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Your Secret Name

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INTRODUCTION

THE GENTLE WHISPER

Tomorrow night I could change my little girl's future forever — and strangely, she isn't even born yet.

On our “date night” — an infrequent event for two parents with two other children under the age of four — my wife, Kelly, and I will go to a local bookstore, sit down with a stack of books, and participate in a ritual as old as humanity itself.

We're going to pick out a name for a child we've never met.

At least that's the plan.

With only eight weeks left in the pregnancy, we can't afford to stall. Unfortunately, we've been having the same date night for the last several months, and we're no closer to choosing a name. When we come home, our babysitter can tell with one glance at our dejected faces that we're going to need her services again, and sooner than any of us thought.

Naming our first two kids posed a few obstacles, but at the present moment this third one has us caught in a cruel headlock and almost ready to tap out. Until we settle on a name we're gridlocked, unable to move an inch in any other area of our fast-paced lives.

As a guy, coming home without a name feels similar to returning from a hunt without a kill — or maybe from the hardware store without that critical part (although admittedly I don't often venture into the realm of home improvement). In any case, my inability to score the right name undermines any hope of fulfilling the “masculine stereotype” of a problem solver.

Kelly doesn't feel any better.

She paces the house at all hours of the night, penciling possibilities that seem impossible when examined in the light of day. Somehow, both of us feel beaten by this task, and every day that we fail to come up with a name is another day closer to our daughter's birth.



At some point in history, we humans decided assigning names in infancy was a good idea. Our parents got suckered into the same strategy because they had the same pattern modeled to them.

The tradition isn't all bad, as there are some benefits to bestowing names early on. No one wants to be referred to as “boy” or “girl” for the bulk of their childhood. Yet our need for names bleeds much deeper than birth certificates on official papers and lingers much longer than the echo from the server's voice at Panera Bread announcing that our “Pick Two” soup and salad combo is ready to be picked up at the counter.

The truth is, every single person who's breathing in this same air on planet Earth is also caught up in the same age-old Name Game. And as long as we're stuck in the Name Game — the unsuccessful cycle of trying to discover our true identity independently of God — rest assured, we'll never win.

On the contrary, we'll always be swept away with a dose of angst that often feels as colossal as planet Earth.

Think I'm exaggerating?

Let me ask then:

Are you completely secure in understanding who you are?

Are you confident you know your true identity?

Are you fully resolved concerning certain monumental issues, like discerning your purpose, calling, and lot in this life?

If not, don't feel discouraged. Instead, realize these feelings are both normal and natural. God himself planted these questions deep inside your soul in order that you'd eventually discover the path that leads to him. Or, more theologically accurate, so that you'd reach the end of yourself and then finally be ready to experience the beginning of him. The Bible tells us: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11 TNIV).

Essentially, we're all homesick for a place we've never been. And so we live as nomads, groping toward a destination we can't quite define. As creatures we fumble along, hoping to find our way back to the One who made us—believing that as we discover who *we* truly are, we also discover a portion of who *he* truly is.

Anthropologists agree with this phenomenon, at least in part. They understand uncertainty infects every person in every culture and that each one of us desperately desires the answer to the most basic question:

"WHO AM I?"

These three simple words hijack our brains at an early age, clutching onto our core, nagging us wherever we go. Children seek to answer this question in playtime by assigning titles like Mommy or Daddy when playing house or labels like cops and robbers when playing bank heist.

Adults seek to answer this question with more sophisticated

strategies. Some of us climb our way up the corporate ladder, plowing through perpetual promotions. Others of us pride ourselves in maintaining our reputation of trendy and hip, manifested by securing the latest gadgets and trinkets. In the checkout line at the mall, we buy the lie that a new jacket or pair of shoes will somehow dispel the hurt we feel in our hearts. But the excitement soon fades, and our souls are once again exposed as naked and needy.

We incorrectly assume that names given by other people or other things will somehow scratch our identity itch.

Yet Birth Names (the names assigned to us when we arrive in this world) and Given Names (the positive and negative titles we inherit while walking in this world) were never hardwired to alleviate the tension.

