Smelling as Sweet: Lamentations on an Uncommon Name and Affordances for Cognitive Freedoms

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At the tender age of two, during a lengthy ferry ride, I somehow managed to independently sneak into the men's bathroom by throwing my weight against the inwardly-opening door. My mother, fearing for the worst, found a crewsperson and put the entire ship on alert in a desperate search for me and my whereabouts. Surprisingly enough, the request over the intercom that a two year old "please report to the purser's office" went unfulfilled, but before long I was found by a good Samaritan, who gently asked if I was Alex Maguire. As the legend goes, I reportedly replied to him, "no, I'm Baby."

Though I had been named Alexander Graham Maguire, on the day of my birth (which despite my mother's claims that it was to give me options if I didn't like it – "multi-purpose" in her words – I consider to be a bad joke on the part of my father, Graham, a man rather enamored with telephones), it wasn't until shortly after the aforementioned incident that my parents began calling me by my given name, instead of relying on my unambiguous status of being the only baby in the household.

For the next 16 years of my life, I toiled away known as Alex. It was a name I had never truly liked, let alone identified with, but it was my name. That's what I had. Unfortunately, it was also a name that many other people in my peer group had – being the 22nd most popular name for boys in the year of my birth ("Top Names of the 1990s").

One day, only a few weeks after my high school graduation, a friend and I noticed that Facebook had a "change name" feature, and we wondered about its implications. Such a change had indeed been stirring in the back of my mind for some time, and so it was decided that I would click this strange button, if for no reason other than science. With the click of a button, one moment I was Alex, and the next, Sandy.

Despite the ease by which I accomplished this symbolic gesture, changing my name *in actuality* proved to be extraordinarily difficult. I was surprised by the ubiquitous opposition erected by those in my life. People simply refused to call me by my new name, most of whom brushed it away as "just a phase" and evidently expected the cognitive difficulty inherent in renaming a familiar concept to be simply not worth the effort.

As a result, I found myself moving away from my peer groups and finding new ones, ones in which I could be me on my own terms. It's hard to say if the drastic changes in my life which have followed since then were due more to the differing social structures or from my newly-created identity, but both were certainly a factor.

To date, only one person from my Alex-era has explicitly supported my change of moniker – my mother, whose reasoning was explained to me thusly: "it's your name and volition; who am I to tell you otherwise?" This remark horrified me; I found it to be absolutely haunting, not because she thought it, but because others *didn't*. This I consider to be a very chilling commentary on our society at large.

A friend of mine, Darrin Rigo, a man whose clarity of thought I greatly admire – despite at the time being one of the biggest lobbyists against my change of name – recently provided me some insight into this phenomenon. For the most part, in Western culture, Darrin says, names are presumed to be invariant over time. Because the change of name occurred simultaneously with my rebellion against other societal constructs (which, it turns out, was a phase), he lumped it in whole with the rest of the rebellion. Fair enough, I must begrudgingly admit, but it wasn't a pleasant experience.

Speaking of unpleasant experiences, another difficulty I had overlooked on the road to a changed name was an aspect of what I have since coined as the “discrimination of the unfamiliar”. Despite “Sandy” being an acknowledged shortened form of “Alexander”, this is a little known fact and suffers from a long inferential distance unlike the more common “Alex”.

This discrimination of the unfamiliar is perhaps most evident when even after I have finished explaining the etymology of my name, people are still hesitant to believe that “Sandy” could possibly be a shortened form of “Alexander”. Indeed, while I would previously sign my name as “Alex” on official documents, signing as “Sandy”, though not more incorrect, often elicits exceptionally undesirable circumstances. Half of my assignments in my first term at school went missing due to a mistaken intuition that if my student number and last name aligned, I would get my marks back. Even

more troubling is that I am often asked to leave the bank for the egregious offense of trying to deposit cheques made out to me, that is to say, to “Sandy”. On one attempt I actually was told that I couldn't possibly be Sandy Maguire, since that was a *girl's* name. Unfortunately, short of my inevitable rise to high fame, or massive advocacy campaigns for the proper treatment of underrepresented shortened names, this situation is unlikely to change in my lifetime. I am certain that all of the Peggys out there share my frustration.

But I digress. My opening anecdote, aside from being absolutely adorable, serves to showcase an interesting phenomenon: that our identities are more closely tied to our identifier than we might think at first glance.

In his scintillating book “Gödel, Escher, Bach”, Douglas Hofstadter makes a strong argument for the experience of consciousness being created by self-referential patterns in the brain – that is, that consciousness emerges from mental recursion. If this is indeed the case, one's name, the identifier by which one recognizes the self, is certainly such a self-referential pattern.

As a result of this, our names serve as a symbolic representation of ourselves, and, as it turns out, a convenient mental structure in which to store the subtle connotations which we associate with the self, be they quirky character traits or minute nuances of our personalities. Humans simply cannot deal with words as Aristotelean symbols (Yudkowsky, “Empty Labels”), and thus the symbols by which we identify get all of these connotations tacked on as extra baggage on the side, usually without our explicit knowledge (Yudkowksy, “How An Algorithm Feels From Inside”).

In short, a name is a convenient handle for the complex system which we colloquially call a person. It is to a person what a map is to a territory -- useful for making quick heuristics, but known to be low-resolution and only relatively trustworthy.

Coming to this understanding, we are not far from a most profound realization: that discarding a name throws out the associated baggage simultaneously. A new moniker provides a clean slate on which one can inscribe a new personality, free of previous associations.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this topic is one over which I often find myself philosophizing, waxing affectedly with old friends who are likewise interested in the human experience of symbols. Regrettably, I am unable to cite them, but among those that have known me long, there is a marked difference in their minds between me as "Alex" and me as "Sandy". The conceptual aspect between the two names have been separated by partitioning legacy emotional baggage and connotations away from aspects of my character which continue to hold true today.

As a matter of fact, I find myself doing this act of partitioning subconsciously. There are at least three mental versions of myself going by different names, each of which exemplifies different aspects of my personality. For example, "Winter" is my internal supervillian alter ego who will stop at nothing to prevent "Santino" (the internal hero and my personal role model) from accomplishing his goals. Whenever I find myself procrastinating important things, it is immediately classified as one of Winter's acts of sedition to prevent me from accomplishing my true potential. It sounds kind of crazy – maybe even really crazy – but it's very useful, instrumentally.

In conclusion, a thing's identifier is a natural place for the mind to store connotations associated with the thing itself, a fact which can be usefully exploited to create *tabula rasa* for oneself. Tread lightly, however, as names are powerful beasts not to be trifled with superciliously, and peers are often more pigheaded than they might appear. If you, gentle reader, are considering a change of name, please, both for cripes' sake, and your own peace of mind, choose something with which the populace is familiar. “John” would be a good choice, and even “Wolfgang” might be acceptable, but under no circumstances should you change your name to “Otterly” – not even if you love rivers and are very playful indeed.

Works Cited

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