



can I have your  
**Name?**

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a short story about change

by Keith Gordon

## CAN I HAVE YOUR NAME?

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**T**he Starbucks barista asked me a simple question, "Can I have your name?"

She was not trying to pry, nor was her query meant to be an existential identity pop quiz. The request was just part of a well thought through business plan designed to make the experience of buying an expensive cup of coffee a little more personal to the customer, and also a practical way of connecting me to the correct order in a busy Vancouver café.

In a moment of random rebellion, I calmly answered, "Keith." I spoke with assurance, as though that was exactly how I had been answering the question my whole life.

The barista had never met me, and she accepted me at my word. Fortunately, there is strength in weak ties. We didn't need to know a lot about each other to have a business transaction. When I gave my

name there was no strange stare, no awkward silence, no loud protestation to my answer. She just wrote *Keith* on my paper cup and in a few minutes, I walked towards the table where my coffee partners waited, smug and satisfied with my successful caper.

I was in the habit in those days of meeting my social impact investment partners for two hours of coffee talk every Tuesday. We were a mixed stratum. My coffee mates had deep pockets and my pockets were, well, mostly empty. While they had been busy making a king's ransom, I had been living a peripatetic lifestyle, seeking private and self-sufficient solutions to social problems in Canadian inner cities and African village settings. My life was one-part amateur anthropologist, one-part rebellious ex-clergyman, one-part community do-gooder and one-part unleash-able family man.



Details are rarely missed on the very rich and so it was not long before the challenge came. One of the philanthropists glanced at the name written on my cup.

"Why do you have Keith's coffee?"

A powerful man was looking for those quick and direct answers demanded by the world of business. The inquisition had begun. The business philanthropists at the table knew what the barista did not. They knew my name was Gordon Wiebe.

*Gordon* being a deliberately chosen Anglo-let's-give-our-kid-a-chance-to-blend-in sounding first name that my Mennonite parents chose instead of Abraham, Cornelius, or any other common name from their culture. My parents spoke little English until the Canadian school system forced it on them at age six in a small southern Manitoba village and I would have forgiven them for giving me a name from a foreign culture. But they had mercy and so Gordon it was. And *Wiebe* being my family name, which is currently a common first name in Holland, the nation from which my persecuted ancestors fled 400 years ago when freedom of religion was not a thing.

What the philanthropists didn't know was that my middle name was Keith, that superfluous hidden name friends and acquaintances rarely know about. Keith was the name I always secretly preferred when I was growing up but being a good and compliant kid, I never vocalized my true feelings until a random barista asked me an innocent question and I chose to equivocate in a silly game of what's my name.

I was in it too deep now to back out and I had to think of a good answer to satiate these dominant men. I knew my role at the table. I was the court

jester. I was there to entertain—a curious anomaly, a man not motivated by money and thus a safe haven for the largesse of the rich and powerful. I tried not to disappoint.

"I am doing an experiment," I said as scientifically as I could, making up an interesting explanation in the moment and thereby believing as does a mouse that this time the cat will let it go. "I am trying to test the plasticity of the human brain and I am going to see if I can get everyone I know to call me by my second name."

The mouse seemed to please the cat for the moment—more entertaining conversation by an ex-clergyman who admitted one day in 2002 he was spiritual, but not religious, and randomly moved into a rooming house in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside—a community where homelessness, drug use, and untreated mental illness is on display for the world to see.

My life in a rooming house was about trying to understand why people in a rich country were living in cycles of poverty and that coffee meeting was 10 years ago. For some reason I kept the gag going. Now every person I know calls me Keith, except for my closest family members. Families can be stubborn. Even I think of myself as Keith now. I guess the brain is plastic after all.

I can't say the experiment was easy. I thought many times of putting an end to this childish prank. But most friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, out of

kindness and courtesy, politely went along with my nomenclature nonsense. Even the philanthropists tried to play along. At least it didn't stop them in 2013 from donating two multi-million-dollar rooming houses they owned to the have-not charity I had co-founded in 1983.

