

MY NAME IS ...

An essay by Verna Kwiatkowski

On my birth certificate is the name my parents gave me: Verna Mae Ziegler. At the time and place of my birth – 1933 in Annville, Pennsylvania – Mae was a very common middle name, along with Ann, Marie, Lou and a few others. Really my parents were naming me Verna and the “Mae” was added because it was customary then to give second names. There were a few of us called by both names: Anna Mae, Sally Ann, Rose Marie, Betty Lou. The rest of us just used our first and last names, keeping the middle one as a sort of secret only to be divulged if someone saw the initial we occasionally added to our signatures and asked, “What does that stand for?”

I asked my mother why she and Dad named me Verna, and she said, “Because we liked the name.” So did I! In fact, around the age of ten this was one place where I differed from my classmates. We girls would sometimes talk about our names, with Jean wishing she had been named Betty, Betty preferring Susan, etc. “I’m glad I’m Verna,” I said. “I like my name.”

Problems began to arise for me in junior high school, not with my first name, but my last! Until then, I do not remember being lined up or seated in alphabetical order, but now it occasionally happened. Guess where I ended up at such times? That’s right: at the end of the line! Many people would not have minded being last, I’m sure, but at that time in my life, it bothered me a great deal.

In the ninth grade we had an English teacher who called the roll every day. I can still hear her going down the list calling off the first names (even though we were alphabetized by our surnames). She gave each name a similar inflection until she got to the bottom. Then, raising her voice she would say “AND” ... and then drop my name like a thud: Verna. I felt like everyone else was the same, and I was an extra, different, an afterthought, tagging along at the end of the line.

To make matters worse, being last sometimes meant I was alone as well. If we lined up in two alphabetical rows, one male and one female, and then walked two by two in a procession, I was always concerned that due to some absences I would end up with no available partner. I had such a sinking sensation when that did occur! No one had any idea how I felt being alone and last, for I never told anyone.

How well I remember our high school graduation ceremony! There were fifty students in my class – an even number! At least I would not walk into the auditorium without a partner, much to my relief. Then something else happened: I became valedictorian and was to be one of four to give talks at the ceremony. The four of us would walk in two by two at the head of the procession and then proceed up onto the platform while the others sat at floor level. I would not be last this time! And then it was decided that a female member of our class would sing a solo as part of the graduation exercises, and that she would join those of us who were going onto the platform. I began to feel uneasy. How would all this be worked out? One of our teachers came up with an idea: “Let’s let Verna walk at the head of the procession by herself since she is the valedictorian and the other four can pair up two by two.” How my heart sank as I heard this plan being approved!

And that's the way it was! True, I was not last, but I was alone – I was different, while wanting so much to blend in with the others, to have a partner.

And then I went to college where, more than ever, we were seated in alphabetical order. In most of my classes, much to my delight, was a girl surnamed Zweier! Oh, how I appreciated her! She did not seem to mind being last, but then I never asked her how she felt, either. We had one professor who understood, who had problems with his name as I had with mine, only with a twist: His name started with "A." He told us that all through his schooling he had to sit up front and had hated it, so in his classes he sat people in reverse alphabetical order. Miss Zweier and I got front row seats for math class! I decided then that having a surname beginning with one of the middle letters of the alphabet would be what I would really like. All I would have to do is marry someone who filled that requirement!

In the spring of my senior year I met Leo, a young man whose last name started with "K," a desirable place in the alphabet, in my opinion. We met at a name-tag event, and his was intriguing. He had printed "Leo J. Kwiatkowski" and underneath had added: (Quiet- cow'-ski). "How do you pronounce that?" I asked. "Just three little words. Try it," he challenged. I did, and he said I was correct. Little did I know that just over two years later his name would be mine! (For the record: no, I did not marry Leo for his name!)

Back in the 1950s, when we got married, there was no question about what my last name would be after the ceremony. But some variety was allowed in the rest of a married woman's name. I wondered if I should drop my seldom-used middle name and become Verna Ziegler Kwiatkowski or did I want to be Verna Mae Kwiatkowski? Whichever I chose as a middle name, I would still be called Verna. Would I like my initials to be VZK, VMK or even VMZK? I was leaning toward Verna M. Kwiatkowski, but as it turned out, the choice was not mine to make!

It started seven or eight months before our wedding. I was teaching school in Tucson, Arizona while Leo was finishing college in Pennsylvania. He wrote to me daily, and to my amusement (at first), began addressing my letters to "Miss Verna Mae Ziegler." Then inside, he wrote, "Dearest Verna Mae...." I supposed that this was just a passing fancy, but it was not!

After our wedding we moved to Huntsville, Alabama, where we were total strangers to everyone. Leo was so pleased to introduce me to the people he met: "This is my wife, Verna Mae." Two names did not seem strange to the folks in Huntsville; Verna Mae fit right in with Billie Sue, Mary Belle, Donna Gail and all the other lovely two-part names that they knew. What troubled me was that Leo never asked me if I minded being called Verna Mae. I imagine the thought had never occurred to him.

And then Leo let me know the extent of his agenda. "I'm going to turn Verna Mae into your legal first name," he announced. We had a lot of paper work to do, being newly married. He would put a form in front of me, point and say, "Here, where it says 'first name,' write Verna Mae. Where it says middle name, leave it blank." I did as he said, but not without resentment. The same was true when there were checks to endorse. "Sign your name Verna Mae Kwiatkowski," he would insist and I would snap back, "You don't have to tell me my name!"

