

**Reading: Reflections (Jen Myhre)**

Jack London once remarked, “Show me a man with a tattoo and I’ll show you a man with an interesting past,” and I suppose my own interesting past led me through the doors into The Border Line Tattoo Parlor. People who get tattoos are inscribing their personal history onto the pages of the body. I had asked Jesús to open a wound on the skin just above the Achilles heel of my left foot and to engrave into the wound a recurring theme in my own story—workaholism, my own metaphorical Achilles heel. I submitted myself to him face down and, as delicately as Benjamin Franklin dipping a feather quill into a well, Jesús wet his ink machine in dark black ink. He pierced the yielding surface of my leg with the vibrating, whining instrument to scratch the outline of the tattoo and my teeth clenched against the searing current of pain. Written in skin is the tale of my inner disciplinarian.

What exactly does my inner disciplinarian look like in her new home at the base of my leg? I cheated, because she looks almost exactly like a tarot card from a well-thumbed deck which I was given at the age of 22 and which I consult somewhat faithfully and somewhat skeptically and with tongue firmly in cheek at milestones and birthdays and New Year’s Eves. This particular card bears the image of the Priestess of Swords. Vicki Noble describes the Priestess of Swords as an “Amazon administrator,” a judge, a thinker, a teacher, a disciplinarian, “an austere personality, uncompromising and somewhat formidable.” She is sharp-tongued, clear-minded, and meditative. In fact, she is quite a bit more beautiful and kind in her incarnation on my ankle than the figure she cuts inside my head. If you heard me speak at a service a couple of months ago, you already know my inner disciplinarian as Helga. I described her to you as a kind of dominatrix figure, marrying the pain of overwork to the pleasure of achievement and self-righteousness.

There was no epiphany, no lightning bolt crashing through my brain that made me resolved to shirk off the chains of workaholism. Certainly, my body had had enough for quite some time and had been telling me ever more insistently. My back, in particular, had signaled to me through several increasingly severe spasms leaving me in chronic pain that it was time to end my relationship with Helga. At one point, my back abandoned the subtlety and forced me horizontal for a couple months, making it impossible for me to do any work at all. My mind also pleaded for freedom through a bout of mild depression and daily headaches. No one staged an intervention, but loved ones told me to slow down, to take vacations, to go to the movies. A therapist challenged me one Tuesday afternoon: So you expect your work to provide you with happiness? But no spiritual or existential moment of clarity knocked me upside the head. I think I was just tired, deadly tired.

I told Helga that I needed my space, that maybe we should stop seeing each other. I thought I’d try letting her down gently. I started taking weekends off from work. I learned to crochet. I moved all my sociology books out of my house and into my office

at school. I began leaving work after an eight-hour day. By the time a tattoo artist student of mine came along and, at the end of the term when the boundaries of propriety had loosened, urged me to get a tattoo at his shop, I was ready to send Helga a stronger message. I wanted her where I could keep an eye on her. I wanted to see her bound and gagged and at my feet, begging for mercy.

And so, Jesús thrusts the buzzing tattoo needle into my tender skin. Some people say that getting a tattoo doesn't hurt, but for me the pain is hot and electric and penetrates down to the bone. If I had thought for one moment that the pain wouldn't end eventually, the pain would have made me scream. Just when I couldn't bear the pain for a single second more and I was sure I would cry out, Jesús would lift the needle and dip it into more ink. I breathed and unclenched my fists. Strangely though, after a while—I submit to Jesús' labors for a full hour—my body accommodates the pain. I get used to it. I can't really say that it felt good, but the feeling was very intense and I can see how someone might come to crave it. Even as Jesús was hurting me and I thought I could barely stand the pain, I found myself pondering my next tattoo. Maybe Helga and I should pick out a safety word.

## Sermon

### Tats

Rev. Julia Older

What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet."

Well, maybe, but Mary Daly, radical feminist theologian, says "Women have had the power of naming stolen from us." And I agree with her. Claiming our names and thereby claiming our own experience of the world absolutely matters.

There is power in giving things a name. When we are given names by an unfriendly power, we know something about how injustice feels.

In many creation stories around the globe— stories of how the universe, the world, and we came to be, it is words that cause existence. (*Rev. Dr. Daniel Ó Connell*)

In the beginning,...the earth was a formless void.... Then God said: Let there be light. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

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In her book, A Wizard of Earthsea, Ursula Le Guin makes naming the basis of all magic power. In her School for Wizards, the students must spend a dark year in the Isolate Tower studying with the Master Namer:

“Ged sighed sometimes, but he did not complain. He saw that in this dusty and fathomless matter of learning the true name of each place, thing, and being, the power he wanted lay like a jewel at the bottom of a dry well. For magic consists in this, the true naming of a thing.”

