

## What Is In A Name

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.”

William Shakespeare uses this line in his play *Romeo and Juliet* to convey that the naming of things is irrelevant. I disagree.

Every day, I strive to live up to my name: Johnnie. Contrary to what one might think, I am a girl. The instant I meet someone, I am already proving them wrong. That is a philosophy I try to live my life by. I’m a female studying engineering. I know there will be glass ceilings. My goal is to crash through.

There is no amazing story as to how I was given my name. My parents lived in Texas a few years before I was born. Apparently in the South, it is more common to feminize a traditionally male name by changing the “y” into an “ie.” My mother was a special education teacher, and the principal at the school where she taught was a woman named Johnnie. My parents were so enamored of the idea that they decided to name me Johnnie. Some people ask if I would have still been Johnnie, or perhaps Johnny, had I been a boy. My parents say they preferred the name Robert in that event. That was their go-to boys name, although it took them three tries to be able to use it.

I would not describe myself as “named after” someone, although my uncle John recently found out I was not named after him, much to his displeasure. The Ashkenazi Jews have a tradition of naming new babies in honor of deceased grandparents or other close relatives. As I am Jewish by my father’s side, the first letter of my name is in honor of my paternal grandfather, Joseph. Lisa Katz says in her article for about.com that this tradition exists to “[keep] the name and memory alive, and in a metaphysical way [form] a bond between the soul of the baby and the deceased relative.” While I do not consider myself to be a strongly spiritual person, I really like this concept and have always felt a special connection to the grandfather I never met.

The definition of Johnnie, according to [www.behindthename.com](http://www.behindthename.com), is a “diminutive of John, sometimes used in the feminine form.” John is defined as being a derivative of a Hebrew name meaning “Yahweh is gracious.” (Yahweh is the Hebrew name for God.) The website goes on to say,

This name owes its popularity to two New Testament characters, both highly revered saints. The first is John the Baptist, a Jewish ascetic who was considered the forerunner of Jesus Christ. The second is the apostle John, who is also traditionally regarded as the author of the fourth Gospel and Revelation. This name was initially more common among Eastern Christians in the Byzantine Empire, but it flourished in Western Europe after the First Crusade. In England it became extremely popular: during the later Middle Ages it was given to approximately a fifth of all English boys. The name (in various spellings) has been borne by 21 popes and eight Byzantine emperors.

Clearly, I’m important.

My favorite aspect of my name is the look on a person’s face when I first meet them. It’s typically a combination of confusion, disbelief, and surprise. Some try to hide their reaction, and others just embrace my name’s uniqueness.

I have a theory about elderly individuals’ reaction to my name. They need to hear my name three times. Their initial reaction is, “What did she say? I must not have heard her correctly.” The second time, they think, “Huh. Maybe that is what she said...” And finally, “I guess that really is her name.” I don’t really blame them. Children’s names have changed so drastically within the last century. There are now celebrity babies with names like Apple and North, while the popularity of nontraditional names, particularly those with nontraditional letters such as “z” or “v,” soars. One hundred years ago, such names would have been unthinkable.

As Spiderman put it, "With great power comes great responsibility," and I think the same is true of unique names. My name gives me the power to stand out instantaneously. My first impression is just a little bit stronger because it's accompanied by a surprise. At the same time, mispronunciations and misspellings are also vastly increased. I believe that I don't have a right to be annoyed by that. Yes, it's frustrating to see your name severely misspelled or attached to the wrong title, especially on important documentation, but my name is so far removed from the norm that these mistakes are going to happen no matter what. If I let it get to me, I would become a very angry person. The way I see it, I don't really have a choice other than to laugh it off and make a joke. Now, I become more annoyed by other people who are bothered by mistakes to their name than my own.

Freshman year of high school, I had to give a speech to my English 9 class. Everyone in the class had to fill out a feedback sheet so we would know what aspects of our public speaking needed improvement. Exactly half the class spelled my name correctly. Within the other half, I think there were six different misspellings. There are only two middle schools and one high school in my district. Approximately half the class had already known me for three years and they still didn't know how to spell my name. I found it amusing, and instead of reading my feedback sheets looking for ways to improve, I was tabulating the variety and frequency of misspellings to my name.

A lot of people ask if I like my name. I understand the nature of their curiosity, but what kind of question is that? Do you like your name? I guess everyone can have a general opinion about their name. Like people who go by their middle name probably don't like their first name. But as for the rest of us, we don't really have a choice. Yes, I suppose I like my name. It's such a big part of who I am that I don't really feel qualified to say otherwise. If I had a different name, I would be a different person. On top of that, this is the only name I know. No one really wakes up one morning and thinks, "You know, I think I'll try being a Sarah for the day." That's just not the way it works. I guess I could introduce myself under a

fake name at parties and see how that goes, but I'm proud of my name. I don't want a different one. There was a brief period of time in elementary school, back when it wasn't cool to be different, that I contemplated going by my middle name, Lynn, but that's not exactly a popular name amongst seven year olds either.

I don't mind having both of my names paired together. Some of my relatives do that, so now I view my middle name more as a term of endearment than the stereotypical "You're in trouble" so frequently associated with childhood.

Having such a strong name also has its drawbacks. The first day of school is always the worst. It seems my name is either one of the few teachers instantly remember or one of the last they finally figure out. I got called on a lot in my collective first days of school. This, in addition to creating insane amounts of pressure, also gave me the opportunity to demonstrate the type of student I was, and consequently allowed me to get away with a lot throughout the year.

If you asked me to describe myself in a word, I would say, "Johnnie." I am my name; my name is me. The two are interchangeable. Juliet, or Shakespeare rather, was wrong. Names are everything. Like most college students, I struggle with the existential phenomenon of, "Who am I?" It is a daily struggle to be myself, whoever that may be. But the most obvious answer is, "I am Johnnie." Not Sarah, or Maggie, or Emily-- Johnnie. Nice to meet you.

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