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Shaydanay A. Urbani

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THE CULT OF NAMES

How the Mormon church tried to hold my name hostage, and how I got it back

By Shaydanay Afshar Urbani

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Behold, mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion.

— Doctrine and Covenants 132:8

I was sitting with the congregation, looking down the line of men presiding over the chapel for the face of a bishop I had never met. The pews were crowded but the meetinghouse was quiet, and one of the brothers quoted some verses from John at the podium. “In him was life; and the life was the light of men.” I watched the time. The bishop and I would talk at 4:00 pm. It was an odd choice for a Sunday afternoon in New York City, considering I left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, colloquially known as Mormons, about 15 years before.

The event that I was at was not your regular weekend service, but it was a standard scene for Mormons: the YSA Stake Conference. YSA stands for “Young Single Adult.” In the church, that means 18-30 year-olds who are ripe for mingling with other worthy brothers and sisters. The Stake Conference is an opportunity for all the YSA congregations in the city to get together, and also to hear announcements from church leadership — like in 2000, when a letter from then-president of the church Gordon B. Hinckley was read to every congregation in California, urging members to protect “traditional families” by voting against same-sex marriage.

Incidentally, I was not there to find myself a worthy brother for a traditional family, but I did look the part in my grey jersey dress, black boots, and brown blazer (no shoulders, no cleavage, no thighs—modest chic). This was important, because I was about to do something that most ex-Mormons do not do, and I didn’t want there to be any assumptions that I “had lost my way” or “strayed from the primrose path.” I was going to delete my church records. Not only that, I was going to confront the Manhattan YSA bishop one-on-one about doing it for me.

The only way to officially leave the Mormon church is a process called “name removal.” The church keeps records on all its members, including inactive ones. These are stored both locally, at the last location where a member was active, and centrally, at church headquarters in Salt Lake City, in a department called “Confidential Records.” Those records never go away, even if a member hasn’t stepped foot in a Mormon church for a decade. They also count towards the church’s annual growth statistics.

Name removal may sound like a simple administrative task, but for many ex-Mormons the process is difficult enough that they would rather slip away into obscurity than go through the trouble for an act of symbolic liberation.

I had never seen my record, nor did I have any idea what information it contained, but I knew that I wanted it removed. For one, removing your record means that the church can no longer contact you. In the 15 years that I had been inactive, I received gifts, letters, and occasionally home visits from women on the church’s Inactive Members Committee. One time, when I was 16, a dozen girls showed up at my door with a basket of strawberry cupcakes, scripture, and Mormon stickers. A woman named Lisa sent me birthday postcards telling me about her son, who was my age, and would be attending BYU for college. This continued over four address changes.

My father was the other reason I wanted my name removed. I had a bad relationship with him. He was an alcoholic, drug-abuser, non-present, emotionally manipulative, and several other things that aren’t fit for

respectable publication. Also, devout. My exit from the church coincided with my parents' divorce. When they split, my mom and I left the church, and my dad stayed. When my mom remarried and my step-dad legally adopted me before I turned 18, I took his surname, Urbani.

It was surprising to learn, the day of my adoption in the family court office, that if the minor takes a new surname, they also change the birth certificate. Which meant that the only remaining record of my biological father's name attached to my own, excluding the archival powers of the internet, was the one that the Mormon church had.

But that was about to change. After the service was over, I found the bishop, Bill Wilcox, at the front of the chapel, exiting the fourth pew. "Let's find a quiet place to talk," he said. As we exited the chapel, I got a text from my mom. "You know that this is going to totally traumatize him, right?" she said. "He's going to tell his wife all about you. They're going to kneel down and pray for you. And then he's going to tell the rest of the bishopric, and they're all going to talk about you and pray for you too."

This October the church took a hard stance against the term "Mormon." Church leaders are asking that members use the full name of church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and pleading with the media to do the same.

The announcement came first as a letter released by current church president Russell M. Nelson, 94, and then at General Conference, a biannual event in Salt Lake City where the church broadcasts major news and announcements, often controversial ones. Notable examples include the 1978 revelation that black people were finally worthy enough to hold leadership positions in the church, or in 2015, when the church said that the children of gay parents needed to wait 10 extra years before being baptized.

