

Name game: Grace is making a comeback

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

As family names and old religious stand-bys continue to lose favor, parents are spending more time and money on the issue [of names for their children] and are increasingly turning to strangers for help." The *Wall Street Journal* (June 22) goes on to say that numerologists are paid up to \$475 to test a favorite name. Hundreds of books and thousands of Web sites offer help. It's a market economy, marketers reason, so why not market names? We read: "An unusual name gets people's attention when you're searching for a job." Some choices can be embarrassingly wrong. One couple, we read, chose **Zoe Rose** and then found that it belonged to a British porn star.

Overlooked in that news story was something we learned in 1960 from Roger Price and Leonard Stern's *What Not to Name the Baby*. They argued that "your name is responsible for all the silly things you do" and that you grow into a name or change it. **Richard** is a different person from **Dick** or **Ricky** or **Ritchie** or **Rick** or **Rich**. **William** is not at all like **Will** or **Willie** or **Bill** or **Billie**.

I couldn't resist peeking: "**Marty** hangs around ranches and ski resorts with Bernie. They don't ride or ski. But they wear the clothes and drink margaritas." That's a Jewish Marty. **Martin**? "Martin is married to Hortense and has a lot of 'get up and go.' He goes bankrupt several times, but . . ." You can look up more, if you can find this deservedly out-of-print book.

Having some sense of mission and stewardship, and wanting to help couples who might be on the verge of spending \$475 for professional name suggesters, I wanted to come up with alternatives without inventing new names, which don't offer much. In the *Journal's* cartoon illustration for its story, there are piles of names being offered and, one hopes, rejected: **Jolt**, **Dune**, **Zayden**, **Dude**, **Wade** and **Fresno**.

The *Journal* noted that "old religious stand-bys continue to lose favor" (**Mary** dropped from first place a few years ago to 84th last year). Why? Have parents

exhausted the possibilities in the Bible? It is possible to make many pronouncements on the times by doing what Bible believers ought to do: go back to the Book.

My own first candidate would be **Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz**, which means “the booty and the shame are imminent” (Isa. 8:3). Very appropriate for our nation now.

Those who favor hyphenated last names would do well to avoid hyphenated first names, like **Merodach-Baladan** (Isa. 39:1), which is the Assyrian for “Merodach [a god] has given a son.” Still, in these days of wild pluralism, when spirituality is in vogue and we give equal time to all gods, why not honor Merodach?

Members of the Christian right who put messages on bumper stickers could influence more curious citizens if in the act of naming children they mourned the fact that the old Supreme Court “took God out of the schools.” They could reach back to Hosea 1:6 and 8 to name twins: **Lo-Ruhamah** and **Lo-Ammi**, the one saying that the Lord will no longer have pity and the other to signal their anger over the fact that we the people have broken the covenant and God now looks at us and says, “Not my people.”

Still, mindful of the fact that children have to grow up with a name (or as Price and Stern playfully show, live into a name), those are cruel choices. We might do better to save \$475, work to boost **Mary** back from 84th place, and startle status seekers by pointing to original names that do survive. For example, in 14th place in 2005 was **Grace**. Amazing!