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Letting Go Of Old Labels

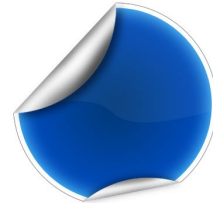
By Roger Jones

As my wife, Jill, and I have prepared for our baby's arrival in May, we have been talking about names and their meanings. It feels like quite a responsibility to choose well, as the name we give our daughter will become a big part of her identity. I remember reading an article a couple of years ago about a family that had named their children after famous Nazis, including Adolph Hitler. I would prefer to offer our daughter a name that blesses, rather than curses, her.

All the baby-name talk has led me to consider the name my parents gave me; Roger is not a family name. (I was named from a commercial in the 70's. Remember the Lava soap commercial, "Wash your hands, Roger"?) I have also thought about some of the other names I was given as a kid, names that were unkind, yet became part of my identity.

It is interesting to me that I can talk all day about sexual issues, my own and those that other people

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Where Grace Abounds
P.O. Box 18871
Denver, Colorado 80218

Office: 303-863-7757
Fax: 303-863-7769

Email:
info@wheregraceabounds.org
Website:
www.wheregraceabounds.org



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are facing, without a flinch. It has become normalized. Yet, sharing the fact that I was called a faggot more times than I can count is particularly painful. I hate that word! It was used against me often as a kid and a young adult. It hurts still to hear it, even when it isn't directed at me.

The message I received through that label was that I was different, and somehow that was bad. In essence, those who called me that name were saying that I was worthless. For whatever reason, they saw something in me that elicited such a response, even before I knew what the word meant. Before I actually understood what they were calling me, I knew it was unkind and intended to be mean. I felt rejected.

While I was getting this message at school, it came at me in a more subtle way at church. No one there was calling me names (for which I am grateful), but the message at church was potentially even more damaging, because it seemed to come from God himself. I don't believe God or anyone else at church intended to make me feel bad. But for a kid who was already confused and afraid that what the bullies at school were saying might actually be true (Was I gay?), hearing Scripture was sometimes troubling. For example, I Cor. 6:9 reads, "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunk-

ards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (NIV).

This passage and others like it were really terrifying to me. It seemed that the Bible was giving me the same message I was getting at school: I was worthless and even God couldn't love me. Of course, there is more to this passage (thankfully). I was so wrapped up in being afraid that I might be gay and, if so, that I would not go to Heaven, that I was unable to hear the remainder of the passage, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God." It wasn't until much later that the fullness of the message of God's love for me was really able to sink in. Honestly, this is something I still wrestle with from time to time. It is hard to forget what I heard from multiple sources and repeated so often.

A few years ago while at an Exodus conference, I heard Kathy Koch speak. She is the director of a ministry in Texas called Celebrate Kids. While she primarily works with children, parents, and educators, she had some really great words for us that year. In one of her talks, she presented the idea that each of us has a Personal Board of Directors. This board consists of the people we give the most credence to, those people whose voices are the loudest and most influential in our lives.

As part of the process of considering who was on my Personal Board, I began to realize that there were some

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Reaching Higher

By Mary Heathman

[Note from Mary: Hello, all! I need this reminder for myself -- I wrote it in January 2001, at a time when I was flying high. Today, 12 years later, I am in a low season and hoping this article lifts many eyes, including mine, to the higher places, the heart and mind of God. I am already encouraged just by the remembering!]

When I was a new believer, my mentor, Dorothy, taught me to “go for the gold,” to “reach for the gusto.” In more spiritual terms, she challenged me to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” Actually, she didn’t so much teach me the theory, but modeled it for me as she lived a life of holy dissatisfaction with the status quo, and constant hunger for more of Jesus and the “abundant life” he promised. Being a part of Dorothy’s life was a continuous faith and vision building experience for me.

I remember once toward the close of one of our coffee times, Dorothy told me she thought I was destined to be an “eagle Christian.” When I asked what that meant, she said she would get me a copy of a tape that would explain it. “In the meantime, just ask God what it means and wait for his answer,” she said.

I did follow part of Dorothy’s advice – I prayed and asked God what she

meant. But as far as the waiting was concerned, I opted to follow my natural inclination to research rather than wait! “Maybe I can find the answer in the Bible,” I thought. (It seemed to me that Dorothy found all of her answers there.)

I wasn’t just curious. My self-image was stung. The only thing I knew about eagles was what I had learned years ago when I took the kids to the zoo—that some types of eagles were endangered species, and that, in captivity, they were the dirtiest of birds.

Since Dorothy had been talking to me about the need to be cleansed by the power of the Holy Spirit, the “dirtiest of birds” image was unnerving. The limited knowledge of eagles, coupled with my mentor’s statement, spurred my thoughts directly toward a rather dramatic conclusion, “Dorothy is telling me that I am going to die soon—in captivity, and in my own filth!”

