No one is anonymous

When we baptize, we baptize individual people who have names.

by Peter W. Marty in the November 8, 2017 issue

Pastor baptizing

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There's a thought-provoking book we haven't reviewed in the *Century*, mostly because it's more art than book. The 1,250 pages of *And Every Single One Was Someone* (Gefen, 2013) weighs in at a hefty 7.3 pounds. It contains 6 million words, nearly 5 million more than J. K. Rowling's seven-volume Harry Potter series. Author Phil Chernofsky has printed the single word *Jew* 6 million times to signify the number of Jews killed during the Holocaust. Chernofsky's aim is to highlight the Nazis' objectification of their victims. Erase a person's name and that individual ceases to be a human being. The Nazi strategy was to treat people as "a thing," a mass to be exterminated.

Our name may be our most important possession. As a Christian, I could argue that my baptism is even more critical to my identity than my name. But we never baptize anonymously. We baptize individual human beings with real names.

I remember the year in my childhood when my brothers and I received bona fide winter coats. We always had coats, but that year we each got a coat that was actually made for winter, not a glorified autumn jacket with a zip-in liner. Normally, our mother marked our clothing with an intricate dot system that helped her sort scores of similar shirts and socks. But on these particular coats she sewed little name tapes into the collar, each hand-stitched with our full name. I'm not certain Mother went to this effort just to ensure the return of the coat if it were lost. My guess is that she wanted us to know, every time we put it on, that we were precious in her sight. Sewing our name into the collar by hand meant her love went with us wherever we went.

Rabbi Shai Held offers a fascinating interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative in this issue ("Tower of uniformity") that highlights the complete absence of names within the story. The story itself contains no individuals, just an anonymous mass of humanity operating under the comfort of uniformity. God disperses the people because they've hunkered down in homogeneity, content to speak the same language and use the same words. They're not scattered because of their crazy ambition to undertake a tower project.

It's because they've ignored their God-given uniqueness and individuality, and lost their names in the process.

Plenty of 19th-century slave stories remind us of people who sought to escape not only physical bondage but also the bondage of enforced uniformity and anonymity. Sojourner Truth's is among the most memorable. "My name was Isabella," Truth once said. "But when I left the house of bondage . . . I wasn't goin' to keep nothin' of Egypt on me, an' so I went to the Lord an' asked Him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an' down the land, showing the people their sins, an' bein' a sign unto them. Afterwards I told the Lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth."

Each of us is blessed with our own name and corresponding significance. Faith calls us not only to relish the uniqueness and individuality of our own lives but to delight in the diversity and individual value of all whom we meet.

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