On the contrary, they only fuel it, creating more space between us and our true identity.

And so many of us spend a lifetime running from our Given Names, exchanging our best years, hoping to escape these false words that reach out and long to define us. But transcending these titles is no simple task.

Slowly over time, these labels become part of our permanent wardrobe. And as we wear them, we end up settling for so much less than we were born to be.

We'd do well to swallow the truth — that such names are never enough. Neither our Birth Name nor our Given Names expel the ache or satisfy our souls. None serve as a substitute for our Secret Name.

Secret Name?

Probably sounds a bit cosmic or, at a minimum, a bit unfamiliar?

But that's only because our vocabulary doesn't often venture into epic realms, realms of destiny and legacy. Instead, we frequently prefer trivial topics, like other people's attempts at dieting,

our favorite college team's road to the championship, or our friend's most recent status update on the latest social-networking site. But let's not be too hard on ourselves. We're not shallow people. Rather, we've just gotten used to relating on levels that avoid soul issues.

For a thousand reasons, it's much easier this way.

Good thing God has much more in mind. He wants to grant you a new name — a Secret Name, in fact — but you can only start embracing your future name when you stop running from your present ones.

You must accept who you are in order to discover who you were created to be.



This book is about giving up the Name Game.

It's about putting an end to chasing the false names that offer only a hollow promise.

It's about finally encountering your Secret Name, drinking it down, and allowing it to ooze into every quadrant of your life — the visible ones and the invisible ones alike.

As you might have guessed, discovering your Secret Name isn't a painless process. And Secret Names aren't bestowed to the masses either, only unto the remnant courageous enough to deal with their junk.

The first step is to turn down the noise a few notches. The world perpetually shouts and screams, seeking to brand you.

Your true name — your Secret Name — is granted only by the One who knew you before you were born.

In all this, remember, the Father doesn't speak with a loud voice, but most often with a gentle whisper. Tragically, we rarely stay quiet long enough to hear him.

THE GENTLE WHISPER

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

1 KINGS 19:11 - 12

PART I

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

*A bad wound may heal,
but a bad name will kill.*

SCOTTISH PROVERB

A WORLD WITHOUT NAMES

You may be surprised to learn that I share a bond with the cool cat who hosted the hit game show *Wheel of Fortune* — a bond so strong that you might say our destinies are intertwined forever.

Pat Sajak and I both have a girl's name.

Don't laugh.

Growing up with a girl's name wasn't easy. More than once I remember the mean kids circling me, wickedly chanting, "Kary has a girl's name. Kary has a girl's name."

Once I got a piece of mail addressed to *Ms. Kary Oberbrunner*. It was an invitation to an all-girls summer cheerleading camp. Good thing my friends never saw that brochure. Come to think of it, upon opening it, I burned it — promptly — after sobbing *like* a girl in my bedroom.

Such acts of naming slowly ate away my security, eroding my confidence like a constant drip of water over time erodes a menacing solid block of concrete.

Eventually I reached a breaking point.

I had to stop the pain, and I decided building myself up physically would solve the problem. Television convinced me that putting on some serious muscle would silence the malicious taunts. Strength worked for Mr. T and the A-Team, and I believed it just might work for me too.

Since steroids are hard to come by in the first grade, I settled for a much faster strategy. One morning, while in my bedroom getting ready for school, I stuffed my tiny navy blue sweater full of socks. I thought a dozen balled-up socks placed strategically in my sleeves and chest area would add an edge to my image and give me a new name, perhaps Spike or Rock. I walked into class, sweater bulging with fake muscles. The kids circled me as usual, but instead of calling me names, they looked on with strange curiosity.

I was thrilled. My brilliant plan was giving me the empowerment I craved — until one of my “muscles” fell out of my sweater and onto the floor.

I received a new name that day — IDIOT.

Life at St. Mary's Catholic grade school inched by slowly that year. I longed for summer afternoons where my cousins and I were the kings of the woods behind their house — where we would invent our own names for each other, names consistent with our other favorite TV shows, like the *Dukes of Hazzard*, *MacGyver*, and the *Greatest American Hero*, popularized by its theme song “Believe It or Not.”