In the meantime, as my internal drama ebbed and flowed, I began the research. The Bible offered some interesting facts about eagles and what they symbolize in the scriptures. For instance:

- Eagles build their nests and live in the clefts of the rocks at the height of the hillsⁱ as if among the stars.ⁱⁱ

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The Same Shade of Green

By Scott Kingry

Several years ago, I was fortunate to grab my piece of the American Dream and purchase a bit of real estate—and I do mean a bit. My desire was to move closer to work and downtown, which can be expensive. Living on a modest ministry salary, I could only afford a 20 by 20 studio condo. But to me it was perfect. On the 6th floor with a view of the city and mountains, it even came complete with a pull-down Murphy bed. Finally, my childhood, Mary-Tyler-Moore- apartment dreams had been realized.

Tonight like so many other nights, I've woken up on the sofa having fallen asleep with the TV still blaring. It's about 2:00 AM so I imagine my neighbors are thrilled. Now I have to muster the energy to get ready for bed, which really just means pulling it down. But at this time of night, even that feels like a major feat.

On most evenings crawling into bed, I'm glad and grateful to be single. I can flop right down on my back, open my mouth as wide as it can go and let my snoring reach its full volume without the threat of disturbing anyone (hopefully not my neighbors, who are already annoyed). But there are those occasions like tonight, when I feel that familiar pang of loneliness as I pull ole Murphy down. It's not so much the desire for a sexual connection, nor even for feeling the closeness and



touch of someone sleeping near, which are legitimate, God-given desires. What I really miss sometimes is simply waking up with someone, cooking breakfast, reading the paper--in essence, sharing a life and space with another in a special, intimate way. It sure has been a very long time since that has happened.

But I catch myself, still plumping my pillows and smoothing out the comforter, from a full-blown, self-pity spiral. With life being so crazily busy, I'm sure even most married folks don't often get to experience such leisurely sharing. In fact, my mind floods with all sorts of painful, war stories of marriage, and I remember hearing once, "If you're afraid of loneliness, don't get married." I believe it. One married friend shared with me that what was most excruciating for him was lying in bed next to his wife and feeling, not intimacy, but thousands of miles of distance and no way to bridge the gulf. Perhaps going to bed alone, isn't such a bad thing after all, I think. Estranged love seems worse to me than mere solitariness.

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I certainly have reaped many benefits from being single these past decades, experiencing life in a very different way from my married comrades. Most days you can hear me preaching, in my counseling sessions with single 20 and 30 somethings, not to whine about “not finding that perfect person,” but to squeeze every good drop out of this single season. I suggest: travel the world; see and explore new places, different cultures; try every hobby that catches your attention and take those classes you’ve always wanted. Make the most out of the freedom you have and you’ll be a much more interesting person when Mr. or Ms. Right does show up, I guarantee.

Although many marriages suffer difficulties, many come to mind that are working. They are working due to much hard work and faithfulness, but are producing joy along the journey. In all my short time on the planet, I guess I’ve concluded that no one has the “easy road.” No matter what your relational status, there are amazing, happy gifts to relish completely and occasionally some very agonizing crosses to bear. As I head to bed, that sure gives me a lot of peace about myself and the community I’m living life in. Envy really is the “green-eyed monster,” and no matter what side of the fence you’re on, it’s still the same emerald, kelly, verdant, chartreuse, shamrock or whatever your favorite shade might be.

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who needed to resign. Why were those bullies whom I hadn’t even seen or heard from in almost 20 years still there telling me that I was worthless? Why is my inner accuser still there, reminding me of all those old messages?

The best part of Kathy’s talk was that we get to choose who is on our Board of Directors. Why give people the right to speak into my life by default, just because they have always been there? There are plenty of people who love me and think well of me whose voices I should be listening to. Just this past fall, my wife and a number of close friends threw a surprise birthday party for me. There was a room full of people who know me and love me. Why do I sometimes ignore their voices,

love and care to listen instead to my accusers?

Those on our Board should be solid people we trust. They may not always say the things we expect to hear, but they should be able to reflect back to us the truth of who God says we are, rather than condemning lies. It may take time to be completely free of those old board members, but the final vote is ours.

Can you relate to this topic? Are there people/groups from your past or present whose voices are louder than you would like? Would you like to live free from the voices from your past? Who does God really say you are? Who would you like to have serve on your Personal Board of Directors? Remember, you get to choose!

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- Eagles are swift and swoop down on their prey.ⁱⁱⁱ
- When eaglets are of emancipation age, the mother eagle stirs up the nests to make the little birds uncomfortable. Then she hovers over her young and pushes them out of the nest. As they freefall, she then spreads her wings, swoops under them, catching them as often as necessary until they learn to fly on their own.^{iv}
- God uses the way of eagles to describe how He wants to take care of us: “The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach.”^v
- “. . . . those who hope in the LORD will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”^{vi}

One can imagine with all this information, and my bent toward drama, that the scenarios I came up with were bizarre. (I will spare the reader my mental gyrations.) At last, after playing around with the facts for a while and coming up with different scenarios, I gave it up. My speculation merely resulted in confusion and further stress. I couldn’t figure out what she meant, and I was driving myself nuts in the trying.

