



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

A rose by any other name is not a rose

Rev. Clay Nelson © 4th December 2022

Shakespeare had it wrong. When Juliet tells Romeo, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” she is arguing that it does not matter that Romeo is from her family’s rival house Montague. The reference states that the names of things do not affect what they really are. I disagree. Nothing could be further from the truth.

During my lengthy stays in hospital, I encountered an unexpected aggravation. Being a junior, I share the same name as my father. He was known by our first name held in common, while I was always known by our middle name by family and friends. Unfortunately, those who did not know me assumed my name was my first name. These were usually my teachers on my first day at a new school. Being outed often resulted in teasing and bullying by my peers who thought the name funny. While I survived this childhood trauma, to this day, I prefer people to mishear my name and call me Clem, Clive, or Clyde rather than by my first name. It turns out my hospital stay triggered memories of a painful past and diminished who I am, just as a rose is diminished when called a daffodil.

During my illness, I was in every ward but one at North Shore Hospital and spent lengthy times in ICU, HDU, ADU, and ER. While the staff did a remarkable job keeping me alive, my efforts to have the hospital use my real name on my ID wristband were to no avail. That meant I had to tell three shifts of nurses every day I was not my father.

There is a lot of waiting for things to happen while in hospital. I filled some of that time reflecting on the power of naming.

Cecilia Sjöholm, a professor of aesthetics at Södertörn University, observes:

In Genesis, the act of naming is what separates humans from animals; Adam proves his humanity through his capacity to give names. To the thinkers of modernity, from the sixteenth century

up to and including the period of the Enlightenment, naming became a sure sign of humanity through the way it made claims for intellect, voice, and culture.

Not only is naming the origin of knowledge, it is the fingerprint of our identity. Everybody names. It's our right as reproducers, owners, friends and family to assign names: to our children, to our grandparents (Mimi and Papi or Nonna and Grandpapa, etc), to our siblings (Junior or, perhaps, butthead), romantic partners (Honey or Sweetie), to products and technology (Apple's Siri).

There seem to be seven reasons we give names. In a world full of words, we name to: identify, symbolise, describe, refer, simplify, organise and, surprisingly, to tame.

Looking at the last reason, there is a story in the bible about taming, but not obviously so. Moses is working as a shepherd for his father-in-law. He is on what is known as God's mountain when he encounters a burning bush, AKA God, who wants him to rescue the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Moses thinks the bush is not only burning but crazy.

But Moses says to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." (Exodus 3:14)

This is a big deal. He let Moses tame him by becoming vulnerable in revealing his name. He is not just any God, he is Moses' God.

In [Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's book, *The Little Prince*](#), the Fox makes a similar point to the Prince, "*To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world*"

While lying in bed killing time feeling like a misnamed rose and in no way unique, wondering who I am, I escaped to the congregation's WhatsApp group, hoping for a diversion. No Joy. They were discussing frustration with our congregation's name, Auckland Unitarian Church. Some object

to the word church. Others think we should include Universalist in our name. Still others hold that we should broaden our focus beyond the Auckland city limits.

When you asked me to be your minister more than eight years ago, I struggled with all those questions. I was aware that long-term members resented the large number of American UUs (including the new minister). They feared our historical ties to British Unitarians who had helped found the congregation and had sent us our first minister, William Jellie, would be lost. I believe under that fear was fear of being diminished. We would lose our identity if named a daffodil.

Then there were the atheists/humanists, who now make up a sizable portion of the congregation, who start twitching when the word church is used. I know the word comes with a lot of unnecessary baggage, especially since our theology expanded well beyond our Judeo-Christian roots with the merger of Unitarians and Universalists in America in 1961. But finding another descriptor has eluded me. All the options make it even more difficult to explain who we are in our largely secular and Christian context. My solution was to drop it. We became Auckland Unitarians, and twitching has been greatly reduced.

Then there is that bugaboo Universalism. There is a story about a conversation on the USS Enterprise. Jim asked Spock what a Unitarian Universalist is. Spock responded that logically if Unitarian refers to a singularity and Universalism is about everything, it follows that a Unitarian Universalist wants one of everything.

Eight years ago, few here knew much more, if anything at all, about Universalism. It even defied Spock's logic. At that time, adding Universalist to our name would have made it even more difficult to explain who we are. The problem is that Universalism was solely an American denomination that responded to the American context. Specifically, it challenged Calvinist beliefs that only the elect went to heaven. Everybody else got eternal fire and brimstone. Universalists preached love and that all would be embraced in the next life by a loving God. It caught on, becoming one of the largest denominations among the working class. With time, Protestant denominations co-opted their message, and Universalist numbers declined, making a merger with Unitarians necessary, although they feared becoming daffodils. So I

often ask myself, what does it mean to be UU in New Zealand? Is it a form of theological colonialism?

The last issue we face is, are we still *Auckland* Unitarians in this time of pandemic? Does our location determine our identity? When most of the immigrants to New Zealand were from the UK, many Unitarians sneaked in. Congregations were formed in Christchurch, Wellington, Blenheim, Timaru, and Auckland. I have heard the Auckland Unitarian Church had 400 members before WWI. In those halcyon days, perhaps our location meant something. Today only Blenheim, an aging and tiny fellowship, and the new fellowship Sally has initiated in Taupo exist besides us. In essence, we have become all of New Zealand's congregation with some international flavour.

We have clearly evolved over our 122 years. Do we need to rename ourselves? Can we do it without losing our identity? Can we find a name that tames us, making us unique and valued in New Zealand?

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

Maintaining our uniqueness as a rose, what would you name us?