“To know the true name of a thing is to have power over it.”

I think really good fantasy writing is like a myth, or a dream, which teaches us through vivid images.

How about the names you have for yourself? Are you cautious . . .or fearful? Thorough . . .or obsessive? Unique . . .or deviant? You get the idea.

I myself was ‘Judy’ for most of my life. My parents originally intended to call me ‘Judy Lee.’ Now that is not a “name of power.” To my ear, “Judy” is a perennially cute, childish name. When I turned fifty I decided to use the name on my birth certificate, “Julia.” When I made the change, right away I felt something shift in my image of myself.

Choosing what we will be called and what we will answer to is taking charge of our own lives. We can refuse to answer to the name someone else gives us without our permission but it takes great care to notice whether names that others give us fit or not. Sometimes the power-wielding is quite subtle. Sometimes we have to take a stand, make a claim, even do something outrageous to find out our true name.

Fifty years ago, or more, when feminists started demanding that female pronouns be used in textbooks, rather than letting the male pronouns be normative, I thought it was truly an awful lot of fuss for a not very big deal. I know better now.

This self-naming was a big deal during the recent election with the rhetoric of Rev. Jeremiah Wright. I met Rev. Dr. Wright during Ministry Days a few years ago. He was the keynote speaker for the ministers’ meeting that precedes our General Assembly. I liked him. His presentation on language was fascinating. So when excerpts of his now infamous sermon began playing on the news, I paid a lot of attention. Why would he use such inflammatory rhetoric? Because he was claiming the right to name the experience of black America rather than have it be subsumed into the dominant story that presumes to be able to name someone else’s experience.

While I was working on this sermon and told a couple of people that I was going to use Dr. Wright’s sermon as an example of “self-naming” I was surprised by the reaction I got. It seems that nobody I spoke with felt Wright was justified in his language. Frankly, I’m not sure either where his message and his ego intersect. And I agree that in

the week following the first news story he could have been more gracious and tried to stand back and made it easier for Obama to have public approval.

Here is my bias: I grew up in the south, Atlanta. My particular senior class was the first class desegregated in Georgia. I was one of those overly friendly, trying-to-be-helpful, white people making the classical liberal error of trying too hard instead of relating to individuals. But I did begin about that time to wake up to the world around me and I noticed something about Black church in the south and how important it is to have a place where your experience can be named.

Rev. Rob Hardies of All Souls in Washington DC said it this way, “Ever since slavery, the church has been the one public place where African Americans could express, in anything other than whispers, their anger and frustration with a white, racist majority. It was also one of the only places they could gather to affirm their worth and dignity in a society that sought to instrumentalize and destroy them.

On the plantation, enslaved persons would go out back, out past the barns and the fields, down by the river, underneath a tree, and they would worship out of earshot of the master, where it was safe to mourn, safe to be angry, and safe to be joyful and loving. Maybe you can imagine the sense of anger and of grief, the sense of frustration. When folks got to church, they were just waiting for their pastor to give vent to their feelings, to say the things that they couldn’t say. He lifted up their anger to an understanding God, and he offered spiritual resources for how they might cope and respond to the latest injustice.

. . . one of the things that was going (on last Autumn was) that lots of people in this country had just gotten their first glimpse of the black church in America. And many folks, I think, didn’t really understand the cultural context of what they were seeing repeated over and over again on television.” (end quote) (Rev. Rob Hardies “Is Jeremiah (W)right?”)

Church was the one place where Africa American experience could be named, and although it often had to be in code, it was life-saving. Few things are more psychically painful than feeling alone and invisible.

Self-claiming and self-naming for many in our culture today is done with body art, tattoos and piercings. Both come out of ancient custom. “Traditionally, body art has served to attract the opposite sex, boost self-esteem, ward off or invoke spirits, indicate social position or marital status, identify with a particular age or gender group or mark a rite of passage, such as puberty or marriage.” (*Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher*)

For “the millenials,” or “Gen Y” as the group born after Gen X’ers and before the millennium change are sometimes called, tattoo art has become a very common way to make a statement of identity. Each generation chooses something, the grunge look, long hair, leather jackets, and slicked back DA’s.

Getting a tattoo is this kind of generational affirmation and a statement of personal identity claiming that this body is yours. It is yours. Only you should have the right to tattoo it. It is a statement of personal choice.

That is perhaps why tattooing is such a big thing in prison: it is an expression of freedom.