Although it was interesting to me that we humans can retrain the neuro pathways in our brains to find new routes for old memories, a greater thought lingered—why would I even pretend to change my name to prove the point? To be honest, most of the time I didn't really know why. But, in the exercise, I did learn something. I learned that the way things are, are not the way they have to be.

Only a few people I knew well objected to calling me Keith and at first refused to go along with my Prince-esque imitation. But even these opposers reluctantly altered my given name in their memory banks when they saw they were in the minority. Admittedly, it could easily be argued I was being a pain in the butt to everyone I knew for no valid reason.

Harsh opinions of my name change stunt were always close to the surface. In an exchange with one of my peers the inquisition again raised its head.

I was having one of many coffee meetings with the former Head of Psychiatry at a large Vancouver hospital. Our ad hoc meetings were partly friendship and partly working meetings as we tried to figure out how to solve the logistics of his "doctor

in the house" experiment. He was working with interns to take psychiatry out of the confines of a hospital setting and into the places where people silently suffer in communities which belie Canada's claim of universal health care.

"What's up with everyone calling you Keith?" challenged a man of letters who had made a career of knowing the human mind and its tendency toward deterioration in a stressful world. He added, "The only people I know who change their name at your age are showing signs of mental illness."



Oh no. A smart doctor's spotlight was on me and shining brightly. But what happen next was one of those experiences when the gods of fate glance your way for a just a moment, at the perfect time. To escape the all-too-wise investigation of my psychiatrist friend, I asked him a question meant to deflect the attention off myself and on to him.

"Your first name is Bill, is that short for William?" I asked. "Did you decide to modify your name too at some point?"

There, the focus was off me. Again, the mouse escapes. But his answer came as a complete surprise.

“Well,” he admitted after a revealing pause, “Actually my first name is Gordon, but I always preferred my middle name, William, which eventually became Bill.”

Perfect.

I started a joke and the whole world was laughing. For many years I accepted that I was the joke, but suddenly I was not so sure. We are all pretending; it is just that some of us do it with more confidence than others.

It was my time to get bold. Time to make the name change official. Time to go on the offensive.

But, before we go any further in this strange tale, I should tell you that there was actually more to my spur of the moment plasticity experiment story than the impact investors understood.

In 2002, I had randomly moved into a 100-year-old rooming house near Hastings and Main in Vancouver. I didn't know it at the time, but the rooming house had been purchased by one of the philanthropists whom I would eventually meet for coffee talk every Tuesday.



That same philanthropist saw me one day shortly after I moved in, and he asked what I was doing in his rooming house. He told me I didn't look the part. I explained that I was an ex-clergyman with a story to tell. He gave me an unbelieving look but said we should meet one day for coffee. I didn't know it at the time, but he had a story to tell me too.

When we eventually met, we exchanged our narratives. My story was about searching for understanding on why people in a rich country are suffering from poverty. His story was about making a lot of money only to become disillusioned with wealth and so he bought and renovated one of the most notorious rooming houses in Vancouver without knowing how he would manage the project over the long haul.

I didn't know a philanthropist owned the building when I randomly picked his rooming house, but I did know that chance favours the connected mind, to quote Steven Johnson, et al.

At the end of the coffee meeting, he reached into his pocket for his wallet. He then symbolically stretched it out toward me and said, "Here, you might as well take this now, you are going to get it eventually anyway." It was a prophetic illustration because eleven years later he and his wife sold the building to the charity I was leading for 50% of fair market value.

In 2005, after three years of rooming house living, I began to collaborate with my nephew, Mark

Alexiuk, who was studying complexity theory at a Ph.D. level. My own studies years earlier were in the humanities, and I was, at best, an amateur science enthusiast. But I did have a long-standing interest in the processes behind self-organizing systems, having lived previously in Tanzania, where many Canadian social ills didn't exist. I was always curious about the inherent ability of sub-Saharan Africans to link families and villages in such a way that a harmonious social whole was always greater than the sum of the individual egos which made up the society.

