

## **A Name of My Own: Disrupting (White) Heterosexual Naming Practices**

*By Melissa Nicolas*

"It's just a name. What's the big deal?" This question has haunted me for the past eight years. My last name "my family name" has changed two times in the past decade and each change, as any woman who has changed her name knows, has been a logistical headache. Just when I think every creditor and every distant relation knows of my new identity, I run into some snag with a credit bureau or a Department of Motor Vehicles because the name I am calling myself and the name they have in their infamous files do not match.

But these technicalities are just that. With a few more hours on the phone, a few more letters to customer service reps, the "problem" with my name gets straightened out, and I am, once more, accurately accounted for. What hasn't been so easy to reconcile over the past years, however, has been my concept of my own identity. As it turns out, my name isn't *just* as name. It is a big deal for me.

Like many American women of Western European descent (born of a heterosexual couple), at birth, I was given my father's last name, "Ososki." Growing up, I never particularly liked my last name because people always mispronounced it, and I was smack dab in the middle of the alphabet, so my name had none of the cachet of those lucky "Adamses" or "Zmudas" who were always first or last on class lists and during graduation ceremonies. But, from the time I had a concept of self until the age of twenty-four, I was "Melissa Ososki."

Then, on a beautiful August day in 1994, at 4:13pm eastern daylight time, I suddenly ceased to be Melissa Ososki and through the cultural legacy of patriarchal practices dating back to the days when women were considered property and marriage was a ritual transferring of a woman from her father to her husband, I became "Melissa Dunbar."

Okay, maybe I'm being melodramatic. The changing of my name from "Ososki" to "Dunbar" didn't happen *quite* as supernaturally as I just described it. I actually spent much time thinking about the whole "name thing" as my friends and I called it, and since I had had some women's studies courses in college, I had at least been introduced to the idea that some women didn't change their names when they got married. But, truth be told, my friends and family looked at the "name thing" as a sort of parlor game to be played at bridal showers and bachelorette parties, but no one, and I do mean NO ONE, in my immediate circle really ever entertained the idea that a bride would not take her husband's name. It was tradition. It was proper. It was, in a nutshell, simply what one did when one got hitched.

Perhaps I would have been able to resist this peer pressure if my husband wasn't so set on having me take his last name. Don't get me wrong. He wasn't some

sort of caveman who wanted to brand his property; it is just that he had grown-up thinking that his wife would have his last name. And even though he listened patiently while I explained my reasons for maybe wanting to keep my father's last name, in the end, he really, really wanted me to go by "Dunbar."

So, on a cold gray day in October, two months after the wedding, I acquiesced and reluctantly went to the Department of Motor Vehicles with marriage license in hand to make it official. I still remember pulling out of the nondescript shopping plaza where I received my new identity, sitting in the passenger's seat, staring down at my new license. The face staring back at me looked like me, the height and eye color were correct, the weight was a generous underestimate, the code that told everyone I needed corrective lenses was there, but the name that was printed in all capital letters at the top of the license just didn't look right. .DUNBAR.

As we drove back home, I stared out the window, struck mute by the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing. The external world looked the same, the man driving the car was still my husband and best friend. The apartment we came home to held all our belongings. My puppy, Mocha, still wet the floor with excitement when I walked in, but somehow, in an ineffable way, I knew everything was different. In the brief span of time it took for the government employee to process my license, Melissa Ososki had ceased to exist and in her place Melissa Dunbar emerged. But where did my old self go? What did it mean that I didn't have the same last name as my parents? Were my parents and I now somehow less related? How would people who knew me as Melissa Ososki know it was me if they received a message from Melissa Dunbar? And, both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees had "Melissa Ososki" printed on them. Did this name change suddenly mean that those degrees were any less mine?

In the weeks that followed that cold, gray day, I had to void a lot of checks because I would start to sign the "O" of my old last name instead of the "D" of my new last name. It was almost like my hand was silently protesting the new routine I was forcing it to develop, silently pointing out with each automatic motion the way my name, my identity was part of my very body.

