' itself derives from the days of the early Christians, who, when they welcomed a new friend into their company through baptism, gave him or her a 'Christ-ened' name. Christians take on a new additional name at confirmation, confirming the person's transition to adulthood within the Church.

Monks and nuns in most traditions take spiritual names, often of saints or qualities they seek to emulate. The new name usually indicates latent spiritual qualities which can be developed, or endows the person with helpful attributes.

Changes of fortune or status

People sometimes change their name in order to facilitate a change of identity (such as marriage), role or function. Islamic cultures also practised name changing to *bring about* a change in fortune, or if a name was considered too ‘heavy’. Muhammad changed the names of several of his followers and those families became known as *Banu Muhawwala* – ‘the sons of the one who was changed’.

A new stage in life

Passing into a new time of life, for instance from childhood to adulthood, into middle age, etc could be an occasion when it would be beneficial and appropriate to change one’s name.

Among the Native Americans, who practised elaborate naming customs, the speakers of the Muskogean languages (the Choctaws, the Chickasaws, the Muskokis and the Seminoles) received a series of names at different stages of life:

- secret birth names;
- infancy and early childhood names e.g. ‘Walking in Sunshine’ or ‘Mother gone’ (the name of an orphan);
- nicknames of later childhood;
- puberty names, such as ‘Snapping Turtle’, ‘Snake Halooer’ and ‘Red Rock Iron’;
- civil titles, such as ‘Crazy Red Arrow’ and ‘Beloved Individual’ (the name of a Chickasaw chief in 1820);
- war titles, such as ‘Creeping in Ambush’

All name-changing ceremonies were preceded by a day of solitude, fasting and the performance of rites to avert evil.¹⁷

Concealment, disguise and protection

Several cultures used naming and its associated powers to protect newborn children or to disguise the identity of the sick or dying in order to avert death. In ancient India it was commonplace to give a child an unpleasant name, such as ‘Flies’, ‘Worms’, ‘Dusty’, ‘Dungheap’, ‘Rat’, ‘Old Shoe’, ‘Pepper’, ‘Old Rag’ or ‘Radish’ in order to scare death away and to protect the child from evil. Sometimes a baby would be placed in the lap of a woman, all of whose children had survived, to be given such unpleasant names. In another custom a stone would be named after the child and given into the care of the village deity. It was recovered with thanks and offerings when the child grew to adulthood.

Turkish midwives would sometimes give the baby a religious ‘umbilical name’ (*gobek adi*) while cutting the umbilical cord. As many children died young, names

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were sometimes chosen to bind the baby to earth, such as *Yahya* from *hayya* – to live, or *Ya'mur*, from *'amara* – to flourish. Or the adults would try to cheat the spirits or frighten the jinn by calling the baby by a negative name, or the name of death, such as *Zibalah* (Egyptian) – ‘garbage’ or *Yamut* – ‘he dies’.

The following account, related by Frances Densmore,¹⁸ tells of the renaming of a Chippewa boy by an old man:

When the child was about 10 years old he became so ill that the parents were afraid that he would die. So they sent tobacco to the old man and asked him to name the child. The old man came, looked at the child, and said he would name it the next day. He told the child's parents not to be afraid that the child would die before the next day. Most of the people assembled there did not believe that the child would live until night, but the man ‘talked and prayed’ so the child would live until the next day. He gave tobacco to each of those present and told them to return the next day. He told the people that when he named the child they would hear a sharp sound of thunder. The child was alive when the old man came next day, and he named the child *Ce'nawickun* (‘He who produces a rattling sound with the movement of his being’). As soon as he had named the child they heard the sound as of sharp thunder, though there were no clouds in the sky and no sign of a storm. Many people talk of this event until this day. The child recovered and lived to an old age.

The Kwakiutl tribe would also wash away sickness by ‘washing’ a name. The Yokuts gave their children two names in case one of their namesakes died. If both died, the child was called ‘No-name’.

In Hebrew tradition a change of name was considered to be one of the four things which could avert evil, and a seriously ill person would sometimes be renamed to include the new name *Hayyim* – life, or *Joshua* – salvation; in order to ‘mislead the angel of Death’. The Yiddish name *Altman* – old man, was traditionally given to protect the newborn child from the angel of death, who was supposed to be confused by the name; or else it was conferred to ensure long life. When God changed a person's name in the Bible it signified investing his life with new meaning: such as Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah and Jacob to Israel. If a child died, one born later might be called *Zeda* – ‘grandfather’, to imply and encourage longevity. Russian Jews in Idaho are recorded as re-naming a sick girl *Ida* – ‘life’.

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With this Book of the Law containing the thirteen attributes of mercy, we pray and ask for compassion from the Creator of the Heavens and Earth. As it is written 'Oh Lord, oh Lord, mighty, merciful and gracious, long suffering and abundant in love and truth, keeping troth to thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.' The Mighty King who sits upon the Throne of mercy, who rules the world with pity and compassion and bestows loving kindness, he who heals the sick of Israel his people, may he grant swift and complete recovery and good life to... who will be named... May he enjoy his name and may the blessing of his name be fulfilled, as it is written '...and I will bless and make thy name great.'

Hebrew name change prayer from 16th century Prayer Book (Mahazor)¹⁹

The changing of names is also common in Tibet, particularly to denote a new stage of life, such as the taking of religious vows. In this case the new monk will include the name of his initiating lama as one of his. The custom of name changing is also applied to babies if they are ill. Also, it is said that if people talk too much about a person, whether to praise or criticise, that this draws a curse (*mi-kha* – literally 'human mouth') to that person which causes sickness or misfortune. Many children were believed to have died from these curses, so sometimes the baby would be given an ugly or uncommon name to discourage people from using it. Similarly, if a family had suffered difficulties with their babies' births or the death of several children, the next-born might be named something unpleasant, such as 'dog-shit' to divert attention from it, and ward off further misfortune.

Is name changing for us?²⁰

We don't generally have any name-changing ceremonies or customs in our culture, nor do we usually change our first names – except perhaps when people undergo a change of sex, in which case they usually just modify their old name (the writer Jan Morris, for instance, used to be James). But is it possible that this lack is a sign that we are out of touch with the power of naming? That we no longer know how to invoke the healing, transformative realities which names can embody? I am not suggesting that we all change our names at the drop of a hat, or as often as we feel like it. In fact, Ted Andrews, in his excellent book *The Sacred Power in Your Name*²¹ cautions against this. He points out that we have an intimate connection with the name we attracted to us at birth, and 'changing your name should be a last resort'. But it might be that giving ourselves a new or additional name at certain significant points in our lives might help support the inner changes we are trying to make – and all the more so if we could develop rituals and ceremonies to give an outer, visible form to such transition times.

A name is, as I have tried to show throughout this book, not just an arbitrary appendage, but a kind of bridge between our ordinary everyday existence and other more impalpable realms. When chosen with sensitivity and intuition a name can bind us more deeply to realities which, though essentially nameless, are the source from which all being and naming arises.

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*Here lies One
Whose name
Was writ
In water*

John Keats: the inscription he requested for his gravestone