

What's In A Name? Plenty

For so many reasons, becoming a grandparent for the first time packs a huge emotional wallop. There is, of course, the great joy and relief at the birth of a healthy baby — in this case a sweet little boy, born to my son and daughter-in-law, several weeks ago — and a profound sense of gratitude for having reached this milestone. But in moving up a notch from parent to grandparent, there is also a keen and sudden awareness of one's mortality, a silent but telling shift of links in the generational chain.

Looking through the window of the hospital nursery and seeing the newest member of my family for the first time, searching for familiar features, I felt elated, but with a wistful tinge of sadness, too. I thought of parents and grandparents in our family, no longer alive, who would have cherished this moment. The feeling gave me a renewed appreciation of the tradition of naming a child for loved ones who have died, connecting those who have passed from this world to those just entering it.

What I was not prepared for, though, in all the subsequent discussion of possible names, was the persistent question people kept asking me: "What are you going to be called?"

It's not that I hadn't thought about it before, but it was no longer hypothetical now, and there wasn't any one title I was completely comfortable with.

Of course there was "Grandpa," and variations like "Poppa" and "Poppy," though two friends warned me that after choosing to be called "Poppy," they found that their grandchildren couldn't pronounce the name correctly and they ended up as "Popeye." That's a problem with any name you pick, I've learned.

It's ironic that after all the careful deliberations that go into choosing an appropriate name for one's self, the matter of whether or not the child will be able to say it properly is a complete crapshoot, and mispronunciation accounts for many grandparents being called the weirdest names imaginable.

But never with any complaints, remarkably, because, as I've also learned, grandparents are the happiest group you will ever encounter. "Welcome to the club," I was told repeatedly by friends and acquaintances with huge grins.

"It only gets better," they would say, whipping out the most recent photos of their precious progeny in self-proclaimed "brag books" and laughingly explaining how they came to be called "Numny" or "Shmutzky" or "Klepkee" because the little tyke couldn't say "Grandma."

Choosing a name at this point in life is like directing an ethnic cul-

tural pattern for succeeding generations, quite an opportunity — and responsibility. Friends of German extraction have picked "Opa" or "Oma" to continue the tradition, and there's the French "Bon Papa," which sounds delightful. Do I want to go the Eastern European, Israeli or American route? Growing up, I called my own grandparents "Bubbe" and "Zayde," but always felt those names, while loving, are for more elderly folk with thick Jewish accents. The Israeli terms, "Savta" and "Saba" are perfectly fine, but not for me, since I never used them or knew anyone who did when I was young. And "Gramps" and "Granddad" are "too American," I was told, though being called Dad has never felt alien.

Personally, I preferred "Coach," but my family dismissed that one outright, with my daugh-

ter observing that it was time for me to grow up.

To complicate matters even more, I found that the ultimate decision about a name for my grandson to call me was not really mine alone. It had become a family affair because, as my two younger children reminded me, whatever name was chosen now presumably would carry on and be used by their eventual offspring as well. So suddenly there was a flurry of e-mails going back and forth among my children casting their votes for the most appropriate name for me. (My wife is deciding between her traditional and more modern Jewish identities of "Bubbe" and "Savta.")

"I happen to like the name 'Pops' — grandfatherly but not toooo old," one of my sons wrote.

"I vote 'Grandpa,'" the other offered. "I know it's plain, but I think it works for Dad."

"Poppy" was considered, but my daughter-in-law noted a negative connotation: Poppy was the memorable character on a "Seinfeld" episode who didn't wash his hands before making pizza. So much for Poppy...

"Let's just say it's something in the Pops/Poppa/Poppy vicinity," my daughter wrote, trying to summarize the voting.

And so it goes.

Actually, the first sign of establishing a new identity as an adult comes about when your child gets married, and your new son-in-law or daughter-in-law struggles to figure out what to call you. For some, "Dad" is tough to say because they call their own father Dad, and for others using first names may sound too familiar or casual. My son-in-law settled on "Abba" for me as a compromise, though I admit I of-

fered "Brooks" (in honor of my favorite third baseman) as an option.

Too many of us never get quite comfortable with these artificial titles and some even manage to go through decades of marriage without calling an in-law anything. My favorite story on the subject involved a friend years ago whose father-in-law helped him and his wife move into a new apartment on the upper floor of a high-rise. My friend, unable to address his father-in-law directly by name, was very grateful for the hours spent hauling and shlepping. So he was aghast when his father-in-law, whom he was about to thank warmly, suddenly turned to leave the apartment. How to get his attention without calling out "Dad" or "Simon" or anything?

As his father-in-law got into the elevator, my friend raced down the umpteenth flights of stairs and stumbled into the lobby, sweaty and out of breath, just as his father-in-law emerged. Face to face at last, my friend managed to gasp, as casually as possible, "Oh hi, I just wanted to thank you for all your help."

Surely there must be a better way.

In the meantime, as I grapple with a moniker for this next stage in life, I recognize both the whimsy and gravitas of choosing, in a sense, a new identity. Most of all, I feel blessed, in the words of the Shehecheyanu prayer, "to have reached this season," and, however I am called, eager to establish a loving bond with little Asher Marcus Rosenblatt. □

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