

My Real Name



Last year, on my birthday, I sent out a poem to celebrate the occasion. You might have received it. This year I am sending out some thoughts, a kind of meditation I have been having. I welcome you to share my little inspiration. If you don't have time, you can easily enough ignore it.

Thoughts are free. They are easy to share, sometimes absurd, sometimes meaningful, occasionally precious. They cross boundaries effortlessly. This train of thought began the other day when a yoga student asked me a question. In all earnestness, she wanted to know my *real* name.

Looking back, the answer was simple enough. Back in 1973, I had wanted a name that would resonate with my new life as a yogi. I had just moved into Toronto's Guru Ram Das Ashram the previous fall. When Yogi Bhajan came to visit in February, he gave me that name. Yogiji wrote it on a little slip of paper. I still have that paper. It says, "Gur Fatha Singh". The Ashram head and I were the second and third members of our community to receive a name from our teacher.

Yogi Bhajan must have had a revelation later on, because after three months I received a letter from his executive secretary. Shakti Parwha Kaur wrote to say anyone given a name beginning with "Gur" should use the spelling "Guru" because "Gur means technical know-how, and Guru means one who imparts the technical know-how". There were a whole bunch of us that year. Many were couples. Guru Charn Singh and Guru Charn Kaur. Guru Tej Singh and Guru Tej Kaur. Guru Shabad Singh and Guru Shabad Kaur.

Before that, there were lots of "Sat" names. Sat Darshan Singh. Sat Jivan Singh and Sat Jivan Kaur. Sat Simran Kaur. There were a few "Babas" too. Then there were the "Siri" names and after a couple of years, a lot of the names were beginning with "Hari". And there was a "Dev" phase after that. Of course, there were lots of exceptions too, too many to mention, but those were observable tendencies over the first few years.

So my name became Guru Fatha Singh. Taken apart, it means the Fatha, the "being of victory" of the Guru. "Singh" means lion, so I am the lion who is the being of victory of the Guru. I asked Yogi Bhajan its meaning twice. Both times, he gave the same answer.

At Guru Ram Das Ashram in Toronto, whenever Yogi Bhajan gave someone a name, and over the years it happened many times, we would always take a few days to informally celebrate the event, then soon everyone would be using it. Before long, I was quite used to being "Guru Fatha Singh". Back in my hippie incarnation, I had been known as "Veg" as I was one of just two vegetarians in our commune. I liked my new name. When I married the next year, I shared the name with my new wife.

Three years later, I applied to have our new identity legalized. In my heart I knew there could be no going back. Then there were all the pieces of identification to change over. The government employment card. The health card. The bank book. Credit cards. All in the new name. Then I helped most everyone else in our community to legally change theirs.

This is the only name I have used for thirty-six years. So when someone asks my real name, it makes me wonder. I wonder about the intent behind the question. I wonder at the meaning of names.

I am not altogether naive. I know some people take in a "spiritual name" as they would a tarot reading. Others wear their name next to their skin on their chest like a talisman to ward away evil influences. Some consider a spiritual name like a secret handshake, thinking it confers initiation into a closed and secretive society. And some people just save their name and use it on "spiritual occasions".

I am also aware that a person's family may never truly accept their newfound destiny and the name that accompanies it. My parents, bless their hearts, still call me by the name they chose for me. But they usually bypass the issue by just calling me "Son" and that works fine with everybody.

There may be others who have a difficult time with a new name. But if it is legalized, the name is yours and your former name is just that. Those who truly respect you eventually come around and acknowledge you. That is another advantage of a destiny name. You learn who your friends are.

I am grateful to acknowledge the wonderful coherence I have seen in the destiny names given by Nirinjan Kaur. Although I haven't an inkling of what formula Yogiji passed on for the selection of those names, she has demonstrated an uncanny knack for expressing the essence of a person in their name. It is truly wonderful.

Yogi Bhajan would make the distinction between a person's fate and their destiny. According to him, fate is what you are predestined to receive from your past actions, or karmas. Destiny is the future you create through your conscious efforts in this present lifetime. Using a destiny name is a technique to advance on the path of realization. Every time anyone calls you by that name, it is a reminder to you of the divine purpose of your living.

Taking or asking for a destiny name is no small thing. It is best done with a good deal of deliberation and never under social pressure. On graduating from a spiritual quest or entering a religious order or assuming a spiritual office, it is sometimes customary to take a up a new name befitting of one's new identity. Unlike a rose that would smell as sweet by any other name, our consciousness is deeply impressionable and affected by any name we acknowledge as our own..

Guru Nanak gave primacy to the Name when he instructed his disciples to meditate on the True Name, the True Identity. In a personal sense, it means we need to live our essential truth; we need to embody our spiritual values to the extent that we are known and recognized by them. When our truth becomes us and we become it, then we have realized the Name.

There are issues with having a name with an unusual spelling, a spelling that needs constant re-spelling, a name from another culture and another story-line. It is hardly convenient. But isn't there a president with an unusual name out there? Why didn't he just change his name to something easy to remember, something simple like "Barry O'Brien" or "Bob Smith"? That would have been less trouble for everybody, don't you think? But no, U.S. President Barack Hussein Obama, as we now know, is a man of character and he kept his difficult name.

Sometimes the world tests our determination, and it is then up to us to stand for the values we hold dear, to hold to our integrity, no matter the cost. This path will earn us endless trial and suffering. It will also earn for us respect in this world, and unfailing faith and self-confidence.

My name is Guru Fatha Singh Khalsa. It represents my values, my destiny, and everything I hold dear. In this unreal world of shifting values, it is a true name. And by the grace of God, it is who I am. (February 8, 2009)