

The Power of a Name

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I was interested this past week to watch the confirmation hearing for Ketanji Brown Jackson, President Biden's nominee to the US Supreme Court. The nomination of a strong black woman to sit on the Supreme Court is a historic moment.

As expected, much of the process was political theatre. Republican Senators were less interested in listening to Judge Jackson and much more interested in scoring political points and ranting about their own favourite causes. Rather than being touched by this historic moment, they did their best "to turn it into a political carnival of conspiracy theories, mansplaining, base-pleasing, and bigotry" (in Diana Butler Bass' words).

Judge Jackson was a model of dignity as she dealt with the lunacy of the clowns in the carnival. She refused to give in to their baiting. She refused to play their games. Instead, she gave reasoned and measured responses befitting a nominee for Supreme Court Justice.

Judge Jackson's opening remarks were particularly striking: "When I was born here in Washington, my parents were public school teachers, and to express both pride in their heritage and hope for the future, they gave me an African name: 'Ketanji Onyika' which they were told means 'lovely one.'"

Before all the political theatre, before all the conservative posturing, before the baseless attacks which tried to portray Judge Jackson as soft on crime, before anything else happened, it all began with a name. She named herself. She claimed her identity. She announced that she would refuse to give up her autonomy and independence. She asserted her power and claimed her agency, fully accepting her authority as the nominee called to this highest vocation in the world of the legal system of the United States of America.

I am Ketanji Onyika. I am the lovely one. I am black and proud. I will not be your victim. I know who I am, and I will keep my identity throughout this process. This is my name.

Claiming the power of her name is particularly important in this instance. She is the descendant of slaves who were forced to change their names by slave owners. The names of her ancestors were stolen from them by people who thought they could own another human being. This is an historic moment.

At the same time, the world is dealing with a liar who think he can take away the identity of a whole people. Putin has lied as he tries to justify his brutal invasion. He tried to say that the Ukrainians have no identity apart from Russia. But the citizens of Ukraine refuse to be cowed by his lies. Ukrainians have a strong national identity; they are holding on to their name, their identity, their pride as they fight against this monstrous attack by a dictator who thinks he has the right to take it away.

I am sensitive to the issue of names because my own name is difficult. It is not a common name, and I have spent much of my life explaining to others how to pronounce it. For the record, it is "I-Me," with the emphasis on the first syllable. Not "Why me." Not "Yim." Nor any other permutation which people have produced over the course of my life (and no, I am not going to tell you). I learned very early in school to announce my name whenever we had a substitute teacher who did roll call. Otherwise, the substitute would invariably murder the pronunciation.

I know how difficult it is when others don't get your name right. I know how important a name is. I work hard to remember people's names. Our name is important to who we are. Our

name is a critical part of our identity. Our name is an important partner in our journey through life.

Another occasion in which names are important is the ongoing story of the graves of unnamed indigenous children. This week, a delegation of indigenous leaders will travel to the Vatican to meet with Pope Francis. Part of what they will do is to tell the story of those nameless children. Some of these leaders have told us on the news that we must remember the names. If we forget the names, we forget the children.

This is part of the sad legacy of the Indian Residential School system. Like the enslavement of black people in the USA, Canadian authorities tried to take the names of indigenous people away from them. We tried to take away their identity, their culture, their history, their story. We tried to destabilize any relationships they may have had with kin and family and tribe and culture.

Indigenous people are reclaiming their names as an act of reclaiming their personhood. They are restitching family and cultural connections. This delegation to the Vatican will expect the Pope to recognize their inherent right to do so. They are looking for the very first steps on the road to reconciliation. They seek a way forward in dealing with the wrongs done to their people by the Church, the RCMP, and the government as they sought to erase their identity.

They will ask the Pope to apologize. They will ask the Pope to make reparations. They will ask the Pope to join them in the demanding and challenging work of remembering. The work of re-membering. The work of putting identity back together. The difficult work of recreating a broken world.

Our name is so important. It is part of our identity. It is who we are. It makes a space for us in the world we inhabit. Our names hold us, and we in turn hold them dear.

“My parents gave me an African name: ‘Ketanji Onyika.’ which they were told means ‘lovely one.’”

The power of a name. A name can cause worlds to come into being.