

### **Angel Invitation Number Four: Name What's Happening**

“OK, Catherine. We're all done.”

I am visiting a doctor's office. It is one of the few places in my life where people call me Catherine. Instead of communicating an atmosphere of informality and comfort, the name signals me that I am in the midst of strangers.

If, when answering the phone, I hear the caller ask for “Cathy,” I am thrown into confusion. Is this a long-lost friend, who knew me before I changed my name (in a rush of teenaged independence) when I was sixteen, or is it a wrong number? The pause before I answer carries thirty years of memories. Names are important.

I've been wrestling for weeks to describe the process of naming that works, for me, as an invitation to angels. In the world of Earthsea, fantasy writer Ursula K. LeGuin taught her wizards: “Magic consists in this, the true naming of a thing.”

Every now and then, I realize that I have been feeling additionally tired lately, that my soul has been in shadow. My unconsidered response is to continue on, hoping the weight and darkness will lift. Sometimes they do, but often they don't. Instead, I need to discern what is happening.

First I have to be willing to seek an answer. I have to take time alone, in the quiet. I need to communicate with myself (or maybe my monsters and angels are communicating with me). I need to talk aloud or write or paint. As Captain Kirk used to say, I need to “open a channel.” Then I need to have patience as emotions flare, words fail me, colors muddy. Eventually the words and emotions slow. I remember to breathe. I start recognizing this place and naming it.

Many people living with chronic illness go years without a diagnosis. Certain diseases, including MS, seem to defy definition. Symptoms come and go like the odd noise your car refuses to make when the mechanic is listening. Friends and family suspect the weakness, weariness and numbness occur too conveniently. Surely, it's all in your head. Getting a diagnosis of chronic disease, while never good news, is at least some relief. I'm not making it up; I'm not crazy; I'm not lazy; I am not alone. There is a name for this collection of physical discomforts. A correct diagnosis brings with it insight into the past, implications for the future and recommendations for action in the present. In those ways, it is a True Name.

Naming is a skill and a practice. The counselor who recommended that I wear a rubber band around my wrist was giving me practice in naming my emotions. Disregarded, they came out where they could, often zinging innocent bystanders. (It's an ongoing issue. I still imagine that Real Adults Don't Show Big Feelings and, attempting to be grown up, I try to bury my feelings under layers of stoicism.) Each time I saw the rubber band, I had to put a name to my feeling. "I was just concentrating and didn't feel anything" was not an allowable answer. Like today's preschoolers, I had to boil it down to mad, sad, glad or afraid. This relieved me of the illusion that, though I felt frustrated and annoyed, I did not feel angry. All three are variations (and, yes, I'll argue in favor of distinctions) of "mad" and it helps me to know if I spend most of my time in that territory.

Different names take me in different directions that may lead to different actions. Often, when I am sad, I pretend I am angry. If I'm irresponsibly angry, I get to rant and rave and have it be someone's fault. That is energetic fun for me. Even responsible anger takes me to enjoyable action: dancing or drawing the energy, advocating for change, inventing a new way of doing something. If I'm sad, what I need most is to cry. I don't like to cry (probably some hold over from childhood), but I'm usually better for it. It clears my emotional being like a summer thunderstorm on the prairie clears the air. Drawing—or even ranting—in sadness doesn't work for me.

Discovering a True Name, I am left in a resourceful place. Searching for the name, I begin to discover what I want...or how I want things to change. A True Name gives me a sense not only of "what," but also of how big and for how long. I have an idea of what I can do next. Monsters sometimes suggest names that leave me squashed flat by despair. Loser. Cripple. Idiot. Monsters make moments into monuments. They make false names look true. If I am left drained, exhausted and without hope, I have not found a True Name.

Naming helps not just for the main monster, but for the attendant demons as well. My writing is one big exercise in naming. Describing my experience helps me understand it better. This may be part of the magic of "talk therapy" and support groups, where I tell my story to listening ears and open hearts. I weave a net of words around the chaos and uncertainty, limiting their movement and giving me some sense of mastery.

The control is illusion and it isn't. Choosing words, I am choosing my thinking and my attitude. They are the most powerful weapons I have with which to respond to this disease.

We can help each other in naming—others certainly offer a different perspective—but we have to be careful not to impose our names on someone else's reality. From twelve-step literature: "We have not found it helpful to place labels on any degree of illness or health. We may have different symptoms, but the underlying emotions are the same or similar. We discover we are not unique in our difficulties and illnesses." There's a distinction: names and labels. A label is something slapped on the outside without understanding. A True Name emerges through intimate knowledge. If I try to name *your* experience, I am likely to label it. If I name *my* experience, you may gain insight into yours.

At the doctor's office, I rarely bother to correct the staff when they call me Catherine. My life is more assertive. If I call pieces of my self or my life the wrong names, my angels are quick to correct me.

"I'm just tired." No I'm not, I'm angry.

"It's just MS fatigue." Made worse by the fact that I haven't eaten in twenty hours.

"Alexis is behaving like a child." She is one. I am behaving like a child, too and I'm an adult who is feeling five years old and wants a hug.

The correction doesn't always happen that fast and that's OK too. If I insist on calling something the wrong name long enough, my sense that Something is Wrong will increase in size until it demands attention.

In the process of sifting through names, I am forced to admit I don't know The Right Answer. I have to practice accepting and entering the mystery of my life: when I look at what I think is one small facet of my life it expands until it includes the whole universe. Naming draws me into holy space and holy space into me.

I used to read descriptions of prayer and discernment and get jealous. I thought the people who practiced discernment were getting explicit instructions from God. (Maybe they are. Good for them!) Only recently have I begun to value the *practice* of discernment, the *practice* of naming. It is a microcosm of the creative process. First, I enter into the uncertainty of not knowing. Then, I have to sidestep the monsters who

gather to shout their traitorous suggestions. I make a choice, being willing to be wrong. I take action and wait for correction or relief. Instead of God sending an answer, God is asking questions. Explicit instructions would make me more confident; Naming increases my compassion.

While naming helps me separate myself from the disease, it also pulls me into relationship with it. To name it, I must pay attention to it and my experience of it. I watch as its strength or importance grows or shrinks, as sensations move from here to there, as its expression becomes harder or softer. Naming allows my monster to be Other, but it also claims it as mine, to know and to accompany, to have and to hold. We will dance together until death do us part.