

What's in a Name?

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I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today. The weekly devotionals and forums have been a big part of my BYU experience. I attended them when I was a student, and my wife and I still attend them with our children who are students here. I am also grateful to my family, friends, and colleagues who have taken the time to be with us today.

Today is my father's birthday. He is eighty-seven years old. He and my mother are in Wisconsin watching this devotional, and if the volume on the television is turned all the way up, they are listening to it too.

My father's name is Gordon Smith. My mother told me recently—and she reminds me often—that my father never wanted a son named Gordon, but he agreed to give me his first name as my middle name. This is the story about why I took that name upon myself and why I have come to believe that the names we call each other are important.

Why I Took My Father's Name

To understand why I took my father's name as my own, you need to know a bit about my relationship with my father. My father and several generations before him had been dairy farmers in Wisconsin, but in the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, my father,

only seventeen years old at the time, joined the navy and was assigned to serve in the South Pacific. He eventually made a career of the military, and I was born in a naval hospital in Bremerton, Washington. Shortly after my birth he was transferred to San Diego, California, where he taught Teletype repair for five years. Following his retirement our family returned to his childhood home of Wisconsin, and that's where I grew up. Many of my earliest memories involve feeding and caring for cows, pigs, and chickens on our small farm, though I was temperamentally not well suited to farming.

My uneasy relationship with farming became apparent to our whole family when our pigs disappeared. Our pigs were named Slurp and Burp. One day they were just gone, and I asked around, "Where did Slurp and Burp go?" Nobody else seemed troubled by their disappearance. They just said that somebody had come and taken them away.

A few weeks later, over a dinner featuring pork chops, my older sister—who introduced so much of life to me—said, pointing at my plate, "Remember Slurp and Burp?"

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Lessons about the circle of life were plentiful on that small farm. I saw my father assist in the birthing of a calf, and we drank milk from the calf's mother. I was playing basketball in the yard one day when a rabid raccoon came toward me, and my dad shot the raccoon. (At first I was worried I had been in trouble, and I thought he had just missed.) We learned by observation that chickens do indeed come from eggs, and we also learned by observation what it means to "run around like a chicken with its head cut off."

Despite our humble and remote circumstances, I managed to cultivate big dreams on that farm, in no small part because of my dad. During his last year of service in the navy he traveled the world and sent us souvenirs from Europe, Asia, and Africa. He was gone for a year, and I remember that when he returned, I didn't know what he looked like because I was only four years old when he left and five when he returned. But I treasured those souvenirs that he sent me, and I spent many hours in my room in Wisconsin looking at photos of Rome or pounding on a drum from Africa or playing with toys from the Philippines, imagining what it would be like to visit those faraway lands.

Some of my most treasured memories from childhood involve sitting in the living room or in the backyard listening to stories about my father's childhood or about his adventures in the navy. Like Aesop's fables, these stories almost always came with some moral that we were supposed to take from them. My son Drew and I were recently in Wisconsin for a family reunion, and we again heard stories about the importance of hard work, competence, and integrity.

My father also taught me—more through his reaction to war than through his words—to despise war. Although he could never speak of combat—and he still can't to this day—one navy story inevitably connected to another, and he often found himself led to memories

that he would rather suppress. We could discern when he had reached this point because he swallowed hard, his eyes welled with tears, and he looked off into the distance. My mother recently observed, "They don't give Purple Hearts for those wounds."

Another significant lesson—never stated explicitly but reinforced repeatedly in his stories—was that one person could change the world. As far as I know, my dad never changed the course of the war through his naval service, but his stories showed me why the navy always valued one more good man. During the war he was only an enlisted radioman, but I was convinced as a young boy that, aside from Admiral Nimitz, my father was the most important person in the Pacific Fleet. To me he was—and he remains—a great man.

As President Joseph F. Smith wrote over 100 years ago:

Those things which we call extraordinary, remarkable, or unusual may make history, but they do not make real life.

*After all, to do well those things which God ordained to be the common lot of all mankind, is the truest greatness. To be a successful father or a successful mother is greater than to be a successful general or a successful statesman. ["Common-Place Things," *Juvenile Instructor*, 15 December 1905, 752]*

From my own experience I knew that my dad could fix anything. Whether the problem was mechanical, electrical, or personal, he seemed to always have an answer. Like many young boys I looked up to my dad. He was one of my heroes.