My nephew's explanation of emergence and complexity theory, replete with reading suggestions, allowed me to understand how the universe was constantly transforming itself naturally from chaotic to organized states, and then disorganizing those states and reorganizing all over again.

We even partnered on a CMHC research effort which explained how chaotic conditions in a rooming house could self-organize given the right conditions. With my nephew's tutelage I discovered that humans could learn a lot from ants who ordered their colonies through random interactions which found patterns amongst countless individual actions that led to the feedback loops. Apparently, flexibility and ignorance are useful to ants and all emergent systems because it allows their collective brains to do what individual agents in a system could never accomplish.

A knowledge of self-organizing systems was helpful in future years to our charity's attempts to scale affordable housing development in every province and territory in Canada. The idea was to use a bottom-up, decentralized system, to let tenants and new housing starts emerge simply by improving links between Canada's 3,500 municipalities, over 1,000 indigenous governmental bodies, and innovative funding by governmental and philanthropic partners.

The universe does not self-organize without challenges. And getting up close and personal with tenants in a rooming house was a difficult experience. In those days, as I partook in the sacrament of living with people in poverty, I was saddened by how very lonely life could be in a rooming house.

The heaviest moments I experienced in my stay in a Vancouver version of Hotel California was always the quiet death of quiet people behind unopened rooming house doors. As if it wasn't enough that many of my neighbors suffered through prenatal, neonatal, and early childhood trauma, lived through the tortures of residential schools, and were compelled by the systemic forces proposing relief of haunted memories through the analgesic solution of drugs and alcohol, now they lived out their remaining days without family and friends in an eight by twelve four-bit room.

If you ever wondered what becomes of the broken hearted, you needn't keep wondering.

When I witnessed the silent suffering of my rooming house mates in those early years, a question haunted me, "When a soul falls in a lonely forest, does anyone hear the sound?"

Well, apparently municipalities can still hear. I learned that the unclaimed remains of persons who succumbed in the municipality of Vancouver are welcomed by the municipality of Surrey. In the Victory Memorial Cemetery, to be precise. After cremation at Victory, the ashes of the broken hearted are placed in low-cost urns and buried in tiny, low-cost plots.

One day, I visited Victory where they lie, no poppies there row by row to mark the spot. In fact, no markers at all save the birth names printed on temporary-looking place holders.

After the visit, in an expression of solidarity, I bought a tiny burial plot for myself for \$2,800 amongst the death rooms of the forgotten. This is where I wanted my remains to dwell when the time came for my journeys to end.

Then I paid \$800 and ordered a permanent tiny grave marker for myself, etched with my birth name. If you care to drop by Victory Memorial and if you look far away from the nice part of the graveyard and search down near the wire fence at the back, you will find the final homes of many people who ended their lives in a Vancouver rooming house. They ended how they lived,

together in their own small forgotten world at the bottom of the hill.

You will also see my future grave marker, nestled among my comrades, written in my birth name...

*Gordon Keith Wiebe*  
1957 -

There was no expiry date I knew of at the time.

I did not know it then, but shortly after etching my birth and death name in stone, the idea to change my name would come to me in a random Starbucks moment.

I am not sure when it first occurred to me that I could use my daft name change experiment as a more profound metaphor to explain how Canada could help its affordable housing shortage. For a long time, the eccentricity of the name change was just about a home-grown brain placidity experiment.

Gradually, I became aware that Canada had all the ingredients to solve its affordable housing crisis, but there was not enough flexibility in the component parts. I believed Canadians could modify the existing top-down affordable housing paradigm that has CMHC funding passing through provincial and territorial housing authorities, and then mostly into the waiting hands of for-profit developers, who have the good intention of including affordable

housing in their focus but struggle to understand marginalized communities.