Unfortunately for us, there was nothing believable about our make-believe playtime, and each school year jolted us back to reality. My classmates knew nothing about the clever aliases my cousins and I assigned each other.

Thankfully, not everyone at my school was cruel.

At recess one day, a particular girl decided she'd seen enough

of my verbal beatings and decided to oppose the mean kids. “Stop making fun of Kary,” she said.

“Why should we? He has a girl’s name,” one particular bully pointed out reasonably.

“So?” my defender shot back, searching for some type of logical defense. “There’re plenty of cool guys with girl’s names.”

“Oh yeah? Like who?” The bully wasn’t about to back down.

We all wondered if she’d manage a rebuttal. With my self-esteem on the line, I desperately prayed she would.

“Pat Sajack,” she blurted out. “He’s cool, and Pat’s *definitely* a girl’s name.”

Pat Sajack? I thought. *I guess he’s cool.* Maybe I was hoping for someone a little ... taller?



Although we humans tend to fixate on names, at one point in history, this simply wasn’t the case. Rewind time way back to the beginning when a much different world existed — specifically, a world without names. The first two chapters of Genesis refer to the first two people as man/woman, male/female, and man/wife. These individuals were identified for what they were (gender and species), not for who they were (personal names).

Remarkably, an environment devoid of sin also meant an environment devoid of human names.¹ Perhaps difficult to imagine, but names were simply unnecessary in those days. Since the original man and woman knew who God was, they also knew who they were — an inescapable by-product. And so the insatiable question presently seared into our brains — Who am I? — didn’t exist because separation from God didn’t exist. The core question of

identity found its idyllic resolution within a pure relationship with the Father.

Prior to the fall, detailed in chapter three of Genesis, the first two people experienced perfect harmony with their Creator. They walked and talked with God intimately and frequently. Names existed in the garden of Eden, but only names that described what beings were, not who these beings were.

God placed the responsibility on man to name the lower order, thereby fulfilling his original command to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28). According to God’s will, the man obediently assigned names to all of the animals and birds:

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

GENESIS 2:19–20

Yet, for man and woman at this time, there was no need for names — that is until sin emerged and ripped them away from God. A fractured relationship *with* God meant a fractured understanding *of* God as well as a fractured understanding of themselves — also an inescapable by-product. By losing their grasp of who God was, they also lost their grasp of who they were. The damage now done and the ground now cursed, the man’s next response proved both chilling and revealing.

Guess what he did immediately.

Adam names his wife — Eve.

God never told him to name her. Only a chapter before, this act of naming, commanded by God himself, was reserved for Adam to bestow names upon animals, not fellow human beings. Pulling back the layers, we see how sin infects a person, even within the first few minutes of contracting the fatal disease.

By naming his wife, Adam attempted ineffectively to solve a riddle well above his pay grade. No other human can answer for us our deepest question of identity.

Sin causes us to treat other people as less than human — more specifically, like animals. And sin seductively whispers the lie that we'll find our true identity by naming others or by receiving names from other people.

Deception now feeding our souls, the truth is that an inaccurate view of God yields an inaccurate view of ourselves — a dilemma we often rush to remedy. But factor God out of the equation and we're left only with using our own efforts to score a new identity, a trend found just a few chapters later in Genesis.

Humankind tried to combine its collective energy in an attempt to provide an answer of the age-old, sin-induced question: Who am I? This mass of humanity slaved away and built the Tower of Babel for no other reason than to forge a new name. They hoped that by carving out stone, they'd somehow carve out their Secret Name too. “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth’” (Genesis 11:4).

Fast-forward and the story is still being retold. We're caught up in the same Name Game, carving out new names, trying to satisfy the same ache. You'd think after all this time we would've learned that idyllic resolution is still only found within a pure relationship with the Father.

But we haven't learned, and so we enter this war-torn world with a few strikes against us. Unfortunately, we arrive with a Birth Name.

Birth Names aren't the enemy, but they certainly aren't a friend either; they don't offer any clarity regarding the question — Who am I? — if that's what you're wondering. Birth Names offer different levels of insight, depending on where you're from, but they can never replace the need for discovering our Secret Name.