The biggest news usually comes from the president of the church, whom Mormons believe to be a modern prophet, with revelatory power from God. In a General Conference talk titled the "The Correct Name of the Church," President Nelson said that the term "Mormon" had a long history as an abusive epithet, designed to obliterate God's hand in restoring the true church of Christ on earth. He also said that nicknames "take Christ out of the name" of the church, and that to do this was a major victory for Satan.

Mormons actually have quite the history of taking names as seriously as possible. For one, they are master archivists. Some may know that Ancestry.com, the largest family history company in the world, was started by Mormon Paul Allen and cofounder Dan Taggart. Although the company is not affiliated with LDS, the church did brokerage free accounts for all of its members.

The church has its own records too. In a hollowed-out mountain 15 miles from Salt Lake City, the church stores 3.5 billion images of genealogical information. It is the world's largest collection of genealogical records, which they acquire, in part, through agreements with other archives and libraries, internationally. In the 1930s, the church began filming the records, and then in the mid-sixties, after amassing upwards of 100,000 rolls, they needed a permanent storage site. Thus, the high-security, temperature-controlled facility in Little Cottonwood Canyon was born.

Why the colossal archive of deceased persons? At least one of the reasons is that Mormons use the names from the records to perform baptisms for the dead. It's called temple work: members will identify their ancestors and then perform proxy baptisms for them, as if they were converts. Mormons say that the ancestors who are trapped in the spirit world have free will and don't have to accept the blessings of the baptism, but that hasn't stopped others from being upset about the unsolicited conversions, especially

when it was discovered that the church had posthumously baptized around 360,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors who were not ancestors of the church.

All of these rituals have their basis in what is one of the most distinguishing aspects of Mormon faith, which is that families should be eternal, and Christ has specifically tasked Mormons with sealing all families on earth together through baptism and the other ordinances that happen in the temple. (I'm reminded of children's song "Families Can Be Together Forever"— "I have a family here on earth / they are so good to me / I want to share my life with them / through all eternity.")

Mormons also receive new names in the temple, which they memorize until they die and then recall for the sentinels at the gates celestial kingdom, that they might be exalted to the highest levels of heaven. The new name is accompanied by a series of a handshakes—a remnant of historical Mormon connection to freemasonry—which they also memorize and repeat with the angels in heaven.

I never had the pleasure of receiving a new name, but my mother did. She says the temple worker handed her a small slip of paper that looked like the fortune from a fortune cookie: "PHOEBE," it said. To this day, she wonders whether the rules are strict about calling herself Phoebe for eternity, or if Phoebes works just as well.

My name, Shaydanay, comes from my mother's name, Shaeda. In Persian, "nay" (or "neh") is a suffix that can be added onto names that means "little," or "the essence of" whatever precedes it. There are many ways you might translate Shaeda, but the translation that always made the most sense to me is "obsessive love." Iranians have a story to illustrate this kind of love, about a moth that circles a flame until it burns to death. For a long time I thought that this was a fable my grandfather conjured to embellish the name he had given to my mother, and then one evening I happened to see a screening of "Downpour," an old 1971 film by Iranian playwright and director Bahram Beyzai. In the movie, a teacher takes a job in a new city in pre-revolutionary Iran, and he falls in love with a young woman caring for her dying mother and younger brother. His new students quickly discover the crush, and one morning when he walks into class he finds a drawing on the chalkboard of a moth hovering above a candle.

I always liked this story behind my name, and told it often. With my surname it was the opposite: bad memories, bad associations. Deleting it from the church seemed to offer a sliver a poetic justice, however inconsequential.

There are several ways to go about removing Mormon membership records, and all of them are tedious. The first is to contact a local bishop, and ask him to fill out a request to Confidential Records at church headquarters in Salt Lake City. If a member wants to eliminate human contact, they can try sending a notarized letter to HQ themselves, but the likelihood is that the church contacts their local bishop anyway, since record removal is an ecclesiastical matter.

There's also Quitmormon.com, started in 2009 by immigration attorney Mark Naugle, who wanted help members leave by filing their letters for free. But wait time is a problem. Currently, there are more than 4000 people who have had Naugle file record removals who are waiting for processing confirmations from the church.

