There's More to a Name

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My dad immigrated from Iran to the U.S. with his family at six years old. While transitioning to life in America, one thing stuck out to him: the complications that his name, Sasan, caused him, whether that be identification as foreign, misspellings and mispronunciations, or even just attention for having a "different" name. He shortened it to Sas—easier for people to spell and say. Oftentimes, his teachers would expect Sasan to be a typo for Susan, and his adolescent embarrassment over such a miniscule mistake grew into annoyance. The complications of his uncommon name led him to pick up a random "middle" name to clarify his gender; now, all of his work-related titles have his name listed as "Sasan Samuel."

I always found his adopted middle name funny as his true Hebrew, or second name, is actually Schlomo. I remember teasing my dad when he'd tell us all of the "Susan" related confusion he experienced growing up. Now, I look at his annoyance with more intrigue. I wonder if these simple mistakes manifested into a deeper shame in being different. When my siblings and I were kids, my dad told us how he'd always insisted that we have completely average American names. He never wanted us to deal with the same issues, so when my brother was born in November of 2001, my parents named him Jonathan David, his middle name after my paternal grandfather.

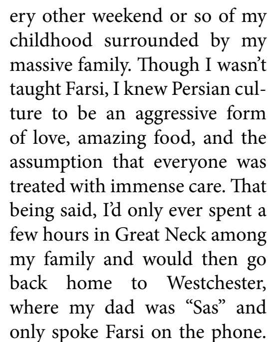
My grandfather, however, only went by David after immigrating to the U.S in 1978. His original first name, Houshang, is only spoken by my grandmother. His choice to claim the name David reflects a common choice of Middle Eastern Americans to anglicize or simplify their names to ease assimilation. I do wonder, however, for all of the seemingly simple name changes—like my aunts and uncles who changed their names from Khatereh to Kathy, Freydoun to Fred, and Afsaneh to Affie—what do people, and their cultures, lose?

My dad was faced with an interesting choice when it came to raising his American-born children. He could have named us after his relatives; Sephardic Jewish tradition, unlike Ashkenazi Judaism, allows you to name a child after someone living, but he knew for years that his children would only go by American names. Immigrants have to decide how and to what extent they immerse their children in their parents' culture, and naming their children is the first choice they make. In the years after the hostage crisis in Iran, just six months after my family immigrated to the United States, the choice to Anglicize Iranian names was easy. For my dad and uncles, the choice to name their children common American names was even easier; out of nine grandchildren, only one of us has a Persian name.

In a post-9/11 era, the option to choose more anglicized or "normal" names was far more common, and safe, for Middle Eastern people of all ethnicities. As those of Middle Eastern origin were increasingly ostracized, with a Pew Research Center study finding that 36% of American adults describe themselves as being more suspicious of Middle Eastern people, giving a child a cultural name seemed counterintuitive to assimilation.[1]

My siblings and I often wonder how our relationship with our Persian culture would be different had we been named after our relatives. Since none of us look Middle Eastern, our ethnicity is often only identified when people ask us about the origin of our last name—if they even go that far. The implications of being given American names shapes the level of our cultural identity, especially as we lack linguistic ties. With our American names, our background is not identifiable at all. The stark contrast between my dad and his brothers' names–Sasan, Babak, and Arman—and the names of my siblings and cousins is telling of my family's means of assimilation. With this transition towards a salient American identity, Persian culture thins by generation. As a result of internalized shame and embarrassment at coming across as foreign, many first generation citizens like my dad seek to make American life as easy and accessible as possible for their children.

I hadn't thought much of my name until I began college a few months ago. Growing up, the only times I've interacted with Persian culture was through my family. My grandmother and her siblings all reside in Great Neck, Long Island, which is predominantly Persian. I've spent ev-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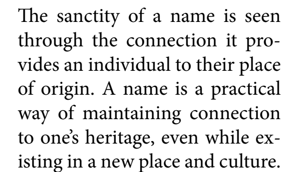
ery other weekend or so of my childhood surrounded by my massive family. Though I wasn't taught Farsi, I knew Persian culture to be an aggressive form of love, amazing food, and the assumption that everyone was treated with immense care. That being said, I'd only ever spent a few hours in Great Neck among my family and would then go back home to Westchester, where my dad was "Sas" and only spoke Farsi on the phone.

At Penn, I have been amazed by the connection I have with my fellow Persian classmates. A lot of our familial antics, traditions, and values are similar, no matter where we grew up. While I have a lot of Persian cousins my age, it's a different experience to connect with people outside of your family who share your ethnicity. As I've met more and more Penn Persians, however, I've become slightly disappointed by my own relationship with the culture. Furthermore, as I've increasingly thought about both my and my father's engagement with Persian culture, I have come to realize that a cultural name provides easy entry to one's ethnic community, especially when far from home.

While I like my name, it saddens me that my dad didn't want to name us traditional names to carry on some semblance of our heritage. My cultural identity derives from my closeness to my family. Since I don't speak Farsi, a Persian name would help connect me to the broader Persian community. It is heartbreaking to imagine my family's cultural heritage evaporating by generation.



The sanctity of a name is seen through the connection it provides an individual to their place of origin. A name is a practical way of maintaining connection to one's heritage, even while existing in a new place and culture.

My dad saw his name as burdensome, an annoyance more so than a celebration of his Iranian-American identity. I understand my dad's thought process behind naming myself and my siblings—we can essentially associate and disassociate with Persian culture at our own discretion. I am confused by how my grandparents made a big deal of us attending family gatherings and living close to one other but didn't emphasize the importance of connecting to Persian culture on our own.

Regardless, I'm incredibly proud of my family's assimilation and all that they have accomplished in America. I am overwhelmingly grateful to have grown up surrounded by my family, and there's no sense of comfort quite like walking into my grandmother's house and greeting the dozens of relatives waiting for me. With this sense of familial pride comes a sense of pride for Persian culture; my love for my family and for Persian culture go hand-in-hand. I wish that my dad and other relatives had been able to maintain a similar sense of pride when it came to my generation.

I'm lucky to now have the chance to explore the Persian and broader Middle Eastern community at Penn as I recognize the true gravity of how my connection to my family and our culture has impacted me.