But, as weeks turned into months and months turned into years "Dunbar" came to fit me in much the same way as "Ososki" did. And, truth be told, I actually liked the sound of "Dunbar" much better. By and large, people pronounced and spelled my name correctly, and I was now at the beginning of most alphabetical lists instead of buried somewhere in the middle. In time, even my recalcitrant hand no longer hesitated between the "O" and the "D" as Dunbar was accepted by my body.

Fast forward to the winter of 2002. I am sitting in my attorney's office, filling out divorce paperwork and she asks me, in a casual, non-chalant way, if I am going to keep my married name or go back to my maiden name. My first reaction is

one of indignation. How dare she even insinuate that this name, "Dunbar," is not mine to keep! This name that I fought so hard to make a part of my being, this name that has defined me for the last six years, this name that I have started to establish a professional reputation with, this name my son has, was just a loaner?! No thank you, Ms. Attorney. Dunbar it will remain.

But her innocent question started working on me like a slow-moving virus. My emotions, all unpleasant, ran the gamut from anger that I would even have to be playing "the name thing" again, to sadness that I may lose an identity that I had as I had matured into womanhood, to anger again that this name thing was an issue for me but not for the man I was getting divorced from, to fear that the small but oh-so-hard-to-obtain professional name recognition I had worked for would be lost, to sadness, again, at the thought that my son and I might no longer be connected by a "family" name.

And, of the most urgent and practical concern to me at that moment was the fact that in three months I would have to tell the university how I wanted my name printed on my doctorate. This was not some certificate recognizing my participation in a candle-making workshop or an award for having the best flossed teeth, this was my PhD, a degree that occupied six years of my life, requiring countless sacrifices (and, in the end, probably a large contributing factor in the divorce itself, but that is a story for another day), and demanding a personal, emotional, intellectual, social, and psychological commitment that are difficult, at best, to explain to anyone who hasn't gone through the process. In other words, this degree was not just a piece of paper but rather a symbol of what I valued, what I believed in, and ultimately, who I was.

Perhaps the sheer stress of the situation made me forget how unhelpful they had been

my first time through this dilemma, but I turned to my friends and family for advice. Their responses fell into three categories:

Response A: "It's just a name. Go back to Ososki. What's the big deal?"

Response B: "It's just a name. Keep Dunbar. What's the big deal?"

Response C: "It's just a name. Keep Dunbar until you get remarried and then you can take your new husband's name. What's the big deal?"

As you can probably guess at this point, none of these responses sat too well with me. Response A, going back to my maiden name, never really was an option since, as I've already said, I never particularly liked that name, and, on an intellectual level, "going back" to my maiden name felt just like that: a step backwards. This divorce was a result of much painful personal and emotional growth, so to "go back" to the name I had when I was so much of an innocent was just not a realistic option.

Response B, keeping my married name, was my initial thought, primarily because my son's last name was Dunbar, and I felt like sharing that name

marked him as mine. All I could conjure up for awhile were these horrifying scenarios wherein I changed my last name and when I went to pick my son up at daycare and they asked for ID and saw I wasn't a "Dunbar," and they wouldn't let me have my son. And I didn't want Drew to have to explain to his friends why his last name and his mommy's last name were different.

The more I thought about keeping my married name, though, the more uncomfortable I felt with it because, ultimately, it was a borrowed name. I took that name because I was becoming a part of someone else's family. Since I was no longer going to be an official part of that family, I came to feel like I needed to give the name back. I didn't really feel like I had a right to it anymore even though I know my ex did not have a problem with me keeping his name.

So, that brings us to Response C, keeping Dunbar until I remarried. This suggestion was viable for all of about ten seconds. Think about it. This option meant keeping a borrowed name until some other (at that point) mythical man came and chivalrously offered to relieve me of that burden by letting me use his name. No thank you. I was past the point of relying on someone else to define me. And, having had to play "the name thing" twice in less than ten years, I was ready to have my name engraved in granite and advise the social security office to flag my file with a note that said something like "under no circumstance is this woman allowed to change her name, ever again, for any reason."