Changing My Name

During those growing-up years in Osseo, Wisconsin, everyone called me by my first name, Doug. Strangely, my group of friends went through a phase in which we decided to call each other by our fathers' names. Some of

those names stuck, but “Gordon Smith” did not seem like a good fit for me at that time. And I was largely content with my name, except when my high school English teacher decided to call me “Dougie.” No one in that day was asking me to teach them “how to Dougie.”

I was still Doug Smith when I arrived at BYU in August 1980. I was not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but my first class in college was Religion 121: The Book of Mormon. My best friend in high school, who had convinced me to attend BYU with him, told me I shouldn’t worry about this class. He said the Book of Mormon was just a history of South America, and that was all I knew about the course.

So I showed up on the first day, and the professor introduced the course by saying we would be covering the first half of the Book of Mormon. He started to talk about the events that we would encounter. I wasn’t worried until the guy next to me raised his hand and said, “Will we be discussing the sons of Mosiah in this course?”

I did a double take. I thought, “How does he know anything about what’s in this book?” And I thought, “Well, the professor will provide us some context for the people who didn’t read ahead.” But he just answered the student as if it was a completely natural question.

And then another student raised his hand and said, “How about Samuel the Lamanite? That guy is cool!” Everybody laughed, and I completely missed the joke. Then another person said something, and by this point in the class I was starting to panic.

I wasn’t in the habit of praying at the time—I didn’t really pray much at all—but I just decided that since I was at BYU, I would bow my head and say a little prayer: “Please, God, make them stop.”

Well, it did eventually stop, and at the end of class I approached the teacher and asked, “Did you post an assignment for the first class?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Well, it just seems like everybody’s read ahead.”

He looked me up and down and said, “You aren’t a member, are you?”

I thought about that for a second, and I responded, “A member of what?”

So we had a nice long talk about the class, and I read the Book of Mormon in my first year at BYU.

The transition from that first day of college to my baptism in the fall semester of my sophomore year did not require a dramatic change in my lifestyle, but my worldview was completely upended. Embracing the gospel impelled me to look outward in a way that I never had before, to place others before myself: “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 16:25).

I decided to serve a mission, and one year after my baptism I was called to serve in Vienna, Austria. I became Elder Smith. Over the past few weeks I have read my missionary journals. I don’t know if any of you have done that, but it is a horrifying experience. I’m not a great journal writer, but I was impressed by the effort I expended in trying to create a new identity for myself as Elder Smith. I wanted to become a powerful missionary. I knew that Austria was not a high-baptizing mission, but, I thought, England wasn’t a high-baptizing mission before Wilford Woodruff got there either. Unfortunately my motives were entirely self-interested: I felt like I had a debt to pay, and I wanted to pay it. I hadn’t internalized the lesson taught by King Benjamin that even if we serve God with our “whole souls,” we remain “unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21).

I worked hard in Austria, and I was frustrated at my inability to reduce my debt. Every sacrifice that I made, every extra effort that I made, was repaid many times over, and early in my mission I wrote about my frustration in my journal:

I have been so blessed by the Lord . . . , and I wanted to go on a mission, in part, to show the Lord how much I love Him. To think of my mission as just something else by which I can make myself better is offensive to me. That implies that the biggest attempt I've made in my life to be selfless has turned into the most selfish endeavor that I have ever undertaken.

By the end of my mission I had come to terms with God over my indebtedness, and I had learned that the most valuable lesson of my mission was to love the people. As King Benjamin said, “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). During my last week in Austria I wrote the following entry in my journal while riding on a train from Vienna to Linz:

Austria is a beautiful land, dotted with small villages. One of the most common sights from the train is the steeple of a Catholic church against the background of rolling green hills. We are sitting with a lady from Vienna who is dressed in a traditional Austrian hat, blouse, and skirt. Tradition prevents most Austrians from hearing our message. And, yet, after being rejected by thousands of people, I have learned to love these people with a love that I have felt for no others. Somehow, I pray for them, cry for them, and hope for them as I do my own family.

You can perceive in these entries a journey taken by many young people—a transition from inward-looking, self-centered teenagers to outward-looking, empathetic adults.

