

Public Profile as an Author: To Use One's Own Name or Not

By Don Little, with essay reflections from: L.D. Waterman, Phil Parshall, Kate McCord, Bill Musk, Nik Ripken & Georges Houssey

When I first began contributing articles to SEEDBED I was living in Canada and serving as the director of our mission's Canadian office. At that time, it made a lot of sense to use my real name since I was in little danger of exposing anyone in secure situations nor was I likely to come to harm myself.

However, several years ago as I began writing *Effective Discippling in Muslim Communities: Scripture, History & Seasoned Practices* (IVP, July 2015), I prayerfully revisited publishing under my name or using a pseudonym. I wrote to more than half a dozen field leaders and solicited their input. As I prayerfully absorbed their counsel, I came to the conclusion that I ought to publish under a pen name. If I did not, my ability to travel into sensitive regions without exposing colleagues to harm would be significantly reduced.

After consulting with my family we settled on my new publishing identity – a Scottish name that incorporated elements of my actual name into a new combination. In negotiating the contract with the publisher we signed an agreement whereby I would only ever be referred to by my pseudonym and no pictures of me would ever be used in the publicity for the book. I was all set and I initially felt peace about this decision.

As the months of writing extended into years, I became increasingly uneasy about this decision to hide my true identity behind a penname. Once, when I posted a review of a book on ministry to Muslims to Amazon.com using the penname I had planned to use for my book, the brother whose book I reviewed rebuked me and challenged me to rethink the negative impact my use of a penname would have on my ability to challenge young BMBs to be bold! What was I modelling for them? They have no option of hiding their true identity under a protective name.

As the completion of my book approached I again wrestled through in prayer which way to go. In the end, as can be seen by the use of my real name on my book and by my clear identity on our Lilius Trotter Center website, I chose to publish using my actual name. Why this reversal? There were many factors that fed into the decision, such as an increasingly public profile already established on the internet and the fact that I was already known as a teacher of Islam at Houghton College. But probably the biggest and deciding factor was my desire to be a model for my brothers and sisters in Christ living in Muslim communities. I want them to know that I am putting the security of my own life, my family and my career into God's

hands and I am choosing to be bold in identifying with Christ just as I am calling them to be bold in identifying with Christ and being willing to suffer whatever persecution they may face.

As we planned this issue of SEEDBED, it seemed that discussing this topic fits very nicely into the larger question of how we are to live and minister in these volatile times and places.

Does my decision to use my real name in publishing a book on discipling believers from Muslim backgrounds imply that everyone who uses a pen name is making the wrong decision? As you read the six reflections below from five men and one woman who have chosen to write with a penname (three of them) or to use their real names (also three), I trust that the seriousness of the issues involved will become clearer. I believe that in this, as in similar issues, we are called to make the best possible decision we can before God, seeking to be faithful to God's call on our lives as we understand it. My hope is that the six perspectives collated here will help us all make wise decisions and encourage us to be patient with those who come to conclusions different than our own. May God grant us great wisdom and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in this and in all other areas of obedience.

Using a pseudonym does not compromise my ability to minister long-term in a Muslim nation

by L.D. Waterman

When I first wrote an article for publication, I was working as an English teacher in a Muslim-majority country. My article, for publication in a journal having 'mission' in its name, was about a province in my country with numerous unreached people groups (UPGs), and an assessment of needs for reaching them with the gospel. It seemed quite possible that my 'extra-curricular' activities in getting the gospel to Muslim UPGs within the country could easily compromise my ability to remain in the country long-term. A large number of my writings since then have focused on issues related to bringing the gospel to Muslims, so I continue to appreciate the ability to present my ideas openly, without compromising my ministry on the ground.

In addition to concerns for my own longevity on the field, I also have not wanted to compromise the safety of my co-workers, either expatriate or national. Truthfully, though, in my context that has been a secondary concern (much less likely to be problematic).

Although I'm careful not to pair (or allow others to pair) my real name and pen name on the internet, I am not fanatical about keeping the two separate. At missions-related conferences, I will sometimes put both names on my nametag, so participants can easily identify me as the person known by both names.

