

5-1-2002

Names

Over the years I've acquired a long list of nicknames, primarily, I'm sure, because of the length of my name. Children made "Mary Frances" into "Mingy" or "Mosse," and adults wanted to say just "Mary."

I remember envying anyone in my school classes who had a brief name, quickly signed, so that its owner could get down to serious business as quickly as possible. I felt that I was spending valuable time writing, no matter how quickly, M-A-R-Y F-R-A-N-C-E-S H-I-C-K-M-A-N. But I was never willing to drop any of the three parts. Years later, when I had lost one letter in my last name, through marriage, (six in Minton, seven in Hickman, you see) feeling I was still not getting along fast enough, I did compromise by using my middle initial instead of Frances, but my attachment to my full *real* name was, surprisingly, so strong that I wasn't really happy with all that new-found time. I guess I shouldn't have been amazed, for over the years I've waged a never-ending campaign to protect the spelling of Frances. How many times have I patiently, or impatiently, explained that i-s is the masculine spelling, with e-s the feminine?

When I was in grade school, I had never envied my classmate whose name was Frances Francis: she had the unenviable task of straightening out both of her names' spellings. The girl I did envy was Ann Pou; I've always hoped she was fortunate enough to fall in love with a man with a short name. But I can't help wondering if she might have married Reginald Abercrombie.

When a high school teacher called me Mary Doris Heckman the first day of class, I was affronted not only by the wrong name but by the fact that, although Mary Doris was a good friend, she was also a beautiful freckled-faced red head. All of this musing brings me to the conclusion that my name is a private thing and a very sensitive matter. In fact, I think I recognized early on just how personal my name is; why not everyone's? I remember being appalled by stories of how immigration officers sometimes arbitrarily assigned American-sounding names to bewildered travelers as they entered this country at Ellis Island. I was intrigued that most of my female Chinese students wanted to adopt a popular American girl's name, say Karen or Patricia or Susan.

In my English as a Second Language classes, I spent a great deal of effort getting my students' names straight and pronounced as accurately as I could. Not only did that indicate the respect I had for each student, but it also gave me much needed instruction in the different sounds in each person's native language. The n-g (as in Nguyen) in Vietnamese was especially troublesome because, while we do have those letters in words ending in -ing we do, in fact, have great difficulty hearing the sound they make alone. English has a number of sounds that Vietnamese doesn't have. My difficulty trying to hear and reproduce the Vietnamese sound gave me the opportunity to drill the Vietnamese on difficult sounds they needed to hear and say if they were to make themselves understood in English. In like manner the initial kh- sound in Arabic defeated me and gave me the license to help my Kuwaitis and other Arabs work on some difficult English sounds. My student Khaled gave up more gracefully on his name than I ever did on the spelling of Francis. He was happy to have his classmates and his teachers call him (hard K) Khaled. I did find an easy way to show Arabs the differences in our voiced *B* and unvoiced *P* by passing out books of matches and having them pronounce *big* and *pig* with a lighted match close to their lips. Then if someone

offered them a "Big pig sandwich," they would know their Muslim background would suggest that they really didn't want it. The main point of this is, of course, my efforts to enable them to keep some of their heritage, in the form of the name they'd been given at birth.

I can't resist going on with the irrelevancy of some of my collection of favorite names that made me wonder how their owners ever developed any self esteem. Mother collected a jewel in her first-grade teaching in Oklahoma: the mother of one little boy came to her indignantly when Mother shortened his name from Alpha Omega to Alpha. It seems she had intended that he should be an only child, a fact she felt should be recognized by his teacher. One of my fellow teachers capped Mother's story when she told me about her student named Bartimus Ultimus Deus Volente. Some of my other favorite names through the years don't always have a story behind them so far as I know. Lydia Hiebert, one of my friends in the second grade, had none of the panache that Paul sings about in Groucho Marx's "Lydia, the Tattooed Lady!" Bettina Boynton's long red fingernails and tight silk dresses seemed to broadcast her theatrical appearance in the fourth grade. I'm not sure what Delno Swarz's name signified, but it was definitely unforgettable. Robin Joyce's name so appropriately heralded his English accent when he sang "Trees," that it was years before I could enjoy any other vocalist, especially when he warbled soulfully, "But only God can make a tree."

There are dozens more unforgettable names I could add to this catalog; they all have in common my wonderment at how normal their owners appeared, how glad I am that I got to know them for a short time, and how happy I am that I have only the correct spelling of Frances to worry about.

Signs in England

Lift well - keep clear
Humps for 800 yards
Urban Clearway (sign on highway)
Dual Carriageway
One mile to Legoland
START STOPPING NOW (approach to roundabout)
Way Out
Give Way
Boarding cattery
Wallingford 1-1/4 m. except for loading
Topsy Miller Fire House
Stratford sub Castle (town near Salisbury)
NO FOOTBALL COACHES ALLOWED (sign on entry to narrow drive of a pub at the bus station:
PENSIONERS CLUB
Left baggage open to anyone
Ashmolean Museum: "The recently acquired lift does not operate to specifications"
"Visitors are required not to step over the black line on the floor"
BATH, notice outside the Pump Room:
"It is an offense to drink alcohol in this public place if warned by a constable not to do so.
Penalty 1 pound"

Road not suitable for long lorries
at Castle Combe: Ready Token
at a diner: "Minimum spend L 2.00 (12 - 2)
Drink can: Best before end; on base of can: 6-98
scrumpy cedar (Andrew)
Stattle - stones like mushrooms to raise hay out of reach of mice and moisture.
Police notice: Keep yellow border clear
Highly polished brass plack on High Street:
(Behind door) at the Mitre: Bookings not always necessary.
in a department store: "Disabled toilets and baby changing"
Road sign: Diversion
Tickets 8 pounds, concession.
In Cotswolds and elsewhere, near a village crossing: ELDERLY PEOPLE
Cotswolds: "Swimming Pool and Toilets"
road sign: "Gap closed ahead"
at Warwick Castle: LIMIT OF MAIN PARK QUEUE
Oxford Ltd. Away Coaches and Fans
Keep clear
Shopkeeper Required: apply within
Do not interfere with the door dictator
Hotel sign: Accommodation Reception in rear
road sign: Oncoming vehicles in middle of road
sign on door in Oriel tunnel: Ensure that this door is LOCKED.
Personal ingredients are disappearing
Overheard in store: "Don't speak to me that way, Moddom, or I will smack your botTOM
Faulty Books (shelf label in bookstore)
sign on a truck: Lightning Protection and Earthing Ltd.
Headwaiter in Oriel Hall: When you're ready, give me a wheeze.
Nancy: Woolsworth, Norman the Conquerer, excited dance and comments
on first seeing Windsor Castle
After listening to two professors and a student in the student pub at Oriel, Peter says he can
understand why the Revolutionary War was fought.