Many cultures bestow Birth Names based on their meaning, but we Americans tend to choose ones predominantly based on the way they roll off the tongue.

We may pick a name because it's popular or because someone we admire holds the name. Perhaps a few expectant parents even settle on a name based on its etymology. But for the vast majority, choosing a Birth Name is almost totally dependent on personal preference.

Not so for hundreds of other cultures around the world, including Africans, Arabs, and East Indians. For many of these cultures, a name describes a person, often referring to his or her physical characteristics.

Customs expert James M. Freeman explains:

Thus a certain Abyssinian was named *Omazena*, because of a wart on his hand; an Arab boy was called *Duman*, because he was born before the gate of Bab-el-Duma at Damascus. Among the Hindoos we find *Ani Muttoo*, the precious pearl; *Pun Amma*, the golden lady; *Chinny Tamby*, the little friend. Among the Native American Indians we have *Kosh-kin-ke-kait*, the cut-off arm; *Wah-ge-kaut*, crooked legs; *Wau-zhe-gaw-maish-kum*, he that walks along the shore.²

For such people groups, one's Birth Name marks a person for life, and changing it is out of the question.

Within the biblical tradition, naming proved an even weightier undertaking. For these cultures, a particular name often carried a prophetic commentary. Your Birth Name shaped how you acted and who you became, functioning as a window into your behavior and temperament. This pattern begins in the first few pages of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. When Eve gives birth to her first child, a son, she says, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man" (Genesis 4:1).

Eve named him Cain, meaning "acquisition" or "possession." The name *Cain* is related to the Hebrew verb *I acquired*. Some scholars feel that Eve's name choice represented her belief that Cain would fulfill God's prophetic statement concerning the promised seed that would come from her.³

Eve named her second son Abel, which means "breath," "vapor," or "vanity" and seems to relate to shortness of life spoken of much later in the Scriptures.⁴ In the biblical account, we see that jealousy *possessed* Cain as he observed God's favor for Abel's sacrifice rather than his. Cain wished he could *acquire* God's favor, so he cut his brother's life short.

With Abel dead and Cain disqualified (murder tends to have that effect), "God gave Adam and Eve another son — Seth — which means 'the appointed, the substitute' (taking Abel's place)."⁵

As the centuries rolled on, the plot thickened. God has always been calling a people out for himself — in the Old Testament predominantly the Israelites, and in the New Testament predominantly the church. The Israelites originated from Jacob, who was the younger son of Isaac, who was the promised son of Abraham, who

was the father of many nations and the recipient of God's unconditional covenant.

Echoing the choices of Cain and Abel, the younger of the twins (Jacob) shrewdly stole the birthright of the older brother (Esau) with a covert act of deception. Jacob invited Esau to exchange his inheritance for a bowl of stew. At the end of the meal deal, Esau might have had a full stomach, but most certainly he also had an empty soul.

Jacob received his Birth Name, meaning "deceiver" and "heel grabber," because he exited the womb clutching his twin brother's heel. Labeled a "schemer" and "one who undermines," Jacob lived up to his name repeatedly at the expense of his brother Esau.

Jacob needed transformation and, more than that, he needed a new name — especially if God would build his chosen people through Jacob's lineage. How could God name his people after a patriarch who habitually manipulated and swindled others through scheming?

As if being called a "deceiver" wasn't bad enough, Jacob had to deal with the shameful connotations that clung to any name associated with the "heel." In the Old Testament, God linked Satan himself to the first reference to the heel, prophesying that the evil Serpent would one day bruise the heel of Eve's future offspring (Genesis 3:15).⁶

"Heel" received some additional poor marks in the New Testament. In one of history's darkest moments, on the threshold of Judas's betrayal, Jesus identified the turncoat disciple as the one who "lifted up his heel against me" (John 13:18).

Jacob, the future father of the twelve tribes of Israel, spent a lifetime running from both his Birth Name and his Given Names. If Jacob hoped to inherit his divine destiny, he needed an entirely new identity.

He needed to learn his Secret Name.

