

Minister's Musings

What's In a Name?

Many folks ask about my first name.

I want to share with you about my name, and I'd love to hear stories about YOUR names.

As your minister, with a call to be both prophetic & soothing, I also want to remind all of us that focusing on someone's name as unusual or uncommon (to our ears or knowledge) can sometimes come from unconscious bias, power, and privilege, and may unwittingly serve to alienate or marginalize. Asking about a person's name can be a personal question, and I might suggest offering something that feels vulnerable or personal about ONESELF BEFORE requesting tender information from a new acquaintance, especially if you yourself come from a dominant or privileged identity group in the USA (typically including identities such as white, male, Protestant, heterosexual, cisgender, able bodied, etc).

That being said, the name "Shams" is a very common name in Arabic. Its literal meaning is "sun." It rhymes with "Moms." If one is being very strict about pronunciation, the final "s" is not like a "z" and is more like the "s" in "snake," but even I rarely pronounce it that way.

People often ask me if "Shams" is short for something, or if my parents were Hippies. Chuckle. No and no. (In my work as a hospice chaplain, I meet new people almost every day. I don't usually ask them to think about their privilege, because they are sad and/or dying.)

I started my life with 3 names, 5 letters each. Diana Aleyn Cohen.

"Diana" is the Goddess of the moon and hunt.

"Aleyn" is Yiddish and means "myself" or "alone," depending on the context, although my UU father, raised Orthodox Jew, claimed to have made it up (according to my UU mother, raised Presbyterian).

"Cohen" is a Jewish class of High Priests.

After being raised UU, I explored many spiritual paths. The one that helped me the most, in terms of psychologically maturing into a sense of adulthood and also feeling connected to a Loving Wholesome Mystery was Sufism (a mystical branch of Islam).

When I felt ready to deepen in commitment on my Sufi path, I was initiated, and was given another (coincidentally 5 letter) name: Shams. In a Sufi context, "Shams" can be a

designator for one who is willing to shine the light on truth, and to metaphorically “walk the steps” of spiritual unfolding. Initiation names are intended as both recognition & aspiration, reminding the receiver of their perceived gifts and goals in spiritual community. I loved it so much, I made it legal (over 20 years ago).

I also really love that the name “Shams” is gender neutral (among English speakers).

People who see me, but don’t know me, are often confused about my gender.

I have to think about this all the time in order to stay safe.

When they would learn my name was “Diana,” very awkward moments would often ensue.

This required a lot of unfair emotional labor on my part, soothing embarrassed strangers, seeking single unit restrooms, some of you know the drill.

I even had some business folks refuse to accept my credit card, believing that it could not possibly belong to me.

Moving through my life with the name “Shams” gives me more power to share tender aspects of my gender reality as I see fit, provides more space and response time. It reminds me that I am bright and strong like the Sun, shining powerfully truthful rays. And it lets me allow my Hospice patients to see me as whomever they need me to be.

Finally, as a half Jew (that’s what we say on the East Coast), I really love having an Arabic first name, and a Jewish last name. Cousins, siblings, semitic peoples. “Jerusalem,” sadly & ironically, literally means “Garden of Peace,” a holy place to which one might long to return. May my name and identity be a prayer for peace, and testify to the holiness of these peoples and our faiths.

Holy Sun of the Truth, Goddess of the Moon & Hunt, Alone, Myself, a Priestess.

I really lucked out in the name department.

Great to meet you; Thanks for asking. Tell me about you?