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The name game is a blame game

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Barack Hussein Obama II and I share many attributes, the principal one being a dopey name that causes trouble from time to time.

I go by Curtis Seltzer, and when Big Brother insists, Curtis Ian Seltzer.

But “Ian” is too fancy for me. I don’t relate to a spoken “Eeeee-an” and ditch it whenever possible. I don’t care for “Iiiii-an” eeeee-ther.

There’s also this. My birth certificate reads, Curtis Ian *David* Seltzer.

Confusion of this sort is the main reason why The Birthers hate me and have blocked my election to the White House. The other reasons should not be examined in detail.

Why was I tricked out with a conventional “David” amid three otherwise discordant names?

My father’s mother, Molly, was expert at manipulating her husband and three sons, according to survivor testimony. In her eyes, I suspect, her new daughter-in-law, Rena, and I were mere extensions of established fields of dominance.

Molly slipped “David” to The Authorities unbeknownst to my parents...or me. At the time, I was too busy complaining about unwanted deletions to worry about unwanted additions.

Rena, I’ve been told, went bonkers when she saw my certificate. She never forgave her mother-in-law whom she called, “Mater” with a coldness that chilled my bones.

On the other hand, Rena never deleted David from my permanent record card. She did instruct me, however, to never use it. Maybe she liked nursing a grievance.

I don’t think my father ever saw my second middle name as a battle for control. My guess is that he thought the last-minute David would harm no one and might even do me some good. My mother was much shrewder about such matters.

Grandma Molly apparently had a thing for troublesome names.

She saddled my father with “Isaiah,” which he hated more than his nickname, “Zeke,” which he hated more than Seltzer, which he put up with. When his new bride insisted, he changed to “Robert” and went by “Bob.”

Grandma Molly, however, insisted in calling him “I,” short for Isaiah. It made for some confusion when, for example, she would say, “I go to the store.”

I, that is, me, was born not long after my Dad’s conversion from Isaiah to Bob. My guess is Mater felt that my mother had pressured my father out of Isaiah, her name choice at his birth. This may have prompted her to load David onto my defenseless shoulders as a way of evening the score.

What is inexplicable in light of this history is how my parents -- who were aware of the burden of ridiculous names -- slapped me with my nickname, “Corky.”

Corky Seltzer sounds to me like a circus act or a soda pop.

The blame for Corky was mostly mine, my parents explained, thus giving me a grievance for my own nursing.

They claimed that I could not say Curtis Seltzer as a toddler. The best I managed was, “Curra Sassu.” My parents turned Curra into Corky. Why they thought this was helpful to my future success continues to escape me. A high-school friend persists in calling me, Sassu. We’re not close.

Corky worked when I was a kid, and it’s still comfortable with old friends. But somewhere I recognized that I could never run for President as a Corky. This forced me to face alternatives.

A high-school English teacher was the first to call me, “Curt.” Generally, her Curt was connected to a “This won’t do,” which referred to everything I wrote. I began thinking that my name was “Curt Thiswontdo.”

Curt was the wrong name to go with Seltzer, because it’s too easy to turn all of the sharp-pointed consonants -- the ks and ts -- into a goose-stepping, percussive caricature Gestapo Colonel--KKkurt Seltttzzzer.

“Curtis” presented its own problems. Some spelled it as “Kurtis”; others as “Curtiss.”

One college upperclassman started up with “Coitus.” Since Bob Kuttner was similarly though differently vulnerable, I quickly stopped him from both Coitus and the equally distasteful, “Coit.” My parents lacked his type of imagination as do most adults.

One girlfriend insisted on calling me Curtis. She thought Corky was juvenile and beneath my station. Curtis, she hoped, would dress me up some. In private, she liked to drag me through a phonetic gantlet—
“Currrrrrrrtissssss.” There’s no explaining the charm of classy women.

Some friends call me “Seltzer” and just forget about all of the preliminary nonsense. I’m OK with that.

My wife and daughter call me none of the above. To them, I am “Aaah,” which rhymes with “Bah” as in “Humbug!”