Why didn't I speak up when Leo went about changing my first name? I was under the mistaken idea that God required wives to obey their husbands, doing whatever they asked without question, even without discussion. What's more, I had promised to love, honor, and OBEY Leo in our recent wedding ceremony, and considered that my promise was made to God. I truly wanted to obey God, for I loved the One who had become my Lord and Savior a few years earlier. If God wanted me to be quiet and subservient, then so be it. My new husband certainly meant no harm, nor could he know how I was feeling, for I never told him. (Through the years both of us came to see that mutuality in marriage and other relationships is God's plan for humans, but it was not so back then.)

When we moved to New York, my name was more unique. A very common response when I am introduced to people is: "What a pretty name! Are you Southern?" I'll say this: it's not bad having a name that is considered pretty! A unique name has its advantages, too. I am seldom confused with anyone else. And using two names spares me the trouble of explaining or spelling my last name in business or fleeting encounters. So if I am ordering pizza over the phone, for example, I just say I'm Verna Mae, and take no offense if the clerk later calls me "Mrs. May."

I had always thought that Verna was a name that had no nickname possibilities. Not so, I found out in the 1960s. I was working then in a music studio and the manager said my name was too long; he was going to call me Vern. Again I was given no choice, but I didn't resent being given a nickname. It was fun, actually, a special name just for the music center staff to call me. To my students I was Mrs. Kwiatkowski and, yes, they easily learned how to pronounce it. I just used the method Leo had used years ago to teach the name to me!

In 1980 I was going through some difficulties for which I needed professional help. I saw a counselor for about two months, and during that time began to wonder "who I was." I had always considered talk about identity crises to be silly. Imagine not knowing who you were! I was ignorant about the whole subject, too closely merging, I think, people's names with their inner beings. In my confused state of mind during that time, when a new acquaintance would ask me what I wanted to be called, I would say, "Call me Verna Mae or Verna, either one." That really surprised me, leading me to believe I was having my own identity crisis. An interesting side effect of all this muddle was the pleasure – yes, pleasure! – of feeling like I had joined the crowd. I was a human being with problems, no longer the one with all the answers. I was no different from anyone else. I belonged!

Now my identity is no longer tied to my name. I am primarily God's daughter, and he has my name engraved on the palm of his hand. My life, my stability and my security are founded and built on Jesus Christ. That's all the identity I need. As for how I want to be addressed, call me Verna, Verna Mae, Vern or Mrs. Kwiatkowski and I'll answer.

Just last week I was introduced to a woman whose reply was predictable: "Verna Mae! What a pretty name! Are you Southern?" A smile rose from my heart and spread over my face. "Thank you," I said. "No, I'm not Southern. And I'm pleased to meet you."

Verna Mae Kwiatkowski
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P.S. Shortly after we moved into Drum Hill Senior Living Community in January 2004, Leo and I were in the elevator when another couple entered. They asked what my name was and I readily said, "Verna." I was so surprised! That was not something I had planned to do, but immediately I liked it. Again I was in a new environment and Verna was easier to use than my double name. So in this place I am Verna, even to Leo. Friends coming in from "the outside" continue to call me Verna Mae, but I don't mind. I know they are talking to me!

Verna Kwiatkowski
December 10, 2005

P.P.S. Today (Sunday, June 16, 2013) I re-read this essay that reaches far back into the past, and confirmed what I had been thinking for a couple weeks: This story needs to reveal the reasons it is being told, the reasons I held in my mind as I typed, and the only way for that to happen is for me to return to the keyboard! I will do my best to tell you what I have learned from the story about my name, for your encouragement and for the glory of God.

First of all, this is a wonderful example of Romans 8:28 in action. The wording of this verse is slightly different in the various versions of the Bible, but basically it says that God works in the lives of his children in such a way that ALL things eventually work together for our good. The verse does not say that everything in our lives will be good, but that everything becomes useful in the hands of God as he conforms us into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. God proved this to be true in my life over and over again – NOTHING has been wasted, not even my name change!

Above all, I learned this valuable lesson – OBEDIENCE TO GOD should be the highest aspiration in a believer's life. NONE of us are meant to have the final say all the time. Even if the obedience comes from an incorrect interpretation of the Scriptures, as the teaching that God wants husbands to rule over their wives, or if it is given with some resentment and reluctance inside, as when Jonah finally went to Nineveh or I allowed my name to be changed, THE OBEDIENCE COUNTS! God knows our motives; NOTHING done for God, even a cup of cold water given in his name, goes without being noticed and rewarded by God, who is also good at lessening the resentment and reluctance, until they disappear.

God also knows how to correct the wrong teachings we have been living under. In my case, God directed me to an organization called Christians for Biblical Equality. In the late 1980s this group was getting ready for its first conference, to be held in Minnesota. Here in New York I went to Leo, pointed to a magazine advertisement and said, "I think I'm supposed to go to this!" "I'll go with you," he replied. And we did! (Not until now did I see this as an act of obedience!) What a difference the conference made in my life! We continue our association with CBE to this day.

Obedience brings with it a great reward: friendship with Christ! Jesus said we are his friends if we do what he commands. I learned that verse (John 15:14) in my childhood church; it sounded good to me then, and it still does now. What could be better than friendship with Christ? Once when I was deeply disappointed by a dear friend, I vowed that from that time forward my best friend would be Jesus. I have kept that vow! That's why I am never lonely here in the nursing home. I am never alone! Also, my mind is full

of rich thoughts that draw my heart heavenward, like how God used even that painful disappointment for my good!

Here is one more point connecting Romans 8:28 to my story. Remember how I didn't like being last because of my name? In college God not only gave me Miss Zweier as a classmate, but alphabetical seating was the way I met Ginny Werntz, the one who played a key role in turning my hopes toward Jesus and the eternal salvation he gives. Now I can truly say:

I will be grateful
For all eternity
That in God's infinite wisdom,
My surname began with Z!

What a God! What a loving, caring, knowing, understanding God we have! How can we begin to thank him? You know the answer: by obedience! Let's resolve to do it! Amen.

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