I pondered the three mature and capable parts of our society that could work together in different ways to produce more affordable housing; namely, flexible government, benevolent business, and development-minded non-profits.

I started to think changing the word order of my three names could illustrate the need in my nation to change the way government, business and non-profits worked together to help its struggling citizens.

It was time to take a silly joke and make it official, a real name change.

So, I Googled name changes in my province and found out it was a two-step process. First, get fingerprinted by the police and then visit the provincial department of Vital Statistics and pay \$137 to make a name change official.

Emboldened by my new and improved plan, I made an appointment to visit the downtown detachment of the Vancouver Police Department.

"What do you want your name to be?" asked the friendly police clerk behind the plexiglass. "I want to change my name order," I answered in a pensive tone, slightly unnerved to be in a police station trying to improve on a small Starbucks lie that just kept on growing.

“What order do you want?” she asked logically, looking down at the birth name on my driver’s license.

“I want my name to be, “Keith Wiebe Gordon” I heard myself say, my voice sounding a bit stronger this time.

"We can help with that," she assured with a slight smile and only a hint of curiosity. I was in Jane Jacob’s neighborhood again, an urban space where that now familiar strength of weak ties routine reduces stress by making it only somewhat necessary to understand the why of what others are doing. You mind your own business in Jane’s world. As the Vancouver Police Department lasers recorded the unique lines and crevices of my fingerprints, I began to sense that soon the name change joke would be justified with cold statistical facts. I would have a new legal name, or at least a new name order. I could formally re-order the chaos I caused 10 years earlier with a new driver’s license, a new passport, a new bank account—all a lot of needless work according to my polite friends and acquaintances, who could never seem to completely let my bizarre idea go without a challenging comment.

After the fingerprints were duly checked with Canada’s most wanted list and I was cleared for the next step, I visited my local Vital Statistics office. I handed the clerk my name change application, together with my fingerprint receipt. She seemed

neither curious nor disturbed. We were at arm's length, further apart than an elbow's length Jane Jacob's relationship.

After some quiet typing into her computer and another \$154 out of my pocket, she handed me a long list of government agencies I would have to contact after my name change was official. When I looked at the list, I could see why clear-thinking people don't change their names for no good reason.

"We are all done," she said finally, sounding sort of relieved. Then with in a flat tone she added, "If you don't hear anything from our head office that is a good thing. No news is good news."

These last words didn't comfort me.

As I left the office of Vital Statistics, I suddenly didn't seem so vital. Why was no news good news? Shouldn't all this foolishness at least be tabloid newsworthy? What had I done? Was I Don Quixote redivivus, foolishly tilting at windmills?

My thoughts suddenly became irrational. I wanted the Vital Statistics' head office to call me immediately and object to my name change on the grounds that it was not a thing reasonable people do in Canada. I wanted someone to care in a non-arm's length way. In a Walter Mitty moment, I wanted friends and family members to be waiting for me outside on the sidewalk with signs picketing



this madness and making me change my mind. I wanted to be a normal person again.

Then I remember the lonely souls in rooming houses behind closed doors, the lonely grave sites of the brokenhearted, the growing number of homeless persons on our streets, seniors in my country sleeping in shelters, the challenges of new Canadians trying to put down roots in a nation where the gulf between the haves and the have-nots is widening.

In that moment of remembrance, I suddenly felt better. There was an existential purpose in this new identity. My posture straightened and my steps quickened as I joined the semi-anonymous ranks of my fellow Canadians on the sidewalk. I did not feel apologetic any more for the brain exercises I had given to so many people over a seemingly needless name change. It was important to me, and to a quest to help suffering Canadians, and this was sufficient.

Sometimes we do things now and find out why later.

I think I will leave my grave marker at the Victory Cemetery as it is. I will let Gordon Keith Wiebe rest in peace and let the universe meet someone new.

Let me introduce you to Keith Wiebe Gordon.

Mr. Gordon to the those at arm's length.

You can call me Keith.