Finally, I followed the rest of Dorothy’s advice. I prayed some more and waited, though impatiently.

The next week, (yes, I know that it seemed longer when I described it. I used to be a bit compulsive) when we met, Dorothy handed me a tape called “The Eagle Christian” by Erin Baxter. I don’t recall how we spent the rest of our time together, but I know I popped that tape in as soon as I got in the car and listened to it all the way through to the end, though I had to drive around my neighborhood about fifteen minutes in order to get it done.

Erin Baxter was a great story-teller. His parable about the way of eagles paralleling with the way of growing Christians was entertaining and convicting. I laughed and cried, identifying with both the mother and the babies when he described the reaction of the eaglets as their mother prepared to teach them to fly. As she hovered over them and pushed them toward the edge of the nest, they thought “Mom’s going to kill us!” When she swooped down and caught them only to dump them off again, they complained, “Mom’s gone crazy!” And when they remembered how she made such a point of spreading her wings out over them just before she shoved them out, they thought, “Hey, I have some of those, maybe I’ll just stick them out there.” Finally, when they found themselves flying, they forgot all about the fear and pain of the process and shrieked with glee to one another, “Wheee-ee-ee!”

I was moved to laugh, cry, and squirm uncomfortably as I saw myself in the illustrations. And as I listened to the story, I began to see what Dorothy meant.

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The eagle has his eyes set on the highest places. It isn't that she doesn't like this world, but she just has a heart that yearns to reach ever higher, and can't quite breathe free while spending much time in the lower elevations. And when the other birds run for cover in a storm, eagles move out to the edge of the rocks, waiting with excitement, anticipating the powerful wind currents in that storm that will carry them higher and higher. They wait and watch, and at just the right time, they dive and soar, and ride the air-waves in a splendid display of power and freedom.

As Baxter moved from describing the eagle to casting vision for life as an "eagle Christian," I recognized something deep inside of me that always yearned to reach higher and higher, deeper and deeper. A memory from my young teen days came to the front of my mind—an Atlantic Ocean crossing by boat, coming back from Germany. A storm was brewing, and most of the others on deck were moving inside. I found myself inching forward, toward the bow that dipped and rose against the sea. I wanted to be there because that was where the action was with the waves crashing and the wind whipping. I leaned into the wind with an unexplainable longing. I long still, but it is explained in Jesus. It is a longing that is only fulfilled in the highest places—

soaring wild and free in relationship with the Lord.

When people in WGA support groups get in touch with their own deepest and unexplainable longings, I want to draw close to them and whisper, "I think you are destined to be an eagle Christian." I watch for and recognize the signs. I hope I, together with the WGA staff and leadership team, are as careful and prayerful with them as Dorothy was with me. And I hope we get to see sometimes when they "get it," when they finally "rise up like eagles, and run without growing weary."

When people in WGA support groups get in touch with their own deepest and unexplainable longings, I want to draw close to them and whisper, "I think you are destined to be an eagle Christian."

Like the Apostle Paul, I can't claim to "have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on"^{vii} toward the vision and direction. "Friend, go up higher."^{viii} I rejoice as I face this new year and a fresh calendar upon which to write divine appointments with people

who want to soar with the eagles.

Come join us if you can; and please continue to pray for us as the Lord leads.

ⁱJeremiah 49:16

ⁱⁱObadiah 1:4

ⁱⁱⁱJeremiah 48:40

^{iv}Deuteronomy 32:11

^vRevelation 12:14

^{vi}Isaiah 40:31

^{vii}Philippians 4:12

^{viii}Luke 4:10



February In Review

February 17th: WGA Leadership Meeting

February 19th: Mary Heathman spoke at Advocated for Change

Thursday Night Group

February 7th: 36 people

February 14th: 23 people

February 21st: 21 people

February 28th: 40 people

Orientation meeting: 2 new people

March And Beyond

March 10th: Roger Jones will be speaking at Celebration Community Church

March 21st: Monthly Orientation Meeting required for participation in WGA's Thursday Night Group—invite a friend!

April 6th: Intercessory Prayer meeting, 8:00 am at the WGA offices. Come join us as we pray for the needs of the ministry

April 6th: Family & Friends Gathering—stay tuned for more information

April 7th: WGA will be presenting to the youth at Cherry Creek Presbyterian Church

April 12th: Monthly Family & Friends of Sex Offenders meeting

May 25th: Memorial Weekend Picnic—stay tuned for more information!

WGA Staff

Roger Jones
Executive Director

Scott Kingry
Program Director

Mary Heathman
Founding Director

Steve Huston
Chaplain/Church Liaison

Jill Huston
Family & Friends Coordinator

A Measure of Grace
is edited by
Elodie Ballantine Emig

Where Grace Abounds exists to guide and support men and women who seek to understand sexuality and relationship, and to inspire all people to know and personally appropriate God's plan for their sexuality and relationships.

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