I have now changed my public identity to ‘writer’, and I do more traveling in and out of various countries. I’ve only once had an immigration official ask me where my writing is published. I told him the initials of the journals my articles have been in, which thankfully satisfied him. But it did inspire me to get some material on the web under my own name, in case someone I don’t trust ever wants to investigate my writing.

I have gotten quite comfortable with the pseudonym as my writing identity for topics related to Islam, missions, etc., and I don’t think it has had any negative effect on my relationships with anyone, from whatever background. To confirm my subjective impression on this (avoid self-deception) I asked a good friend who is a Christian from a Muslim background: ‘Do you think my use of a pen name has had any impact my relationship with you or other believers from Muslim backgrounds?’ He responded: ‘No impact in my opinion. Everyone understands why one might want to be careful in revealing their full identity in Muslim countries and ministries.’

I’m thankful the Lord has allowed me to express my ideas to a wide reading audience while continuing ministry on the ground in unreached contexts.

Reflections on name transparency

by *Phil Parshall*

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I was forced to make a decision concerning name usage as far back as 1972 when my writing journey began. My wife and I had already spent ten years as active, witnessing missionaries in eighty-five percent Muslim Bangladesh.

It is important to state that all of our team were granted ‘missionary visas’ during this time frame. This concession continued throughout our time in Bangladesh and followed us during our Muslim-focused outreach for twenty-three years in the Philippines. Unfortunately, such visas are no longer given in Bangladesh; though the Philippines continues to allow such openness to foreign missionaries.

Legally I was under no threat of expulsion as I journeyed on in grass roots evangelism while authoring books and articles on Muslim related subjects. There were major hassles in Bangladesh as I sought to obtain visas for our expanding team. However, the government *per se* never cited my writings as a concern. Bureaucratic frustrations with government officials often centred on their desire for bribes in order to perform their official tasks.

After I published, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* in 1980, I began to be noticed by a number of Muslim publications. One was a widely circulated Islamic journal published in the UK and another was a quarterly sent out from Saudi Arabia. A

newspaper in Bangladesh quoted from my writings about a new contextualized effort to make Christianity more palatable to Muslims.

In *New Paths*, I was careful not to mention Bangladesh by name and also did not cite my place of ministry. But definitely, by the mid-80's, Muslim watchers had picked up on my writings as well as that of others who mostly sheltered under pen names.

It goes without saying that missionaries living in tight Muslim contexts should evaluate carefully whether a pen name is the way to go. I can only say that, for me personally, I have no regrets for being up front with using my name openly and broadly. Here are some of the reasons why:

- I have always believed in maximum transparency. There should be accountability in one's writings. There is a lot of confusion on the part of readers as to who is responsible for whatever controversial postulate being presented. Pen names have a unique way of leading to confusion and even false accusations. However, there will be times when there is no choice but to go with a cover.
- Openness in recognition leads to significant opportunities in ministry. *New Paths* provided a wonderful season of sharing insights through seminars and other writings. Even in retirement, these interactions continue through email and Skype.
- I have shared my writings with more open-minded Muslims. A number have responded appreciatively. Perhaps that would not have happened if they felt they were dealing with a person who appeared to be hiding his/her identity.
- As far as I know, the use of my name has not been a negative influence on mission to Muslims. Twice I have been threatened with death by Muslim extremists in the Philippines, but these events centred on my evangelistic effort, not on my writings.

I have no regrets in repeatedly using my name very transparently and in my writings and in being cited by others in their books. But everyone will need to consider their context and receive the opinions of others as they go forward.

Lastly, I would say, in spite of my many deficiencies, one area which hasn't been a problem to me is fear. For that I am humbly grateful to our Lord. It's been a great ride!

Becoming Kate

by Kate McCord (Kate.mccord.storyteller@gmail.com)

An individual's name is deeply personal. It's an integral part of one's identity. To use another's name in conversation is to see and honour the individual as a unique and valuable human being. To change one's name is to lose and gain simultaneously.

