

# HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE MY NAME

Our names affect how people perceive us and how we perceive ourselves, and that's just fine with me

by Janice Eidus | Saturday, September 23, 2017



(Getty Images)

"I'm going to change my name to April Honey when I grow up," said Pearl, one of my two best childhood friends. She was addressing me and our other best friend, Susan, as we piled out of our fourth-grade classroom. "I'm going to be a movie star and April Honey is a movie star's name."

Her given name—Pearl Perlmutter—was much prettier than mine, I thought, but I completely understood her desire to rename herself.

"I'm going to change my name, too—to Lynette Karlen," I said. *Lynette Karlen* sounded nothing like the names of the kids in our working class Bronx neighborhood: Nancy Damiano, Monique Jeffers, Carmen Rodriguez, Shushie Cohen, Petey Gagliano, Chickie-Boy Lenahan. It was original, the thing in the world I most wanted to be.

Pearl and I waited for Susan to tell us her fantasy name. Since she was silent, I figured that her name—Susan Goldberg—worked for her, despite the fact that I found it pretty ordinary.

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A few weeks later, out grocery shopping with my mother, I asked, "Why did you name me Janice?"

She squeezed a cantaloupe. "No real reason. I just liked it."



"That's your reason? You liked it?"

"It's pretty." She placed the cantaloupe back in the bin.

"It has no pizzazz. It's *ordinary*." I turned my back on her and stared at a head of lettuce.

Bertha, a girl in my grade, had asked everyone to call her Jeanette, her middle name. I didn't have that option, since my parents "didn't believe" in middle names. Neither my older sister nor I had one, although my brother, the oldest of us, did: George.

"Why did you give *him* a middle name?" I demanded of my mother, a few minutes later.

"Well, he was born on George Washington's Day, and Daddy and I felt a burst of patriotism." She was frowning now, clearly growing annoyed with me.

I didn't say anything more, although I felt equally annoyed, especially because my parents usually eschewed flag-waving and other conventional patriotic activities. Being named Janice without a fallback middle name was bad enough, but my last name, *Eidus*, was the absolute pits. True, it wasn't ordinary, which should have pleased me. But I was teased mercilessly by some of the kids at school and even one sadistic teacher who said, "Janice Eidus sounds like 'Janice-itis'—which means you're a disease!"

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Throughout elementary and junior high school, I yearned for the day that I would be old enough to legally change my name. Pearl and I discussed what we would wear when we went to court together to become April Honey and Lynette Karlen: a Hollywood-style mink coat for her; bohemian black dress, tights and ballet slippers for me. Afterwards, we'd celebrate in the dimly lit Greenwich Village café frequented by Lynette Karlen.

In high school, though, I became more confident academically and socially. I liked the girl I was growing up to be. And that included her name. I discovered that Janice means "God has been gracious." Whether I believed in God or not, it was a lovely sentiment.

I even started to enjoy Eidus. It was quirky, I decided. Now, whenever someone said, "You sound like a disease!" I responded, "Only to people whose minds are stuck in second grade." I loved watching them turn beet red.

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I appreciated other things about myself, too. When a bunch of girls in my grade got nose jobs and a few suggested I do the same, I replied, "Nope, I'm keeping my nose, bump and all."

Those same girls streaked their hair blond; I remained a brunette.

I preferred my natural scent to the Jean Nate perfume they splashed on their collarbones and wrists.

Years later, when I got married, I wasn't even tempted to change my name, although some people insisted on calling me "Mrs. His-Last-Name" instead of Ms. Eidus. I corrected them until they acquiesced.

When my daughter was little, she frequently whined, "Why didn't you and Daddy name me Rebecca? It's so much prettier than what you gave me!" On a piece of cardboard that hung on her bedroom door, she wrote: "REBECCA STARR'S ROOM!!!"

"I understand how you feel," I said. "We chose Alma because it means 'soul' in Spanish and 'young maiden' in Hebrew." (She's adopted from Guatemala and we're Jewish.)

My explanation didn't sway her, nor did the one I offered about her middle name. "Karmina is the color crimson in Esperanto, and red is my favorite color. And Daddy and I love the idea of Esperanto, the 'universal language' intended to bring world peace, even if it didn't work."

But last year, in ninth grade, she fell in love with her name. "It's so meaningful to our family," she says now, laughing about her youthful infatuation with "Rebecca Starr." (She's still on the fence about Karmina.)

Meanwhile, Pearl Perlmutter didn't end up changing her name to April Honey. Nor did she become a movie star. Instead, she became a schoolteacher, moved to the suburbs, and took her husband's last name. "I've become a very traditional person, and Mrs. Pearl Baum is who I am today."

Susan Goldberg, our other best friend, the one who'd said nothing when Pearl and I declared our passions for April Honey and Lynette Karlen—well, she stunned us by moving to India after college and changing her first name to the Indian name Lahar, which means "wave." During one of her trips home, she confided, "I was embarrassed to tell you, but I always thought Susan was too ordinary."

Over the years, I've met many others whose feelings about their names have evolved with time. After all, our names affect how people perceive us and how we perceive ourselves. As for the three of us: Pearl, so conventional and sedate; Lahar, in India, graceful and flowing; and me, a tad bohemian, sipping tea at my favorite café while wearing all-black. Each of us part ordinary, part extraordinary, as most people are, by whatever name they're known.

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