

In college, I changed my name to Rachel. It didn't stick.

## **Struggling with whether to abandon my Korean name made me think about the queerness in all of our identities.**

by [Mihee Kim-Kort](#) in the [July 18, 2018](#) issue



When my parents and I immigrated to the United States from South Korea in the late 1970s, we took the traditional path to citizenship through naturalization. Seven years later, when I was eight years old, it was time for us to be officially received—and I had the opportunity to change my name. At the time, it seemed that many of the Korean Americans around us were adding a first name like Joanne, Christine, or Sarah, or David, Michael, or John.

I don't remember exactly what name I picked. It might have been Rebecca (good biblical name) or Elizabeth (I liked all the possibilities of nicknames, which struck me as solidly American). But somehow we forgot the necessary paperwork or missed the deadline. Or maybe my parents got cold feet and didn't want me to change my name. Whatever the reason, the opportunity passed. I recall being disappointed, but the moment passed quickly, and I soon forgot about it.

That is, I forgot until the teasing began. At first, I was fielding questions about whether I was Chinese or Japanese. Then came the guesses, like a game: "Where did you come from?" Then there were all the variations and changes they made to Mihee, an easy target of a name. And since it's an Asian name, it was easily paired with ching-chong songs while my tormenters pulled their eyes up at a slant: "Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these." These incidents led to years of propagating the deep shame a person can feel, calcifying that self-hatred until it becomes a part of your skin and bones.

When I got to college, I decided to finish the process we had begun at my naturalization. A few signed documents did it: my official name became Rachel Mihee Kim. Why Rachel? A few reasons: I didn't know many Korean Americans with that name. It was biblical (to appease my parents). And I'm embarrassed to say it, but I loved the show *Friends*.

The thing is, I hardly used my new name. I was in the middle of college, and I continued to go by Mihee with friends, acquaintances, and people in my program. The university officially changed my name and gave me a new email address, but even in class, whenever I was called on for attendance that first week, I asked to be called Mihee.

My new name did provide a useful mode of categorizing interactions with people. I called Rachel my "Panera name." I would use it for convenience, like at restaurants or coffee shops, because I could avoid the tedium of repeating my name at least a handful of times, spelling it, and explaining it, only to get the meal or the cup with my name spelled incorrectly or yelled out incorrectly.

"MY-hee!"

"Miltee!"

"Mikey!"

I know: it's confusing, because Mihee uses two different vowels for the same vowel sound. I always had to explain it by reducing it to the familiar pronouns me and he. Rachel was helpful because it was effortless and uncomplicated to say.

Except I still didn't really feel like a Rachel, and when I gave people that name, it felt false. I didn't have that confidence in my voice where you know yourself. Each time I used the name, I wondered if people could see through to my insecurity. I started to give the name Rachel when, upon first impression, I decided I would likely not have any more conversations with a person—in other words, when I felt like I didn't like someone. It was a way to separate out people I would know in a very casual way from the people I thought I would eventually befriend.

And then I got married and hyphenated my last name, and it became clear that I had too many names. When I signed up for anything, like at the doctor's office or at a hair salon, I couldn't remember which name I had used on the forms. I'd have to give them all the variations on my name as they looked at me askance: Rachel Kim-Kort? Rachel Kort? Mihee Kim-Kort? Mihee Kort? *Don't you know your own name?* Then there were the awkward situations where I was with a mix of people who knew me as Rachel or as Mihee. I felt strange, like a fraud.

This is what we might call an identity crisis.

The traditional psychological view of identity is that the individual self is somehow autonomous and independent of external sources—that there is something natural, pure, and untouched (and untouchable) by outside forces of socialization. But some psychologists believe a person comes to his or her identity through internalizing the influence of certain people, especially parents. Each human being is an amalgamation of the people who have the most influence, a combination of genetic and personality traits. Identity is a symbiotic process between the individual and the community.

