

I'm Irish—that's what I know about who I am. And I know this because my grandmother gave me a piece of glass brought over by my great grandmother when she immigrated from Ireland. I'm Irish because my family tells the disturbing story of one of my relatives who stowed away on a ship from Ireland to America after a bar fight. I name myself Irish because I have a poetic sensibility and I love Celtic spirituality, Nancy Graffith and potatoes (and no, I can't explain why I don't love Riverdance or Guinness). And if all that weren't enough, I hiked across the Southern coast of Ireland to honor my Irish heritage . . . so I'm not letting any DNA analysis get in the way of that story.... even if my results shows that I am as British as those natives living in England today with less Irish blood than my partner who we didn't realize had any Irish blood at all.

We all have stories we tell ourselves, regardless of the facts, some are harmless, some helpful, many are less so. There are pieces of who we are that become central to our identity be it birth order or the role you play in your family system.... names you call yourself, or perhaps the things your family has told you for so long you've begun to believe about yourself-- about being the perfect one, the helper who takes care of everyone else, or the black sheep.

Our given names and nicknames may not appear on the double helix strand of our DNA but they're still a mark of who we are. Thanks to your responses last week, we have in this room names that have been passed down for 6 generations, names that have religious significance, names that carry their ethnic heritage through their immigration or ones that are shortened to Anglicize the name to avoid ethnic bias. We have several people whose middle names carry the surname of their mother in a time when their mother's name would be dropped in marriage. We have nicknames that are versions of names, nicknames based on some ability, nicknames we want hold onto and those we spend a lifetime trying to shake including those nicknames that dare not be spoken because they are based on the size of a nose, some gaseous state, or some other feature we deem less than desirable. There are names that their owners like OR hate, ones that suit them or ones they have adopted because their given name never quit "fit." We have those who were named after popular actors in their day. Naming a child after someone desirable, whether saint or celebrity or favorite great aunt, is a long tradition, hoping the child will live into their namesake.

Which I wonder about sometimes, because most of those Biblical characters have very problematic histories and there are some saints with some pretty strange lives, lives of isolations, or visions, or heresies, or ones who are persecuted, and children get named for those also.

Science has shown that the stories we tell, about ourselves, about others, about our world can be "the most powerful form of persuasion" at least according to the *Freakonomics* authors who use the science of economics. Stories capture our attention, they exerts a power beyond the obvious, and "even stories that aren't true can be so persuasive."¹ Our names, whether the ones on our birth certificate or the ones we choose, or nicknames, or our surnames that get passed down from generation to generation like DNA, these names almost certainly have stories attached to them (whether we know them or not).

So in this new year, as you explore who you are, you might just reflect on your name, beyond the one on your name tag, that name you have in your family system, be it "overachiever" or "screw-

up” or whatever else. Consider how persuasive it has been, how it has marked your life.

Because we can train our brain, like we train other muscles in our bodies, to think differently.

The authors of *Think Like a Freak* would

like to bury the idea that there’s a right way and a wrong way, a smart way and a foolish way, a red way and a blue way [to think]. The modern world demands that we all think a bit more productively, more creatively, more rationally; that we think from a different angle, with a different set of muscles, with a different set of expectations; that we think with neither fear nor favor, with neither blind optimism nor sour skepticism.²

This, they suggest, is what it means, to think like a freak.

Looking to the other story we have for the day, the one where Jesus heads down to the river to see his cousin John. As they say, there’s a strange one in every family and John was it... we can imagine the names they had for the one who lived in the wilderness: “prophet” is the charitable name of polite society but he was also called “crazy” or perhaps even “freak.” In the South, they might say he was “touched” which is neither exclusively a good thing or a bad thing –it is a sign and a affliction.

So Jesus heads out to see the one who thinks so differently in his family.... We last saw Jesus a teenager in the temple, avoiding his parent’s home in favor of the life of the scholar. We label today’s story “the baptism of Jesus” and say it was the beginning of his public ministry – but what if it’s neither. Looked at from a different angle, it might be a story of the “naming of John,” of the wild one in the desert who always considered himself the stagehand to the main event. The One who had adopted the name “unworthy,” before this event. The One whom Jesus renames– “worthy,” “central-to-the-story.”

And so John lets the weight of that former name sink into the river and tries out the name “one-who-enables-things-put-right.” And with that, he is able to baptize Jesus, and through *his* actions in the waters of baptism (of renaming) we are told the spirit of God descends like a dove.

And Jesus, who has done little up to this point, or at least nothing the gospel writers saw fit to tell us about, Jesus rises from the water and is named “beloved.” Before he *does* anything, we hear that he is “marked by love.” It’s not about what he’s accomplished, it’s not like a grade on a report card marking one’s performance–it’s the mark of who he is. That’s why the story is timed the way it is, before all the other stories, even before Jesus goes off into the wilderness for 40 days to reflect on who he is and what his future will be about... before all that, two men stand in a river on the outskirts of cultural expectations and have their former names washed away and discover what it means to live with the name “beloved.” Perhaps it’s necessary (in order to *do* anything) to know your God-given name, to know you are “marked by love” at the core of who you are, it’s in your DNA... it’s what it means to be baptized– your namesake is Christ. Now you know ... who you are.

1. Steven D Levitt & Stephen J. Dubner in *Think Like a Freak* (NY: HarperCollins, 2014) 183.

2. Steven D Levitt & Stephen J. Dubner in *Think Like a Freak* (NY: HarperCollins, 2014) 8.