I didn't mind the idea of sitting down with bishop. If he had access to my records, maybe he could tell me what they looked like, and what information the church was storing on me. There were claims in ex-Mormon support communities that the church never actually deletes your record — just updates it to

indicate that you are no longer a member. Surmising that an institution that makes it their business to store family history in a high-security mountain vault wouldn't be quick to press delete on my personal information, I called Confidential Records myself to find out if this was true. A staff member named Robert replied: "You know, I — we remove your name. That's all I can tell you."

I let a week pass before calling back to get a more detailed response. After the name removal, I asked, this time to David, another staff-worker, would the church be able to look up whether I had been member at some point? "Sure. Yes," David said. What was it exactly, then, that remains in the system? It turns out, there is no way to get your record completely removed. That's "proprietary information for the church," David said.

That evening I called my mom to complain. "I always thought it was silly that people get frustrated by that," she said. I asked if she didn't see anything concerning about a powerful religious institution keeping track of her family an information. "Sure," she said, but what are they going to do with that information?"

My mom said that in some of her Sunday school meetings, women would organize home visits to inactive members to help bring them back. The women would sit in a circle, sometimes with a print-outs information about a member and where they might be able to find them.

Nowadays, the church has gotten more high tech, and the guidelines for locating members looks like something out of an intelligence handbook.. "When members move from a ward, the ward clerk or membership clerk is responsible for making best efforts to find where the member has moved and send the record to the new ward." Apparently, best efforts include looking through voter registration records, property tax records, criminal records, and Utah divorce records.

"Great," I said. "Not only are they trying to document my membership and genealogy, there are also nice ladies sleuthing around to compile any other information they can find on me in hopes of bringing back their lost sheep."

"Yeah," my mom said. "You have a point."

Names have a strange power across religions. In Genesis, God says "Let there be Light; and then there was light." The name came even prior to creation. In Judaism, the name of God is too holy to be pronounced: to say God's name would be like trying to control him, to assert dominion over God.

Other groups take it further still. In the early 20th century, *imiaslavie* was a dogmatic movement popular with Russian monks living on the Greek peninsula of Mount Athos who believed that the name of God was God himself. They were, somewhat derisively, called "name worshippers," and they worked themselves into ecstatic trances by repeating the name the name of Jesus Christ.

Long before the Judeo-Christian tradition, Ancient Egyptians also believed that humans could evoke the power of gods, and ultimately control them, by knowing their names. The Egyptian god of creation, Ra, is said to have kept his name secret even from other Gods, lest chaos and destruction disrupt the order of the universe.

It occurred to me, standing in the aisle of the chapel, waiting for this bishop who held the key to my record, that the power to name is not universal. It lies almost exclusively with men.

In the Mormon church, the gender gap here is explicit in the scripture. “The Patriarchal order is of divine origin and will continue throughout time and eternity,” Joseph Smith wrote. Naming children is one example of this. Men are given exclusive priesthood authority to perform naming and blessing rituals on children. Men are also allowed to know the eternal names that their wives receive in the temple, but women are not allowed to know the names of their husbands. Mormons say that the power of naming includes the responsibility to protect and nurture the one receiving the name, but the recipient of the name, in turn, has to honor the name giver and follow their counsel.

When President Nelson announced this October that God was serious about eliminating nicknames for the church, some women, like April Carleson, a writer for digital Mormon publication Exponent II, used the opportunity to point out the lack of seriousness with which the church handles the titles of young girls. Boys become “deacons” when they are 12, “teachers” at 14, and “priests” at 16. Girls, on the other hand, are called “beehives,” “mia maids,” and “laurels.”

This is what the church has to say about the origin of the term laurel: “For centuries the laurel wreath has been a crown woven from the leaves of a tree. It is given to someone who finishes a significant achievement as a symbol of honor and accomplishment.” Starting from very young age, the church gives boys titles that imply a certain amount of sacred authority. Meanwhile, women are crowns of accomplishment.