The process is never linear but full of ebbs and flows. An identity crisis can occur when a person feels disconnected from the community that gave them their identity, creating a fissure in their self-understanding and self-expression. This is common. We all experience moments in our lives that precipitate crises of identity.

I can point to a number of such moments in my life. They happened in college, trying to understand myself in relation to others; in seminary, trying to understand and engage my faith; in marriage, trying to live out this covenantal relationship; in

becoming a minister, a mother, a midwesterner, and more. When I look back, I can hardly think of an extended period of time when there was no crisis concerning my identity, whether it was getting my period or rebelling against the role of hardworking Asian student. In all honesty, I struggled throughout most of my life to name myself, to know myself, to recognize myself when I looked in the mirror.

But every single time, when I felt near the point of total and utter despair, it was community—a gathering of others, a tribe—that would raise me out of that cavernous hole of existential anguish, whether it was too many voices trying to tell me who I am or the absence of a voice within me. It was the realization that my identity wasn't completely internal and innate but that the people around me who love me hold up mirrors for me to see myself more clearly. Each time, they would call me out of that abyss by baptizing me in an ocean of love and hope: naming me beloved, adventurer, child of God, sister wild and holy.

Names—whether Rachel or Mihee or even pastor, mother, student, or writer—are not meant to be exhaustive of who a person is. We get caught up in names because we see them as a way to extend ourselves—to know and be known, fully and completely. When I took on Rachel as my legal first name, it was a way of saying to the people around me, “I’m one of you; I’m like you.” But that’s not how it works. Even when I gave my name as Rachel, people would often show shock and surprise when they heard me speak perfect English or tell them I was from Colorado.

I’m done trying to fit into the boxes for what is considered legitimate.

Did I expect my name to signal something clear to the world? Names matter only if we believe that they point us to some coherent and absolute sense of self and that this sense of self can be captured in this thing called identity, which we try to express through labels and categories. But perhaps we are not meant to have a system of consistent desires and steady ambitions, as if each person is a metaphysical being totally aware of oneself at all times. We are all an amalgamation of stories and dreams, histories and genetics, easily affected by lunar cycles, barometric pressure, and sunshine.

Naming is descriptive, not defining. Phyllis Tribble writes that when God uses dirt to create *ha-’adam* (Gen. 2:7), it’s not clear that this “earth creature” is male. The distinction between female and male occurs later, when the second creature is formed from *ha-’adam*’s rib cage (2:21-23). This *’ezer kenegdo* is usually translated

as “helper” or “helpmate,” but the Hebrew doesn’t carry any domestic or demeaning nuances. The sense of *‘ezer* is better expressed as “a companion corresponding to it.” So the kind of naming that happens here is distinct from the naming *ha-‘adam* is given the power to enact over all creation (2:19–20). Eve, as Adam’s companion, is partner in mutuality, equality, and solidarity—not a helper who is subordinate or weaker. Eve is not derived from Adam so much as differentiated. It’s an insight that shifts the way Eve has traditionally been identified and named.

When we are given the power to name each other, we call each other into new life. Yet that power is often wielded to hurt, to erase, to cause life to shrivel up—especially when the naming is rooted in greed, oppression, and destruction. Savage. Foreigner. Three-fifths. Illegal. Second-class. Sometimes naming amounts to a demand that people make an account of themselves, to explain and legitimize their existence.

Naming is a gift, a privilege. When we use it as a means to relate to and understand one another, it becomes a special responsibility for all. The work of naming, when enacted genuinely, is sanctifying. It’s calling out and lifting up—it’s resurrecting, like Jesus calling Lazarus to new life.

