

Can a name make a person great?

Oct 20 , 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

The story of Joseph and his brothers in the Bible has so much to tell us about our psychological selves. In addition, part of Joseph's tale links rather nicely with a certain someone here at home in Taiwan.

As the anecdotes about the biblical Joseph unfold, keep an eye on the trajectory of his EQ, his "emotional quotient." In Chapter 37 of Genesis, at the age of 17, Joseph is flush with confidence and fairly well bursting with pride. If there is such a thing as a typical spoiled teenager (but I am not sure there is), well, friend Joseph, that man is you.

Joseph suffers from low EQ there at the beginning. He lacks all awareness of how his words and actions affect the people around him. Joseph assumes his older brothers are interested in his dreams, and will be impressed by them. The brothers are flat out not interested, and they are certainly not impressed.

The first dream, you may remember, has Joseph in a position of authority over his brothers, all of whom are of course older than he is. His sheaves of grain rise to "an upright position" in the field. The sheaves of his brothers encircle his, and bow down in respect (37,7). Our narrator notes that his brothers "hated him all the more because of the talk about his dreams" (37, 8)

Joseph's second dream is even more likely to irritate his brothers. Still, he plunges quickly, brashly, and blindly forward. "I dreamt," he says, "the son and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me" (37, 9). Even Joseph's father is disconcerted now. The brothers "were wrought up against him, but his father pondered the matter" (37, 11).

Let us put ancient Israel and the Bible aside for a moment and look at someone closer to home.

"Modesty no barrier for new name" read the title of an article this past Tuesday in a local newspaper (TT 10-15-13 p. 4). The story begins with a gentleman here in Taiwan named Huang Hung-cheng legally changing his name two times. That is the maximum anyone is allowed. Change your name twice, and that's it. Your name then stays with you forever.

Mr. Huang's original name, says the article, means "great man of the world." Well, so, in patriotic zeal, Mr. Huang changed his name the first time to Huang

Hung-cheng, tai-wan a cheng." This means Huang Hung-cheng, A-cheng from Taiwan." Then he ran the ball in for a touchdown.. Mr. Huang added "shi-chieh-wei-jen" to his name, which the news reporter rendered in English as "Huang Hung-cheng, A-Cheng from Taiwan, the great man of the world."

Are any English students reading these words? A man of hope, I'd like to think so. We have here a teachable moment. Let's not let it pass by.

Fix your eyes on that "the" in the phrase "... from Taiwan, the great man of the world." That "the" ought to be an "a."

The main point of this column is not this somewhat silly little goof in grammar. Nevertheless, we can learn from our smallest mistakes in life if we want to. If Mr. Huang keeps the English rendering as "the great man," he is claiming there is only one great man in the world, and he is that man.

A simple "a" before "great man" allows for the possibility that there are others who are also great, perhaps just as great as Mr. Huang, but, you know, great in their own ways.

We were thinking about Joseph in Chapter 37 of Genesis at the top of this page. Chapters 39 – 44 continue and complete his story. Countless twists and turns occur, and many an unexpected repetition of this and that key event as well. And yes, we have more dream talk.

It turns out in the end that the sheaves of Joseph's brothers do indeed stand around his sheaves and bow, and that the sky above pays Joseph tribute as well. Joseph is a great man at the end of the story, not the only great man in the world, but still a great man.

A slight grammar mistake in words about Mr. Huang, that other great man, has given us the chance to consider what makes people great. This is no small or trivial question to ponder.

Surely it is not our task to judge whether we are great in any way. That is simply not for us to decide. At the same time, there must be more to greatness than developing a certain name for ourselves. There's got to be more to it than that. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. The Taiwan man in this column has changed his name 2 times because he wanted to "live up to the expectations" of an impressive name. Do you find some of your personal identity in your Chinese name? Does your actual name mean something special to you? If you use an English name, is that name important to you in a personal way?
2. Mr. Huang wants to be "a great man in the world." Describe one characteristic about a person that you hope people may use one day when they describe you. Do you want to be "great" also? What does greatness mean?
3. The English news reporter here made a mistake in the use of the word "the," and the writer of the column tried to draw out a philosophical lesson from that language error. Do the words "the" and "a" give you trouble in English? What is the difference between these words?

**本文章僅供讀書會參考使用，非經原作者同意，請勿任意轉載。