A WORLD WITHOUT NAMES



Chances are that somewhere along the way, you've been tagged with a Given Name⁷ that you're not too crazy about:

ORPHAN	INVISIBLE	UNSURE
RICH	FORGOTTEN	UNSTABLE
POWERLESS	ABANDONED	HOSTAGE
WEAK	RUSHED	ABDUCTED
LOST	HASTY	ENSLAVED
UNCREATIVE	STUTTERER	CAPTIVE
MISTAKE	SPEECH	POOR
ACCIDENT	IMPEDIMENT	HOMELESS
UGLY	DEPRESSED	BUM
BATTERED	UNPROTECTED	GIFTED
EXHAUSTED	ATHLETE	NEEDY
FATHERLESS	SINNER	FAILURE
EXPOSED	HANDICAPPED	DISCONTENTED
FAITHLESS	INCAPACITATED	DISTRAUGHT
UNWANTED	INVALID	SICK
ARROGANT	DISABLED	UNHEALTHY
HEALTHY	BORED	DISEASED
AGNOSTIC	BURDENED	VIOLENT
VENGEFUL	COCKY	WHORE
BRILLIANT	DESPAIRING	TENSE
COMMON	IGNORANT	ALONE
TRAPPED	IDIOT	JUDGED
OVERWHELMED	FOOLISH	MISJUDGED
TIRED	UNTOUCHABLE	POPULAR
VICTIM	SELF-RELIANT	DIVORCED
REJECTED	UNABLE	UNSKILLED
UNSEEN	SUCCESSFUL	INCAPABLE

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

UNFAITHFUL	MISFIT	FAT
ADDICT	COLD	ANOREXIC
HELPLESS	CALLOUSED	CUTTER
PLAIN	IMPATIENT	SELF-INJURER
SLUT	UNAPPRECIATED	LAZY
SIMPLE	OUTCAST	BLAH
DISPOSABLE	UNLOVED	BISEXUAL
DOWNCAST	RELIGIOUS	FREELoader
SOMBER	FAMISHED	SUICIDAL
MELANCHOLY	UNFULFILLED	USED
LEGALISTIC	INDECISIVE	PERPETRATOR
TAINTED	BROKEN	MOLESTER
TRAMP	LOSER	UNBALANCED
IMPURE	SPINELESS	STRESSED
LESBIAN	FEARFUL	OFFENSIVE
DIRTY	WIMP	UNPRODUCTIVE
DEFENSELESS	TRANSGENDER	WASTEFUL
OPPRESSED	BANKRUPT	LIAR
SINGLE	FRIENDLESS	DECEPTIVE
DISTURBED	DAMNED	UNCERTAIN
TROUBLED	CURSED	AVERAGE
CRIMINAL	UNLUCKY	GAY
GUILTY	ACCURSED	UNIMPRESSIVE
ESTRANGED	CLUMSY	
BANISHED	AWKWARD	

Most of us spend a lifetime running from these Given Names, wasting our best years trying to escape words that trap and define us. But transcending these terms isn't a simple task.

God desires a different outcome. He has a Secret Name for each one of his children, and he whispers to all those who will listen, "He

who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some* of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it” (Revelation 2:17 NASB).

For each of us, the pretending will stop — either in this life or the next. But only a few of us choose to learn our Secret Name this side of eternity. Lamentably, the rest of us have gotten so used to the bondage, we remain content only knowing our Given Names.

Jacob might never have learned his Secret Name either, but during his exile in which he ran from his vengeful brother, he had a dream. Through this dream, God showed Jacob a different way and a different world, and when he awoke from his dream, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it” (Genesis 28:16).

Jacob had no idea that God planned to build a nation through him. He couldn’t imagine the lands he would one day inherit or fathom that the blood flowing through his veins would, centuries later, animate David and Solomon. He couldn’t foresee that Jesus, the Promised Redeemer, would descend from his son Judah.

But before any of this could happen, Jacob needed to discover his Secret Name. That would make all the difference.

You too need to be awakened by God’s whisper in a dream because, most likely, you have no idea of all the wonderful plans God wants to lavish upon you.

So are you ready to discover your Secret Name?

Learning it will make all the difference.

I know it did for me.