The journey of changing my own name began with the publication of my first book, *In the Land of Blue Burqas*.² I had no idea where that journey would take me, what it would cost, nor how it would enrich me. The decision was borne out of necessity. When the book was published, I was still working in a country deeply hostile to the faith and practice I explored in writing. I needed to protect myself as well as my foreign and national friends from potential violence.

Choosing a protective pseudonym was not the first time I had been required, by context or situation, to offer a name that was not my familiar given name. Years ago, I lived overseas and chose a nickname my Spanish-speaking friends could pronounce. After several months, I ached to hear my own given name. I realized that the nickname I had chosen was not comfortable for me. It simply didn't fit.

When I moved to Afghanistan, my Afghan neighbours sought to rename me. Foreigners encouraged me to let them do so. I resisted. Instead, I offered a variant of my given name. To this day, I treasure the sound of that name on the lips of foreign and national friends.

By the name my first book required a protective pseudonym, I knew that the choice of an alternate name would be significant. I considered several factors when I chose my name. Firstly, the name had to feel like me. Secondly, the name had to honour my family. Thirdly, the name could not be connected to my given name.

I considered a number of options and prayed about each. I found a name that honoured both sides of my family. My first name is a variant of the common given name for women throughout generations of my extended family. My last name comes from a significant and untraceable member of my bloodline. It accurately represents my ethnic background. I discussed my choice with those most affected. Each felt honoured by the name I chose, or simply thought it fit me well.

I played with the name, wrote it, prayed about it and felt its 'rightness'. In the end, I offered Kate McCord to my publisher and, over the years, embraced the name as my own.

Initially, being Kate was easy. Kate on a book cover and Kate on the radio was fun, a kind of play. I created a Kate email address, scrubbed my given name from the internet and blogged, posted and engaged as Kate. The distance provided by technology offered a clear presentation of my own identity. Over time, Kate in the larger world naturally became authentically me.

² Note that Kate's recent book *Why God Calls us to Dangerous Places* (2015) is reviewed in this issue of SEEDBED, below.

The greatest struggle I encountered with owning both the pen name and given name was in presenting myself in my new local US community. Which name do I use when visiting a new church or meeting new people? Sometimes I hesitated, trying to decide who I would be in that context. The hesitation created a kind of social awkwardness. Sometime, I forgot to think and introduced myself with my given name. Then, I stumbled over the questions; what do you do? Oh, you're a writer? Have you published anything? Well, or, yes, but not under my own name. Suddenly I was faced with a challenge; allow a stranger to know both of my names or hide my Kate identity behind vague responses or intentional deflections.

My obfuscation created stress within me. I felt invisible, without clear identity, trapped in confusion. I resolved the struggle by consistently offering Kate to strangers. That allowed me to be open and honest about who I am and what I do.

I did not give up my given name. Instead, I treasured it. When a person begins to move into my inner circle, I invite them to use my given name. Often, the invitation is received as a kind of honour. It says 'You and I have moved together into the trusted space of friendship'.

In this way I unintentionally followed the example of so many others now and throughout history who carry both a public and private name. I have become Kate while remaining myself. Now, I'm grateful for both names and for the on-going journey of both becoming and being authentically me.

Living and speaking with transparency before Muslims

by *Bill Musk*

By the time I felt that I had anything to offer in writing from my experience and reflection on being a person whom the Lord had led to be involved with folk from a Muslim context, two decisions were already just about made for me. I had been imprisoned in and then expelled from a Middle Eastern country after being caught distributing informative material about the Christian gospel. Any authority or group with a will and effective intelligence could easily find that out, so why bother to try and hide away? Secondly, and more importantly, I had come to the conclusion that whatever I wanted to say about Muslims and their faith should be said in front of them.

Strongly influenced by my academic background and out of my experience as a preacher, I believe that intellectual honesty requires that anyone who puts material in the public domain needs to be willing to take responsibility for that and for handling peoples' reactions to what they proffer. What is more, knowing that material I was writing could be read by Muslims – and also by national Christians from the Middle East – certainly made me think twice about what I was writing and how I was writing it! For me, such a deliberately chosen path is part and parcel of a

Romans 12:18 constraint: 'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone'.

