



What is your name?

The indigenous North American tribe known as the Cherokees believed that a person's name is prophetic. In the mid-1700s, they developed an elaborate naming ceremony that began a few days after birth. Parents would hand their newborn over to a Cherokee priest who would pass the child over a sacred fire. Then the priest would immerse the child in sacred water and pray a blessing for the baby's future.

Finally, the child would be presented to an elder matriarch of the tribe who would name the baby. She would choose the child's name carefully because the name would indicate the child's destiny.

But here's the thing. A Cherokee can have several names over the course of his or her life. For example, a child named "Little Butterfly" or "Bear Cub" will probably want a more grown-up name as he or she grows into adolescence. Or someone who performs an extraordinarily courageous deed might be renamed by the community—with or without a ceremony. Or someone who experiences a vision quest might receive a new name. A person's name changes as their life-story changes.

J.R.R. Tolkien captured a sense of the story that names tell in his classic work, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Two Hobbits are on a quest, and they encounter a talking tree, called an Ent:

"I'm a Brandybuck, Meriadoc Brandybuck, though most people call me just Merry."

"And I'm a Took, Peregion Took, but I'm generally called Pippin, or even Pip."

"Hm, but you are hasty folk, I see," said Treebeard. "I am honored by your confidence; but you should not be too free all at once. There are Ents and Ents, you know; or there are Ents and things that look like Ents but ain't, as you might say. I'll call you Merry and Pippin, if you please—nice names. For I am not going to tell you my name, not yet at any rate." A queer half-knowing, half-humorous look came with a green flicker into his eyes.

"For one thing it would take a very long while: my name is growing all the time, and I've lived a very long, long time; so my name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of the things they belong to in my language, in the Old Entish as you might say. It is a lovely language, but it takes a very long time to say anything in it, because we do not say anything in it, unless it is worth taking a long time to say, and to listen to."

Names also carry power, as Treebeard implies when he is honored to know Merry and Pippin's names. In some cultures, to know a person's true name grants you a certain level of control or intimate knowledge. For example, someone who wishes to do me harm might go to lengths to sully my "good name." For some legacy corporations who have seen better days, the last thing they may have that is of any value is their company name. And, of course, Moses famously asks God for his name. The name of God is so revered in Judaism that it is not said out loud so as to avoid any possible, even if unintended, disrespect. Obviously the profanation of a *word* used to designate a name cannot cause any harm. Rather, the harm to the name is harm to the reputation—to the story—of the name bearer. Hence, Treebeard is reluctant to share his true name until he is confident Merry and Pippin know enough of his story—which will take a long time to tell—to be properly respectful of it.

In this issue of *Presence*, Diane M. Millis reminds us:

Each of us has a story to share. We don't need to be eloquent or have a certain level of education in order to do so. What we do need is a process, a place, and a committed person, or group of persons, to encourage and accompany us as we share stories about our lives. (6)

The art of spiritual direction begins with sharing our names. At first, however, we might not reveal our "true" name. As we share our story and grow more confident in the other's care and respect, our name changes. Perhaps it sounds the same. I am "Nick" when we first meet, and I am still "Nick" many stories later. But the name has grown deeper and more meaningful. I am, perhaps, not the "Nick" you first thought you knew.

And someday, possibly, I'll tell you my true name. ■

—Nick Wagner