In 2011, a study by Gender and Society reported that half of Americans think that women should be legally obligated to give up their name at marriage. And for many years in the United States, women were. The tradition comes from a feudal English common-law concept called coverture, which dissolved a woman’s right to property when she married. Prior to marriage, women were able to sue, execute wills, enter contracts, and manage property. After marriage, women would take their husband’s surnames and lose their legal independence.. In the early development of the U.S, jurists carried on the tradition, and made it a legal requirement for women to adopt their husband’s surnames.. It wasn’t until 1972, thanks to the Maryland Court of Appeals, that U.S law protected women’s right to use whatever name they wanted after marriage.

Little has changed since then. Men, in fact, face extra bureaucratic hurdles if they want to take their wives’ names. As late as 2015, there were only eight states in the nation that allowed men to follow the standard name-change procedures that women follow at marriage. Instead, men had to follow a legal name change procedure, which can require, among other things, petitioning for a court order and spending up to \$400.

When you look at studies about why people think women should give up their names and men should keep theirs, it is clear that the pressure comes from all angles: men fearing that they would be seen as less manly, women thinking it makes men weak, couples not wanting to stand out, women not wanting to seem uncommitted to the marriage, and women wanting to have the same names of their children. Even in cases where women do retain their names in marriage, it remains extremely rare that her children adopt her name instead of the father’s.

Despite decades of progress towards gender equality, and heightened sensitivity—especially now, with the #MeToo era—to women’s issues, the way that society tabulates ancestry is still through the man’s name, and the way that society dictates ownership and belonging, perhaps not of property but of children, is still through the man’s name.

Bishop Wilcox led me down a carpeted hallway lined with scenes from the Bible and Book of Mormon. There's a great dusky blue painting of John the Baptist holding the wrist of Christ in the Jordan River that reminds me of Monet's impressions of the Seine — maybe I would look for it later, if I didn't feel like exiting the temple as soon as I could after our meeting.

We went into a small room and I sat down in a metal chair at the corner of a table across from him. A whiteboard on the back wall read "Faith, Divine Nature, Knowledge, Individual Worth." He asked me to tell him about myself and what was on my mind. I told him I was thinking of removing myself from church records. I wanted to know what that meant practically and theologically.

Wilcox, in his late sixties now, told me that he had several crises of faith in his life: the first, when he was a teenager living in Puerto Rico, helping missionaries teach and giving talks about *creer*. In the 70s, Wilcox served his mission in La Serena, Chile, and that's when the second one came. He served in the bishopric in the Bay Area town of Danville, as well as the nursery at the Hyde Park ward in London, before finally coming to preside over the YSA ward in Manhattan. He studied biology in college and was an engineer by day. I thought that maybe, with his scientific and technical background, we could have a comfortable and interesting conversation about why I wanted to leave the church officially.

But his voice tightened. He said that he knew the church was true. His eyes began to water and redden, and his voice shook. "I have evidence," Wilcox said. "And I know that God knows your name."

If there was a proper response to this statement, I didn't know it, so I plowed forward, trying to politely ignore the tension. What did it mean to have my record removed, besides cancelling my baptism?

He said that Joseph Smith was commanded by God to record the blessings and ordinances of the church--that the records would be used on judgement day. He folded his hands in his lap and quoted some verses from the second chapter of Doctrine & Covenants, a lesser known set of scriptures in the Mormon canon:

And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming.

"This escalated quickly," I thought.

The verse from D&C is based on a nearly identical verse from Malachi in the Old Testament, although the King James Version doesn't mince its words nearly as much as Joseph Smith did. *And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.*

After a breath, the bishop asked if I minded if he pulled up my church records. Please, I said. After all, this is what I had come for. He pulled out his iphone and fiddled with an app. I asked if I could see it, and he handed me his phone. The record read: Name, Date, City of Birth. Born in the covenant. Baptized and confirmed December, 1998. Local records in the Crystal Springs first ward, San Mateo, California.

Wilcox asked me if I wanted to set up another meeting with him, his voice still a little shaky, and I considered whether to tell him I wanted to move forward with my record deletion. Was it worth it? Here was a man who believed that if I removed my name, the whole earth would be utterly wasted. And what

was I left with? Shaydanay Urbani. A surname I took when I was 18 from my adoptive father —not my own, not even my mother's. Transient. In the end, I thought, what do names mean for women?

I told the bishop we could set up another meeting. "How do you spell your last name?" he said. "I just want to update your record."