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Ideas — What's in a Name?

BY [CANDACE BAKER](#) on [OCTOBER 23, 2018](#) • [\(0 \)](#)

I've always taken pride in telling people how my parents chose my name. "Candace" was the name of an aunt who I'll never meet, but who I've been told was a determined, independent woman. She was headstrong and stubborn, never fearing to speak her mind even when most would stay quiet. My sister had a similar namesake, our great-grandmother, when my parents decided to give her the middle name of "Rose." Some people are given names based on what's trendy or what flows well, but my family has always appreciated the fact that a name is a vital part of a person's identity.

That's why it was almost jaw-dropping to read a recent response in the nationally syndicated "Dear Abby" column, in which columnist Jeanne Phillips discouraged people from giving their children names that might be considered "unusual" or "foreign."

"Not only can foreign names be difficult to pronounce and spell, but they can also cause a child to be teased unmercifully," [Phillips wrote](#), "and one that sounds beautiful in a foreign language can be grating in English."

Now, I'll be the first to say that I've been in situations where I could not, for the life of me, figure out how to pronounce someone's name. But I've come to realize that it's only awkward and embarrassing if you make it so. For the most part, people are willing to help you out if you're struggling, and even if you still completely botch it, you're making an effort at the very least. As kids, we're taught that it's always better to meet people where they are instead of expecting them to conform to our own needs. So why don't we have the same attitude when it comes to cross-cultural names?

I'm sure that Phillips didn't intend to be offensive, but the attitude that she's perpetuating is one that is rooted in a preference for a homogenous America. The reality is that no such thing exists. We live in a place that's built upon the spirit of people from all over the world with different stories and identities, many of which are the roots of names that we might not fully understand. To simply reduce someone to an acronym or a nickname because it's just "too hard" to say their name correctly robs them of that unique identity and lets them know that they don't matter because they're not like you. At the end of the day, that's perhaps as un-American as it gets.

To be fair, I've met plenty of people with difficult-to-pronounce names who simply prefer to go by something different, and there's nothing wrong with that. Others might simplify their names for the sake of those around them. If that's what they genuinely want to do, then good for them. But nobody should ever feel like they have to change such a vital part of their identity because someone else might see it as an inconvenience.

Of course, there will always be those people who think that cross-cultural names just don't have a place in America, who don't see the beauty in America's multiculturalism. But I also like to think that those people are just the minority and that most realize that although there's a sense of safety in conformity, it makes



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things incredibly boring. Sure, maybe it would be easier if everyone went by the same name. But that would rob us all of the opportunity to grow in our own understanding of another's past and culture. There's a story behind every name, and even when we can't quite understand it initially, it's one that we should take the time to hear.

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