E-mail Identities

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Normally, people do not get to name themselves. Parents choose our names and I have known individuals who have rued the parental choices they carried throughout their lives. To their minds, their names (and often their body sizes, features, etc., etc.) are too common, uncommon, interesting, or dull. Few among us have not had a friend or relative who has not spent endless hours complaining of the misfortune of having a name or face that was not masculine or feminine enough, handsome or pretty enough. In my experience, such discontents are sometimes a part of our way of establishing a separate identity from that of our family which named us and passed on their body sizes and looks. When Erik Erikson wrote so insightfully about issues of identity, I doubt that he imagined that there would be such a fruitful way of trying on different identities as there are on e-mail.

On e-mail, we have the choice of totally reinventing ourselves as whatever we would like and in being perceived by people who have never met us in person as whoever our new name implies. This process can make for all sorts of transformations that would be either difficult or impossible in reality. The media focuses on cases of pedophiles or scam artists who create false identities used for immoral/unscrupulous purposes. My interest is in how young people, mostly 18-25, make statements about their identity in choosing e-mail addresses. In this article I write about some of the e-mail identities taken by people in this age group with whom I have had some contact in the last year or two. It is amazing to me that all of these examples come from a fairly small number of individuals. To protect the identity of those involved, I have disguised the addresses of the server and sometimes made changes without disrupting the essence of the address. For example, "@aol.com" may be changed to "@com cast.net" or "@juno.com" and "psyhhstfm3@juno" would be altered to something like "Psychohistory Forum27@aol.com." Numbers may be changed or added to further disguise an address and often vowels are added. Note that e-mail addresses had been limited to eight spaces before the "@" until fairly recently, and they now appear to be limited to 13 characters. However, for the sake of clarity I have lengthened them and added vowels which are often eliminated for the purposes of space. I have also added capitalization to make it easier for the reader who is unfamiliar with e-mail to read the component parts. Thus awywithwrds22@nyu.edu becomes AwayWithWords22@netmail.com.

I find that e-mail addresses ("handles") can be organized under many different categories such as: anti-intellectual (AwayWithWords22@netmail.com), ethnic identity (ItalianStallion7@hotmail.com and FightenIrish253@ru.edu), food (Cookies736@netmail.com), gender (BabyGurl 03579@hotmail.com), mood (Ennui425@msn.com and ImAlmostHappy33@aol.com), nature (Red Sands834@aol.com), nicknames (Honey B289@ hotmail.com and Wags9356@aol.com for an individual with a name like Wagnert), personal characteristic (PeachyChicOne@aol.com), self-image (FadedSilhouette3@earthlink.net and Vanity97@ telusplanet.net), profession (NurseNumber1@juno.com), prophecy (shaman 535@hotmail.com), and worth (BillDaBest721@rr.com). Togetherness with a loved one (TomAndMary33@yahoo.com and GeorgeAndAnna@yahoo.com) is not uncommon and in my limited sample it has been women who have these e-mail addresses. Could such an address be an e-mail equivalent of an engagement or wedding ring?

Hobbies are important and sometimes even lead to professions: AquaAngel628391@aol.com loves to swim, Breakwave7@hotmail.com is a swimming instructor, and PonyGirlRacing651@hotmail.com likes horses and is training to be a nurse. Animal names also serve as ways of establishing identity: PrissyKittyKate56@aol.com and MonkeyFreak 23995@hotmail.com are straight forward examples, while WernDog88@yahoo.com is based on half of the individual's last name and man's best friend.

My first hypothesis about the meaning of an Internet handle is often not what the creator of the e-mail address had in mind. For example, IrisInBalance@comcast.net had a hard time concentrat-

ing on her schoolwork because of disruptions in her personal life, so I wondered if her e-mail was a reflection of a psychic balance she was trying to achieve. When I inquired about why she choose this address, she gave me her business card while stating that she was a physical therapist who helped balance the bodies of her clients. When I read the address TwistedKisses15@yahoo.com I assumed that some sort of a kiss was the main thing on her mind in devising it. However, she reports that in creating it as a fifteen year old she was not thinking so much of kissing in the sexual sense, as of something that would both convey "strange/ weird" ("twisted") and "sweet/cute" ("a kiss"). Gender neutrality is common in e-mail handles: Chris348@aol.com could be Christina, but it is for Christopher, Mel94597@hotmail.com is the address of Melissa rather than Melvin, Pat31638@yahoo.com is Patrick's rather than Patricia's address, and Rob89@aol.com comes from Robyn rather than Robert.

There are also issues of multiple and changing identities. AwayWithWords22@netmail.com also wrote me from the e-mail CitizenSoldierX@ netmail.com. I wondered if he was thinking of joining the army, the National Guard, or a militia group, but he told me that the address was inspired by a book on WWII soldiers and that he wanted to convey something about personal struggle, in the sense of "soldiering through life."

Sometimes more than an e-mail address changes in the search for a comfortable identity. Several years ago my sense of gender identity was confused by a young person with a gender neutral name who worked in the college cafeteria. The first day I saw him he looked male and the next day, and mostly thereafter, he appeared at work dressed as a female who was slightly in need of a shave. S/he was singularly uncommunicative and when I asked a question about the food it felt like s/he was going to bite. Before too long, the public presentation of this quite visible person settled in a female persona. The school scuttlebutt is that electrolysis and estrogen treatments helped to clarify the identity. A few months ago when chatting with her in a lounge area, I received an approving nod of agreement when I commented that she seemed to be much more relaxed than she had been the year before. When I asked her for an e-mail address, it included a totally different, quite feminine name within it.

It was through my work in psychohistory that I first used e-mail and I wanted an e-mail address that reflected my several decades of psychohistorical research and writing. To my astonishment America Online (AOL) e-mail handles conveying the word psychohistory were already taken and yet I did not know or know of the people involved. Before long I discovered that the e-mailer's using them were mostly inspired by Isaac Asimov's fantasy psychohistory. This stimulated the *Clio's Psyche* special issue, "Freud and Asimov: Two Very Different 'Psychohistories,'" (Vol. 5, no. 1: pp. 1, 15-38) to better understand the imaginary psychohistory of a most prolific author. I will conclude with my own e-mail address of pelovitz@aol.com. It reflects a lifelong identity, but little of the imagination of so many of the young people who have come of age in an era of Internet identity.

***Paul H. Elovitz, PhD**, is editor of this publication.* ❑

Holding onto September 11th

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On September 11, 2001 I commuted to class enjoying the comfort of my morning schedule. It was a beautiful day with the sky a lovely shade of blue with puffy white clouds. In fact, I was completely ignorant as to what was going on less than 30 miles from my campus. While I sat in class busily taking notes on Machiavelli, terrorist hijackers were crashing planes into the World Trade Center. My peace of mind was shattered when a professor came running into our classroom and told us, "The United States is under attack - two planes have crashed into the World Trade Center." My thoughts left the lecture subject, fearfully jumping to my father, who worked in Tower 2 of the Center. I rushed out of the classroom while trying on my cell phone to contact him, my mother, and my sister. I got into my car as quickly as possible, hitting redial on my cell phone, I dis-