Throughout the Bible, a new name signals a new reality. Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, Jacob becomes Israel, and Saul becomes Paul. When Jesus calls the first disciples, he calls Simon something new: Peter, or “rock.” It’s a nondescript, ordinary choice, like naming someone Tree or Cloud. And it’s fitting, as throughout the rest of his time with Jesus, Peter appears to have the intelligence of a rock. He is not quite the cornerstone he later becomes. Perhaps Peter’s new name is less of a prophecy and more of a promise: God is already his rock and his foundation. Jesus loves him and names him, and that relationship means something. It is sealed by the name. No explanations are necessary; no definitions or labels matter as much as the promise of God’s steadfast love.

That’s the kind of identity that resonates with me—an identity that is an invitation, a beckoning into freedom. It is a call into being one who is loved. That conception of identity is a gateway into connection and communion; it is space wide enough for me—for us—to play, to live, to breathe.

Identity isn't lived out in a vacuum; it is affected by things external to us and things internal. And identity is tricky: it attempts to cast who we are in categories like gender, race, and sexuality. Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick talks about queerness as the open mesh of possibilities, with gaps and overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning. Identity is better engaged as not the boxes we check off—Korean, Christian, woman, spouse, mother—so much as the spaces all around those boxes.

Names are how we maneuver through all those containers of identity and occupy the fissures between them. Identity is a way we know and are known in relationship, and the names and labels we take on can help root us in our identities. At the same time, queerness can help us embrace the fluidity of our identities and the multiple points of connection. Queering our experience of identity involves a sense of playfulness and openness to the unknown. Not-knowing isn't laziness or willful ignorance but a trusting in, as Sedgwick says, "possibility without result": all inklings and glimmerings are connected to the full picture.

Early in the 2015 film *The Danish Girl*, painter Gerda Wegener asks her husband, Einar, to stand in for an absent female model. This awakens something in him, and rather than fighting this identity, he embraces it, taking the name Lili.

Lili begins a love affair with a man named Henrik. In one scene, as they are kissing, Henrik whispers, "Einar."

This catches Lili off guard. "I don't understand," she says. "I don't know what you want. I don't know what you mean."

Henrik responds, "I want you."

Lili says, forcefully, "No." She pushes him away and runs out of the apartment, stopping twice to look at her reflection in storefront windows on her way home.

When Henrik says the name Einar aloud, the reality Lili feels emerging in herself becomes little more than fantasy, a reflection and image. This throws her world into turmoil. Alone, she sees Lili, she feels Lili, she is Lili. It is in her relationships with Gerda, Henrik, and others that she has to intentionally cultivate that identity. She narrows the possibility of romance and love to one experience, and when this is wrecked by Henrik's attempt to fully recognize and receive her—her history and her present struggle—she has to shift her orientation not only to him but also to her own

self.

We can create, we can discover, and we can know ourselves, but we live in a world where others also answer the question of who we are. This shapes us, but when identity is experienced in terms of desire and love, we can choose to let it shatter our world or expand it beyond our imagination.

Alfred Kinsey developed a scale to describe a person's sexual orientation based on their experience or response at a given time. Imagine the reality of identity as the meeting point of various Kinsey scales. Queerness engages those measurements—but also liberates us from them by acknowledging that identity cannot be so easily categorized. In disrupting traditional categories around identity, queerness liberates us from the constraints of being named and defined. A queer spirituality allows for loving pandemonium—the challenge of shifts and transitions, the realization that we are shaped by each other, and the emergence of new identities, new creations within each relationship.

The name Mihee was given to me by my paternal grandfather. It is a common Korean name. It means “beautiful girl,” and today that is the name I give to anyone and everyone who asks, spelling it out loudly and clearly, and explaining, when asked, that it is Korean. I'm done trying to pass—to fit into the boxes for what is considered legitimate or real—for white or Korean or woman or mother or whatever else. I want to simply be who I am—because of my history, my parents, my family, the social conditions in which I grew up, yes, but also because of the mysterious grace of God that binds it all together in love.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “In between identities.” It was adapted from Mihee Kim-Kort's book Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith, © 2018 Fortress Press. Reproduced by permission.*