I recognise that there is an 'if' at the beginning of that Pauline sentence and I recognise that other practitioners will see things very differently. Then there is that intriguing episode in John's Gospel where Jesus tells his disciples 'I am not [yet?] going up to this Feast' followed a few verses/days later by the note that 'Jesus went up to the temple courts and began to teach' (Jn. 7:8, 14)! Plus I have huge respect for some authors/practitioners who have chosen to go the more anonymous route. Different contexts can provoke very different attitudes and conclusions. Maybe it is just as possible to take responsibility for what one puts in writing in the public domain whilst withholding one's real identity as it is through declaring it?

Owning up to who I truly am as an author goes hand-in-hand with my convictions about some related issues in missiology. As a pastor on-the-ground to practitioners in various Muslim countries, I have found myself giving support to a number of mission personnel who have started out in the Middle East as 'hidden' or partially 'hidden' in terms of their persona and work and who – on learning the language and making good friends of nationals – come to feel that they are being deceptive at a very deep level. They have nearly all ended up seeking to change the means by which they could remain present in the country more transparently.

I also have strong pastoral concerns about the kind of worldview/aroma of integrity that is passed on to 'disciples' in situations where a fundamental disguise or disingenuousness is being practised by mission personnel. How does that help believers from a Muslim background to live as light and truth within their contexts? Sometimes, I suspect, a mind-set is developed amongst workers which encourages a 'bubble' mentality from within which a hostile, outside, lost world of people (Muslims) given over to evil is viewed with reservation and suspicion.

I could not believe my ears when my wife and I responded to an invitation to give some talks in a 'closed' country and, upon arrival, overheard a responsible leader phone someone else to report that 'the package has arrived!' I would rather be Bill Musk than a package any day!

'To be or not to be'

by Nik Ripken

Somalia in 1991 was persecution and chaos wrapped in the context of a Civil War. There were very few workers in Somalia combining relief work with proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Quickly we found ourselves feeding 50,000 people a day, providing burial cloth for children and old people who died during the night,

attempting mobile medical clinics and resettling refugees—all while trying to stay alive.

The nature of the beast was such that we had many short-term volunteers coming in week by week, many of them medical personnel. This became my practice for the next few decades: once I had taught something a few times, I would write the orientation material in the form of an article and give it to new personnel. I was encouraged to send what I was writing to mission publications for use by others doing similar work in dangerous places. From the beginning we did not want to waste what we were learning, often in painful circumstances.

Since there were few western workers in Somalia, the danger to our team members and local believers was a real concern. Therefore, using my birth name in conjunction with these articles could place our teams and myself in extreme danger. This was the genesis of using the pseudonym 'Nik Ripken', a name chosen for me by the Evangelical Mission Quarterly (so it's all their fault!). Since the spiritual community in Somalia was small, disassociating my pen name with my birth name was impossible. Yet they respected the need for such a practice and it has worked well in the broader Christian world for approximately twenty-five years.

I remember guest lecturing from the very first EMQ article I had written at a seminary in Texas. In the middle of my lecture (while I was speaking!) a student exclaimed, 'Professor, you need to get the article written by Nik Ripken in the June edition of EMQ. He writes about the same subject that your lecture addresses today. But he writes so much clearer concerning the subject you're speaking on.' Since the class professor knew us intimately, he was attempting not to laugh out loud as he sat in the back of the room. I just thanked the student for his comment and went on with the poor presentation of my own material!

When we were forced out of Somalia we entered the broader world of global persecution. We wanted to know best practices to use in places that were hostile to the kingdom of God—places where just being a friend to a westerner could cost locals their lives. In this context, Somalia destroyed my heart in such a personal way that I wondered if Jesus was still pertinent for dangerous places around the globe, or was He simply suitable for Western, dressed up Christianity. In other words, was Jesus trustworthy? We wanted to enter the global world of suffering and persecution for who Jesus is, without further endangering believers in persecution.

Our spiritual advisors believed along with us that traveling under our birth names and eventually writing under the pen names about what we were learning was the best way to keep both ourselves as well as persecuted believers secure. The believers had to trust us that we would not write nor tell their stories in ways that would further increase their persecution. In return, we trusted them with both the birth names we travelled under as well as our pseudonyms. This has allowed us to

securely provide resources from the church in persecution to the church in the West. It has also allowed us to connect with the church in persecution.

