

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

What's in a name? I have struggled with Shakespeare's question for most of my life. What is my name?

Recently, I took the giant step and changed my name. I should say that I am changing my name. It's more a process than a simple decision. And the process is far from complete.

I didn't actually change my name, but rather I dropped my nickname, Terry, which I have had in some form or another for most of my 50 years. I have reverted back to my given name, my baptismal name, and my long-dead grandfather's name, Soterios.

Why? I am not sure why. For many years, I have used my given name, Soterios, on all-official documents, credit cards, and business cards, driver license and property deeds, etc. But friends, colleagues, business associates and even relatives call me Terry. Although not my immigrant aunts and uncles.

I have always remembered my name's impressive pedigree and its daunting role models--god and the Son of God. In ancient Greek mythology, Zeus was called the Soter, the savior. Herodotus referred to Zeus as Soter in his histories. Later, the early Christians also called Jesus the Soter. If you pay attentions to the Catholic or Eastern Orthodox liturgy, you can hear the word Soterion, which means deliverance. There is even a field of study called Soteriology, which is the theological doctrine of salvation through Jesus. It's a lot to live up to.

But my concerns are practical. I am in the public relations business and for calling on clients, reporters, and editors, Terry is much easier and simpler than Soterios. Besides in Irish Catholic Boston, it does not hurt to be called Terry. But I have always made it clear that my name is not Terrence. Another unintended benefit from my nickname is the juxtaposition of my first name: Terry and my last name: Zoulas. Reporters and editors and even clients remember my name. It is an odd coupling of names from different ethnic traditions that sticks in people's memories.

When I announced my name change to a group of long-time friends at a recent summer outing, I gave a mock serious speech that I was dumping my nickname because it was imposed on me by the white power structure. I even considered for a time, I said, that I would call myself Soterios X, but in my meager attempt at humor, truth appeared. My immigrant father was the one who imposed the nickname, Terry, on me. At first, it was Teddy and over time metamorphosed into Terry. My wise and sensitive father gave me the nickname to make my life easier growing up in Irish Catholic and Anglo Saxon Protestant Worcester, Massachusetts in the 1950s and 1960s when having a different name or religion was not acceptable. My friends were named Jimmy or Johnny or Timmy. Even my Jewish and Armenian friends had names like Butchie, Eddie, Elliott.

My hard working immigrant father owned a neighborhood store, a spa—not the kind today where you get mud baths and eat macrobiotic food—but a place where neighborhood people, the working class, bought staples like bread, milk, cigarettes and even condoms. It was also a restaurant, no a luncheonette, where the whole family shared in the work and in the joy. It was also a place where to success we had to accommodate the customer—get along, try to please, even when they were drunk. My nickname comes from the immigrant experience, having a place for us, being accepted, while different. It was my father’s gift to me, smoothing my life’s road in America. And I love him for it.

He also invented an American name for my mother, who had a beautiful and fitting name for she was the Goddess of the hearth and home: Demetrula, a name derived from the Greek goddess Demeter. My father’s version of her Americanized name was “Tillie”. To this day, I am clueless how he came up with her American name. My mother worked at the store and it was easier for the customers to say. My older sister and brother had a much easier time with their names. My sister’s name is Katerina, which in America became Katherine. My brother who was six when he arrived in America with our mother in 1940, adapted quickly to his adopted country. His name, Stavros, became Steve and he has never looked back.

But America is different today. And I am different than he is. I want to reclaim my other identity. Maybe I am growing up as America has, accepting differences among all of us who make up this country.

On a lazy Saturday morning, late in August, I was puttering in my garage in a suburb west of Boston when a neighbor whom I had never met came by. She said that she had locked her keys in her house and could she use my phone to call her husband for help. When she introduced herself as Shanti, I had an epiphany, not on the level of Paul on the road to Damascus, but one that has led me to the decision to drop my nickname. You can’t call me Terry anymore, but you can call me Soteri.

By the way, the street I live on is called DiTullio, and I’m thinking of changing it to Adams or Jefferson. What do you think?

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