Contemplating these three options made me acutely aware of how patriarchal all these possible moves really were. Sure, in theory, I was the one making the decision, but really, what I was deciding on was which man I wanted to name myself after: my father, my ex-husband, or my imaginary future husband.

After doing some investigating, I found out that when you are getting a divorce, you can change your last name without having to go through the normal lengthy and expensive process of a legal name change. What most people don't know-- probably because tradition has become so ritualized in this country-- is that you do not have to change your name to your maiden name. I'm sure many women in my situation who change their name during a divorce do indeed go back to their maiden name, but legally, at least in the state of Ohio where my divorce was handled, you are free to change your name to anything you want.

This information was so exciting to me, it was almost overwhelming. For weeks, I fantasized about the last names I might take. Maybe I would take my great-great maternal grandmother's maiden name. Or maybe I could trace my lineage back two hundred years and take an ancestral name. Or maybe I would take the name of a woman I admired. Or maybe I could take a symbolic name, like 'new life' or 'love' and use their Italian or French equivalent as a last name. The possibilities seemed endless and each felt radical and freeing. I would finally get to choose the name I wanted. This was going to be my name and no one, no man, could take it away from me.

The one thorny issue, though, was my son's last name. I could not figure out how to reconcile my need to create my own identity with my desire to share that identity with my child. He was the only male I felt drawn to share a name with. Indeed, at this point in my life, he was my family and I felt like we should have a "family name." At the same time, I knew it was unfair to ask my soon-to-be-ex for any kind of legal name change for my son. That idea was simply too strange for him, and quite frankly, I think it would have been wrong of me to ask him.

Then, one day, in the midst of this inner turmoil I was playing with my son, Drew, and I was calling him by one of the silly names I make up to go with his name Drew Nic-a-wick-a-wick-a-wick-a-las Dunbar. He was giggling and I kept saying it over and over, eventually dropping the Dunbar and just calling him Drew Nic-a-wick-a-wick-a-wick-a-las. And it hit me. Drew already had three names, 'Drew', 'Nicolas', and 'Dunbar'. While Dunbar is, of course, the name he got from his dad, I was a key player in coming up with 'Drew' and 'Nicolas'. Well, OK. 'Drew' is his father's middle name, but 'Nicolas!' now that is a name I chose. 'Nicolas.' If I gave my son that name, surely I could give it to myself.

So, on another cold, gray day in Columbus (there are far more of these kinds of days in Columbus than we like to admit) I stood in front of a judge and told her of my intention to become "Melissa Nicolas." She asked me if "Nicolas" was my maiden name. I said "no." She paused for about 3.5 seconds, looked at me: the first of many looks I have been given when questioned about my new name--and then moved right along. No questions asked, no explanations offered, a signature here, an official stamp there, and voila! I became Melissa Nicolas.

I half expected to feel the same sort of cognitive dissonance leaving the courthouse that day with my new name as I did that day seven years prior when I left the driver's license center with my then-husband's name. But, strangely, I felt quite calm, at peace almost. In fact, I went immediately from the courthouse to the social security office followed by a trip to the Department of Motor Vehicles to make all the necessary changes so that I could present myself as **Melissa Nicolas**. Indeed, the very next day, I went to the university and informed them that the name on my doctorate should be **Nicolas**, and several months later, when I walked across the stage to receive my degree, I was announced as **Dr. Melissa Nicolas**.

My initial comfort with my choice of a last name has only deepened in the months following the change. I have not had to void any checks because of involuntarily signing my old last name, and I have not had to pause, even for a second, and think about how I was going to introduce myself to someone. My new last name, my final last name, was a part of me almost from the moment I decided to change it. This name feels comfortable and right.

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