When I returned to Osseo after my mission, I shed the title of Elder Smith, and, like many returned missionaries, including my son Drew, who just came home from Ukraine, I went through that awkward phase of adjusting to being called by my first name. In my case, however, my pre-mission name evoked thoughts about a confused young boy who had

arrived at BYU three years before. “Doug” just didn’t seem to fit anymore, but I didn’t do anything about it until I met a young woman at BYU the following year who was changing her name. She just decided one day to ask people to call her by her middle name. And they did!

I thought, “Is that really all there is to it? Just tell people, ‘Call me [Whatever],’ and they do it?” This was a revelation to me. I didn’t have to be Doug Smith anymore. I could be anything I wanted! After much contemplation I decided that using my middle name would not only be the simplest change—after all, I wouldn’t have to make a legal change to my name—but it would also honor my father. What I did not fully comprehend was how that change would affect me.

Changing my name was a tremendous hassle. My wife, Sue, was supportive, and I didn’t ask our families to call me Gordon, so when we visit relatives I’m still Doug. But the real challenge was among my friends. In my first accounting class of the fall semester, legendary accounting professor Jay Smith called on me by my first name, and I asked, “Would you mind calling me Gordon?”

By that time I was well into my major, and both he and my classmates looked at me quizzically, wondering, “What’s the punch line?”

But I didn’t have a punch line. “Um . . . I changed my name to Gordon.”

In another class so many people knew me by the name Doug that they simply wouldn’t allow me to change my name to Gordon. They insisted, over my protests, that I was joking. My coworkers and supervisors in the Reading and Writing Center split about evenly between those who made the adjustment and those who couldn’t, and that just caused confusion. It was hard on people.

Several times during the first few months I considered abandoning my project. In conversation I stumbled over my new name. More than once I failed to acknowledge people who called me Gordon. I experimented with new

signatures. I changed my driver's license. I learned to fill out forms that had blanks for "First Name, Middle Initial, Last Name."

At the same time I was surprised to discover that when people called me Gordon, it felt different than being called Doug. In the beginning, each reference to Gordon caused me to think about my father. I was clothing myself in his name, and I felt obliged to wear it honorably. I didn't want to become my father, but I wanted to become a person who would make him proud. Over time I came to associate the name Gordon with my Mormon identity and the name Doug with my pre-Mormon life.

Taking Christ's Name Upon Us

I have sometimes thought of the experience of changing my name in relation to my baptism—an ordinance in which I took upon myself the name of Jesus Christ. In both instances the name was given to me by another, but I was asked to embrace the name as my own. Now each week in taking the sacrament I reaffirm my willingness to take upon myself the name of Jesus Christ (see D&C 20:77). What is the significance of this representation?

When I took upon myself the name of my father, I was not using his name as a description of my character. I was not saying, "I am my father." Rather, I was using the name to honor him and to inspire myself to develop attributes like him. Similarly, taking upon ourselves the name of Christ is not a recognition of an achievement but rather a nudge toward improved behavior.

King Benjamin gave his people the name of Christ only after the Spirit had changed their hearts, but he gave them the name not because they had reached some threshold and not because they had "no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). Rather, he gave them the name so that they could remember that moment and remain

"steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works" (Mosiah 5:15).

When faithful people take upon themselves the name of Jesus Christ, they assume a name that is imbued with meaning. President Spencer W. Kimball once said, "The name Jesus Christ and what it represents has been plowed deep into the history of the world, never to be uprooted" ("Why Call Me Lord, Lord, and Do Not the Things Which I Say?" *Ensign*, May 1975, 4). This feature of the name is useful in transmitting large quantities of information. Rather than saying that we should have "faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, diligence" (D&C 4:6)—or any of the other myriad of attributes that we associate with Jesus Christ—we can say more simply that we take upon ourselves the name of Christ. Moreover, because we have stories of His life, Christ's name has a richness and texture that is impossible to convey merely by listing the attributes of His character.

Name-Calling and Judging

I have spoken about the positive power of naming, but naming also has a dark side. Just as naming can inspire and direct, it can also discourage or obstruct. This is a phenomenon that we all recognize as name-calling or labeling. The line between labeling for the purpose of providing information and labeling for the purpose of marginalizing others can be subtle, but I will strive to illustrate a few guiding principles from my experiences as a law professor.

