



A rose by any other name is not a rose, part 2

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I've always had a thing for language. I think I inherited this from my dad. Dad wasn't highly educated, nor widely read – the only magazines he ever subscribed to were *Reader's Digest* and *TV Guide*, and I never knew him to read a novel -- but he loved to play with language.

He often used words that were either made up or some version of a word he'd learned while serving overseas in the military. He would latch on to words and phrases that were new to him.

When he came to New Zealand for the first time, the term *flatmate* caught his eye – it's not a term used in the USA -- so for his remaining years, he referred to my daughter, his granddaughter, as "my little Kiwi American flatmate".

In fact, he had nicknames for just about everyone – or at least everyone he liked. They were not all flattering.

He had two nicknames for me. One was "Number One Son", which he used a lot. Unfortunately for me, his other nickname, used equally often, was Stinky. Both names came from being the first-born child. As the oldest, I was the "number one" son, but also mine were apparently the first nappies he'd ever changed.

I'm sure my inherited love of language from Dad was a big part of why I majored in English literature at university and then specialised in communication in my postgraduate studies and in my career.

So thanks for the love of language, Dad, even if one result was that particular nickname.

The "part 2" in the title of my talk today will ring a bell for some of you. In early December last year, Clay entitled a talk [*A rose by any other name is not a rose.*](#)

He talked about the power of naming and especially about how we Auckland Unitarians have struggled -- and continue to struggle -- with what we call ourselves and this building in which we meet.

My focus today is also on the power of naming, but I want to focus on some other ways that naming plays out in our lives.

Clay mentioned 7 reasons we name things. We name to identify, symbolise, describe, refer, simplify, organise and to tame. I want to talk about 3 that aren't on that list, although maybe they're implied.

Specifically, we also name to *connect*, to *divide* and to *heal*.

Naming to Connect

One of the important ways we use names is to connect with others.

We are Auckland Unitarians. We may at times debate what we want to call ourselves, but for now, the simple statement *We are Auckland Unitarians* unites us in the same way that calling ourselves Kiwis unites us as a country.

These names are part of our collective identity, so they bond us together as individuals with a shared identity. But they're also part of my – and your -- personal identity.

In workplaces, people get a sense of identity – and often a sense of belonging and pride – from the name of their work team. Many organisations are aware of this and give their work teams creative names to evoke a sense of interest, energy and pride.

At Massey University, our HR Department is now “People and Culture”. A colleague in charge of one part of HR at another organisation is called Head of Bench Strength – which was explained to me as analogous to building up the strength of the backup players – the bench – on a sports team.

A colleague at a consulting firm is Head of Evolution – because his unit focused on organisational change. Teams at many workplaces are encouraged to give themselves a fun nickname to promote bonding and identification.

My dad intuitively understood the power of naming to connect. In calling you a nickname, he communicated that you were special to him – even if, as in my case, the nickname wasn't so flattering.

There's not a lot of research on pet names in romantic relationships, but what's there suggests that couples who have pet names for each other generally are more satisfied in their relationships. Nicknames and pet names often serve to enhance our bonds.

Naming to Divide

But of course, we also use names to hurt and to divide.

Names have been used throughout the ages to denigrate, control and marginalise groups by race, gender and sexuality. A few of those names have such power we don't even say them, not even when quoting someone.

Here's an important caution about naming, though. Culture, context and timing -- including not just when in the course of a conversation you use a name, but the broader sense of the historical time in which we live versus previous eras -- those are all crucial for understanding names and their power – and this is true for all communication.

If you decide to start calling me Stinky, I'm pretty sure I would not welcome it. I didn't exactly encourage my Dad to call me that, but it had a loving connotation in the context of our lives, so I look at it with love and humour now, as I mostly did then.

What a name means and how it is interpreted in one context can mean something greatly different in other contexts, cultures or eras. Even if the root language is English, for example, the language itself changes and interpretation of words changes over time and place.

As an example, I doubt any of the men here today would be offended if I walked up to you as a group and said "Hello Boys!" or if I said to you individually "There's my boy!". You would probably see it as a term of familiarity, friendship or endearment.

But one of my most horrifying early work memories was with that word *boy*. I was working at supermarket in my hometown of Charleston, South Carolina – the Deep South, the same town where the American Civil War started.

I was 16 and had only been working there for a short time when the owner of the supermarket – a 70ish white man -- said to me “I want you to drive this boy to his house”.

I looked around and the only other person standing there was an old, somewhat frail, slightly bent black man who had been doing some cleaning in the store.

I had heard black boys my age say “Don’t call me boy,” but never *really* understood the history or the power of that name until that moment. Even as a young white kid growing up in the redneck South, my heart hurt for the humiliation that old man must have felt in that moment and in a lifetime of being called boy and far worse -- and not having the power to respond.