On the other hand, gang members tattoo themselves to show that they belong. It is a modern tribal marking. More traditional tribal people chose to have tattoos of totem animals or shamanic symbols for protection, or magical powers.

I have been quite fascinated with the choice to be tattooed. Many of our members here have them. Few if any of my contemporaries do. We're older than the current wave and most of us were brought up to think that tattoos were, well, trashy. You certainly can't make that comment now. And tattoos are not new among polite society. In the 1800's King George V had a dragon tattooed on his arm. Lady Randolph Spencer Churchill, mother of Winston Churchill, had a tattoo of a snake around her left wrist.

Actually, royal tattoos were common in Russia long before Britain caught on. Peter the Great and Catherine the Great both had tattoos.

In my research for this piece, I looked at hundreds of pictures on the web. Some of the most striking were used to cover scars. Some were very elaborate chest wide designs of flowers on women who had had double mastectomies. I found them beautiful and a bold response to a potentially deadly disease.

Winner of the creepiest award was a picture I ran across of a man who had had the whites of his eyes tattooed bright blue.

More solemnly, I had a professor in seminary, Rev. Dr. Ibrahim Farajaje, who had a number of visible tattoos. He spoke here, by the way, at Lynn Cox's ordination. He got a new tattoo while I was in his class—a tattoo in a more private place. He didn't go alone; he took several friends with him who helped him create a sacred environment. I imagine they lit a chalice, chanted, and perhaps burned incense. Ibrahim is a very tall, very tall man who, when I first met him had long dreadlocks and a full beard and dressed in kaftans and other costumes -- not costumes as in party or Halloween, but assemblages of clothing that made political and social statements. He talked about it a few times in class -- about how it takes daily choice and courage to use your self as a billboard for the causes you believe in. He knew he caught everyone's eye. He knew that he stirred things up just by walking into a new environment. He had chosen to be conspicuous about his identity to deliberately awaken people to difference and our own unexamined attitudes. Ibrahim does not blend with common cultural norms. Many in seminary believe that his choices are heroic.

An ancient practice popular in the Middle East involved people cutting themselves and rubbing in ash during a period of mourning after a death to form a tattoo.

Memorializing a loved one who has died is still common -- a heart with a name -- symbol of the loved ones' strength or beauty. I wonder if it helps to create this lasting, very personal memorial.

So, this art form of making permanent symbols in our skin can be esthetic, medicinal, magic, or religious. Tattooing can be a rite of adulthood or a passage into puberty. In some tribal groups if a girl can't take the pain of tattooing, she is considered un-marriageable, because she will never be able to deal with the pain of childbirth. If a boy cannot deal with the pain of his puberty tattoos, he is considered to be a bad risk as a warrior, and might become an outcast.

Among my younger colleagues, many of whom have "ink," tattoos are planned and the symbols are very carefully chosen. These are not sudden visits to a parlor during a night of too much drinking. These are thoughtful, considered, careful, choices. And the artist who will do the ink is researched carefully.

One friend, who was molested as a girl, has a fairly large and elaborate Ganesha, Hindu elephant-headed god of new beginnings on her hip. Clearly, she is reclaiming her body. She planned it for years.

I think it might be revealing to ask yourself what sort of symbol you might chose to claim your own name, to authenticate your own body, to name your own experience or to show which tribe you belong to. Perhaps you would like to choose a declaration of independence? A symbol of hope? Something which evokes your heritage like perhaps a Celtic knot ? A flaming chalice? A memorial to something that has been lost? Perhaps a Japanese character meaning peace? If you were going to use a tattoo as a symbol of your life, what would it be?

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If you are not going to choose getting a tattoo, is there another powerful and lasting symbol that you can put in front of yourself on a daily basis that will help you remember your true name? Discovering and answering to your true name, and not the name others have given you, marks a great awakening, makes you more yourself. That is our most important human task. To be who we most authentically are when we are not yielding to the pressure to fit in.

Choosing the richest life and the most interesting relationships, we may be called quirky and much worse, but if we learn to answer to names other than our own, if we learn to adapt too well, if we stay too clean, we ourselves will be lost.

If we can resist total assimilation, if we can make spontaneous works of public art and find the courage to say the true thing when everyone else is staying silent, we will sometimes be outcasts, but life will not wear us down such that we forget who we are. We will stay actors in the world; we will hold onto our legitimate personal power as a one time only and one of a kind, precious life. Blessed be.

**Benediction:**

“Naming things is magic. In naming something we re-frame the way we think about it and we can convert fear into courage; we can transmute depression into acceptance and change.”

Rev. Dr. Daniel Ó Connell