Each year BYU Law School attracts some of the brightest law students in the country. I have taught at six law schools in the United States and in several programs abroad, and I know from law students. When I came to BYU five years ago, some of my colleagues at other law schools wondered aloud whether law could be taught effectively at a school whose students who share so many religious values.

While an outsider might imagine legal education at BYU Law School as a form of indoctrination, my experience has been quite the contrary. The fairly high degree of religious homogeneity we experience here has actually enabled or encouraged discussions in class that are more vigorous than those discussions that typically occur at other law schools. While students at other law schools often pass off their disagreements on the simplistic grounds that they belong to different value groups, students at BYU's law school often feel compelled to examine the implications of their assumed shared beliefs. This is real learning, not indoctrination.

For example, in my Contracts class, students express a range of views about the social implications of contracting. (The following discussion draws in part on Stewart Macaulay, Jean Braucher, John Kidwell, and William Whitford, *Contracts: Law in Action*, 3rd ed. [New Providence, New Jersey: LexisNexis Matthew Bender, 2010], 491–93.) Some students enter the class with a bias in favor of market transactions, believing that economic efficiency and respect for the liberty of individuals should compel courts to enforce almost all contracts, regardless of the consequences. The students who hold this view sometimes invoke the gospel principle of agency, arguing that we all benefit if people are encouraged to take responsibility for their own risk.

Other students enter the course with a bias in favor of social control, believing that respect for the dignity of individuals should compel courts to protect the weakest members of our society. The students who hold this view sometimes appeal to the gospel principle of charity, arguing that legal rules should ensure that contracts are fair and that people with more wealth, talent, or bargaining skill should not be allowed to use those advantages to prey upon the weak.

Former Yale law professor Arthur Allen Leff recognized both of these impulses and

described in poetic prose why we cannot have our cake and eat it too:

*In effect, we want to have the world so arranged that everyone will be motivated to get as good a deal for himself as possible by being as informed and efficient as he can be, but that no one will have to get a bad deal in the process. But the payoff for the former necessitates, indeed entails, the latter. Hence doing both is not a technical problem . . . but a cultural one: we cannot have perfect freedom and perfect fairness at once. What we have, instead, [are] . . . legal device[s] that [allow] us, inconsistently and with only symbolic impact, an occasional evasive bow in the direction of our incoherent hearts' desires. ["Thomist Unconscionability," *Canadian Business Law Journal* 4 (1979–1980): 428]*

Sometimes in the course of our class discussions the students will square off in these two camps—even identifying members of the rival camp with a derogatory name—but I strive to be sensitive about the formation of viewpoint cliques in the classroom. If students caricature their classmates—if they attempt to marginalize someone in the class as an “other”—then learning suffers and we have to talk about the importance of empathy in learning law. We truly understand our own views only when we understand the views of those who disagree with us. In seeking to understand those who disagree with us, my own experience has been that views evolve. This is not only acceptable but praiseworthy.

In the April 2012 general conference, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf reminded us to “stop judging others and replace judgmental thoughts and feelings with a heart full of love for God and His children” (“The Merciful Obtain Mercy,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 75). Name-calling and labeling are forms of judgment, and the problem with judgment is its finality. As disciples of Jesus Christ we should encourage people to change and improve. If we believe that others have taken a wrong turn,

one of the greatest acts of charity that we can perform is to give them room to repent.

As observed by President Uchtdorf:

We must recognize that we are all imperfect—that we are beggars before God. Haven't we all, at one time or another, meekly approached the mercy seat and pleaded for grace? Haven't we wished with all the energy of our souls for mercy—to be forgiven for the mistakes we have made and the sins we have committed?

Because we all depend on the mercy of God, how can we deny to others any measure of the grace we so desperately desire for ourselves? My beloved brothers and sisters, should we not forgive

as we wish to be forgiven? ["The Merciful Obtain Mercy," 75]

Thus, if we are to be like Jesus Christ—if we have truly taken upon ourselves His name—we should avoid name-calling and labeling and stand ever ready to receive those who have strayed. My own experience has been that when we exercise influence “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41), we not only bless the lives of others but we also elevate ourselves.

I pray that we may all come closer to that ideal, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.