Aaah derived from my daughter’s first recognizable words as an infant, “Aaah Daah Daah,” which I claimed referred to me rather than her diaper to which she was pointing. Her second group of recognizable words was: “Stop telling me what to do.”

The name virus I inherited from my grandmother, Molly, ran rampant when it came to my daughter, Molly, who was deliberately not named after my grandmother.

It took months for my wife, Melissa, and I to agree on a name for “Unnamed Baby Seltzer,” as the birthing hospital referred to her. The nurses grew hostile after only a week of inquiring hourly, “So do we have a name yet?”

We finally agreed on Mary Rebecca Wilkinson Seltzer. From the start, we’ve called her Molly.

I voted for “Mary,” because it was simple and out of fashion. I voted for “Rebecca,” because it was simple and out of fashion. I vote this party line, because I am simple and out of fashion.

Melissa voted for “Wilkinson,” because it was her grandmother’s surname and lent some Anglo-Saxon uplift to the Seltzer mess that followed.

No one voted for Seltzer, with which we were stuck.

I rooted for Molly, because it’s one of the few first names that, in my opinion, has a chance of working with Seltzer. Only a few kids at her school couldn’t refrain from “Good Golly Miss Molly.” None called her “Alka,” which I had heard from time to time.

At least, I didn’t stick a “Davida” between Wilkinson and Seltzer.

The Wilkinson grandmother, incidentally, had trouble with Corky. She eventually settled on “Porky,” which in her North Carolina accent came out as “Pokey.”

Operators at the other end of credit-card purchases routinely mangle poor old Seltzer into Sessler, Smelter, Smellzer and “How’s that again?”

They also can’t distinguish between a heard “S” and an “F.” So they turn my humble Seltzer into exotic species like Feltzer, Fellsmore, Fellini and NoseDrip.

It’s the “tz” that stops traffic.

People breeze through a “tz” at the end of a word like “blitz,” but find themselves rudderless in the ethers when navigating a “tz” in the middle.

They come up with Selzer, Settsler and Sizzler. (I like Sizzler, by the way, particularly when it's hitched behind Pokey.)

One operator asked me: "Are you [Seltzer] like Smuckers?"

"Yes," I replied, "I'm often in a jam."

She then asked: "How do you spell Smuckers?"

I've also been asked: "Is Seltzer American?" I admitted that it wasn't. Same is true of Smith and Jones.

My daughter, when she's friendly, calls me "Poppa" or "Papa." This decks me out with a little Old-World, maybe even Mediterranean, cachet. I've also been "Daddy," but never "Pop."

Pop Seltzer, aaaarrgh! There's no escape. Seltzer is a firecracker tied to my tail.

Molly, too, has had run-ins with Fellzor, Smeller, Tzelzer and that crowd. I've offered support and sympathy. Her equanimity exceeds mine. You don't see her writing about this stuff in public.

In the mid-1940s when my father was still trudging along under Isaiah Seltzer, an uncle who had achieved some prominence in the world suggested that he rid himself of that unfortunate burden in two fell swoops—junk Isaiah in favor of "John" and replace Seltzer with "Cosgrove."

Seltzers of my stripe were never good at following sound advice. For reasons concealed by the drifting sands of time, my father stuck with Seltzer. Cosgrove would have done wonders for all of us.

I've met one John Cosgrove over the years. He was wealthy, married and a heavy drinker. He had a hearty laugh and three mortgages.

For reasons I neither understand nor defend, I never changed my name, either completely or by dropping one or more of the objectionable components. My life would have been different as John Cosgrove II, even if Corky hung on for the ride.

Obama substituted "Barry" for Barack in high school and college. He doesn't look like any Barry I know. He may or may not look like a Barack. I confess I know no other Barack, and that goes for Obama, too.

I'm guessing that in elementary school Obama suffered some "OMommas" and at least one "OTrauma" in college.

If Barack Hussein Obama II could overcome his funny name, I should be inspired to do something on behalf of mine.

My problem with John Cosgrove is that you can't write an occasionally humorous column under that byline. Cosgrove has no credibility in my line of work.

Suggestions are welcome.

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