While we’re on the issue of context, that research on pet names in couples that I mentioned suggests those pet names only serve to bond when both partners embrace the name. Sometimes we give each other nicknames to hurt or insult. I had a friend once who referred to his wife as *Death Woman* because she was so often sick in the years before she discovered her gluten intolerance. Clearly not a name she embraced. And not surprisingly, they’re not together anymore.

But names that start out hurtful can sometimes be reappropriated and reclaimed. The word *queer* is one of those. It was often used in the past to insult or demean, but it has been reclaimed in recent decades as a source of pride and as a critical and political identity that challenges traditional ideas about sexuality and gender.

“Queer Theory” has emerged as an important perspective in the humanities and social sciences, alongside perspectives such as feminist theory and other critical theories.

[Naming to Heal](#)

Finally, I want to talk about naming to heal.

The idea of naming to heal, or to restore a sense of wellbeing, is not new. Growing up Catholic, I was taught that the path to redemption was in naming, or confessing, my sins.

Unfortunately, I'm not sure I ever felt better after confession. I usually ended up feeling worse for confessing only the sins I was prepared to say out loud.

But despite confession not working out for me, the idea of naming as a way to heal is still a powerful idea.

Many of us have been taught **not** to acknowledge feelings, much less to name them. "Harden up" is a common refrain in New Zealand, especially for Kiwi boys and men. Typically, that means *don't complain, get over it*, or don't express any emotion that might be taken as weakness.

Maybe it's no surprise that in the most recent year for which there are statistics, 75% of the suicides in NZ were males. Construction was the sector with the highest rate of suicides, followed closely by farming and forestry – all male-dominated industries.

Follow up research found that the people in the construction sector who were interviewed attributed the high rate of suicide to a macho, bullying, homophobic culture. Interviewees said phrases like "take a concrete pill and harden up" are common.

Avoiding emotional expression is not just an issue in blue collar jobs, though. Studies show that what people associate with being "professional" is closely tied up with tightly controlled or masked displays of emotion or outright suppression of emotions.

I have lived most of my life cultivating a calm exterior. And being able to maintain that calm demeanour in the face of others' expressions of anger, angst or hurt has served me well in my career.

People have told me on several occasions how I helped calm a difficult situation or that my sense of calm gave them confidence that things were going to be okay.

That sense of measured calm – meaning masking or suppressing strong emotions -- is a skill mastered by many people who assume leadership roles.

But recently I have wondered what the cost of that has been for me. I learned to hold back anger, hurt and frustration not only at work, but

also with people I care about. So my “skill” allowed me to be dishonest – missing the opportunity to meet my needs and to connect honestly – and I believe the bottled up emotion contributed to self-destructive behaviours.

Much of what I have learned in recent years through counselling and through my work with the [Essentially Men](#) organisation has been to acknowledge and name emotions.

The German author Hermann Hesse said, “Everything becomes a little different as soon as it is spoken out loud”. That’s certainly my experience. Talking about what I’m experiencing in a safe environment – naming the difficult emotions I’m feeling and exploring what’s behind them – has been life-changing.

Allowing myself to be vulnerable and share pain, anger and sadness has enabled me to connect with others, especially other men, in a way I have never before experienced.

In a [New York Times article the writer Tony Schwartz said](#), “Emotions are just a form of energy, forever seeking expression. Paradoxically, sharing what we’re feeling in simple terms helps us to better contain and manage even the most difficult emotions. By naming them out loud, we are effectively taking responsibility for them, making it less likely that they will spill out at the expense of others over the course of a day.”

Part of the value of knowing and expressing what we’re feeling, rather than keeping feelings bottled up, is that naming our emotions tends to diffuse their charge and lessen the burden they create.

But unfortunately, most of us are not very good at this. [Marshall Rosenberg, the leader of the Nonviolent Communication movement](#), said that most of us lack an emotional language and so we struggle to acknowledge and name our emotions.

One of my Essentially Men friends, who is trained in Nonviolent Communication, has been bringing “feelings cards” to our men’s group meetings – they’re just like playing cards but each with a different feeling or need printed on it. We find these helpful in overcoming our lack of emotional vocabulary. Just by sorting through and selecting cards, we

can often home in on what we're experiencing and talk about what's behind the feelings.

This isn't just pop psychology. Multiple studies have shown that "affect labelling" – that is, naming your feelings – not only results in people saying they feel better, but actually changes brain activity in a way similar to other tried and tested techniques that lessen anxiety. It also has been shown to lessen the behavioural effects of anxiety, reducing agitation, restlessness and being easily distracted.

So, as Clay said, Shakespeare was wrong. It does matter what we call things. It also matters *THAT* we call things -- that we name things.

As the rhetorical scholar [Kenneth Burke said, humans are "the symbol using animal"](#).

Naming things – using those wonderful symbols called words -- is a big part of what makes us human. Among other things, our naming of things – and especially our naming of ourselves, each other, and our experiences – creates the potential for us to connect and heal.

Meditation / Discussion Question

What is your experience of naming to connect, to divide or to heal?