

Baby Naming

March 15, 2024

The first time I heard that term was just recently from a good friend of mine whose daughter is about to give birth. I asked “When will I get to see Peanut (my nickname for this unborn child)?” She said, “Oh, when Sammy has the Baby Naming, maybe some time in June.”

Baby Naming is a rite of passage for Jewish girl babies—a more benign introduction than the boy’s bris. Naming is additive—not reductive— giving what can be a lifetime identifier that doesn’t involve removing a piece of one’s anatomy. Naming is a gift, which can elicit the “Oh, what a beautiful family name” or the regrettable “What were your parents thinking when they named you after one of the elements in the periodic table?”

Recently I have been thinking about my own “naming”. I was in a monastery 50 years ago and when I left, I kept my monastic name Adam over my ‘maiden’ name Daniel. I choose it— to be accurate, the Abbot chose it thankfully over my two other suggestions: Jared and Israel—as a symbol of my birth into the religious family that I was freely joining and I was excited to be presented at that first Vespers service as Brother Adam.

Now, it is not my first name that I am now considering changing but my last name. Like many of us who came to this country, I suppose we don’t know the complete story of the conditions in the old country that lead to our ancestor’s decision to come to America—but they did come here and there were many changes—and one of them was that their last names were changed in some way. A name too long with too many consonants to pronounce, a name too ethnic from a country not so favored, a name misunderstood because the American ears of the clerk couldn’t understand the frail immigrant standing in front of them —so the kindly or more likely, bad tempered clerk in Ellis Island, did what they wouldn’t have done freely themselves: changed their last name. Who needs that last ‘ski’ or ‘vich’ or ‘stein’ when there are plenty of other perfectly good letters in front of it.

In my case, I don’t know for sure but the family lore (from someone, someplace-who knows now) is that our last name in the old country was ‘von Dolle’ or as my dear sister

tells me, von Dollen. It doesn't really matter either way but when my ancestors knocked at America's front door to get in, our name was probably not just Dolle. There is a village in northwestern Germany near Hanover named Dolle. So there is a high degree of probability that my ancestors came from that area. Hmm—von Dolle. That short modifier generally means the concept: 'of' or 'from' the place.

Last names were developed out of necessity to say "who are you" and indicate your family by identifying what place you were from as in: 'von Dolle' or maybe what guild your ancestors were members of: Smith (black smiths) or who owned your ancestors at one point: Jefferson (Thomas). Think of the infinite names and the ways that they were generated—amazingly ingenious and practical.

But now, in making this choice to change my last name, I am thinking about other ideas which reflect living in this time, in my skin. As the feud about immigration boils in this country, I look at changing my last name back to the original form as a way to self identify as an immigrant. I am the same as those frail people at Ellis Island one hundred and fifty years ago or at the Rio Grande today. And, as we look around, we all find our selves in the same metaphorical boat since how many of us can not say that we are not immigrants to this country—damn few.

But beyond the political implication of changing my last name, I have a host of personal reasons why I am doing this. I have had a series of different chapters in my 73 years and, looking forward, I am fully embracing what might be my final one. I studied for the priesthood for 11 years with over 3 of those years in a Benedictine monastery, followed by a nearly 50 year career as an interior decorator, while for 17 years I have co-owned a yoga retreat in Costa Rica. I am a practicing artist for the last 7 years and 6 years ago I co-founded Pionero Philanthropy, a non profit in Guatemala.

My current project under development is a \$250,000 grant being given to The Our Fund Foundation in Fort Lauderdale, FL to evaluate and invest in the work of trans non-profits within the queer community in South Florida. I feel the need to support this group of human beings as they demand their rights, just as gay men and women did in the 1950s.

And so like many others in our society who at major events in their lives that are celebrated by changing their last name, I do so now for a host of private and intimate reasons. Am I new person, maybe metaphorically I am—on a molecular level, no I am not, but I share this with those others who at the moment of life-changing decisions, also change their last names. I am changing my last name, albeit not celebrated by marriage or baptism, or naming or acceptance into a new religious community, but by my own choice.

So while I embrace my past, I look to the future with an intensity I have not felt before. I'm looking at those five letters—d o l l e— and wonder if they fully express who I am today. It would be an understatement to say that growing up Danny Dolle didn't fall into that category of 'what were they thinking' when my parents gave me that original name 73 years ago. I sense though that walking into the future—owning my name that I fully choose, Adam von Dolle, doesn't seem entirely inappropriate as it more accurately fits the man that I am today.