To this day we have not regretted this decision. We have attempted over 600 interviews of believers in persecution in approximately seventy-two countries. As far as we know no one has been further harmed because we sought them out in their settings, sat at their feet, and learned from them. This is not a small matter and it is somewhat related, we believe, to the wise partnering of our pseudonyms and birth names in appropriate venues.

Using our pseudonyms for weeks at a time has led to both our pen names and birth names becoming a part of who we are. Perhaps it has helped me to stay mentally and spiritually healthy as, sometimes, Nik Ripken goes to the dark places filled with trauma while using my birth name signifies being home and safe with my family. That's perhaps a more personal observation than is warranted in an article such as this, yet mental and spiritual health is often discovered by creative means. There's also humour in the back-and-forth of our real names and pseudonyms. Recently, after weeks in environments of persecution as well as teaching in numerous places under our pseudonyms, I heard my wife laugh in the kitchen. When I asked her what had caught her fancy, she told me that I had been calling her 'Ruth' for the first time in twenty-five years within the safety of our home!

Whether sitting at the feet of believers in persecution, connecting believers in persecution with the broader suffering church, or teaching in western settings, we always explain why we use our pseudonyms in writing, then and now. In many places we trust local believers with our real names. Only once has someone attacked me because of the use of a pseudonym, expressing his belief that I was unethical, and perhaps a coward, for doing so. Oh well! Again, if we had to start over, there might be quite a few things we would change, but the use of a pseudonym would not be one of them.

The question of pseudonyms in ministry

by *Georges Houssney*

Many missionaries choose pseudonyms and pen names to conceal their identity. Some organizations have a policy of secrecy. They choose a secular name on the field that does not link them to the mother organization. This obviously restricts their overt Christian activities and limits them to humanitarian projects. They reason that this strategy allows them to stay in the country and protects them from danger and from being expelled.

Without passing judgment on these groups or individuals, I believe that Christians should not hide their identity. Although I entertained the thought of

choosing a pen name for my book *Engaging Islam* and other writings, I decided against it. Here are some of the reasons I choose to use my real name.

Fact not fiction

I use my real name because it contains my life story, my testimony, real information about where I grew up, names of my mentors, details of specific churches I helped plant, and organizations I belonged to. How in the world was I going to come up with fake information about all these things? The book would have resembled fiction rather than fact.

Credibility

I have read books with fake information. Identities, locations, and organizations were concealed. There is no way of knowing if these things were real or made up. There is no way of verifying, observing, or even believing these claims. Using my own name has given me credibility and the authority to speak from personal experience.

Fear and secrecy

To me, fear is behind most, if not all the practices of concealing one's identity. Fear of being persecuted, fear of jeopardizing the national believers, and fear of being expelled from the mission field are some of the issues that lead to secrecy.

Fear and faith

When I entered into full time ministry to the world of Islam, I was fully aware that it would be a dangerous endeavour. I had to decide between protecting myself and trusting the Lord to protect me. So far, with all the exposure of my face and my name on websites, TV, YouTube and other social media, I have experienced the protective hand of God. Each time the Lord saved me from a potential fatal or near fatal experience, my faith in him was both tested and strengthened.

Public vs. private ministry

My desire is to make the biggest impact possible and that means a public ministry. One of my evangelistic programs on TV was watched by millions of people. That same program was uploaded to YouTube and in one week was viewed by 117,000 people. Thousands write comments and send inquiries. A number of Muslims search for my name and write me directly. In early 2016, a woman from Libya came to know the Lord because she had been following my teachings on the internet and began to correspond with me.

Follow up and discipleship

Jesus disciplined his followers in person, not in absentia. Discipling converts needs to be out in the open so that your disciples can see you functioning in real life. There are ministries that follow up contacts using pseudonyms and I am sure the Lord uses them. But when the disciple knows you are a real person it is more effective. Part of the training is to demonstrate faith by trusting God for our lives. This

message is what is likely to help the new convert withstand persecution and live a bold, fearless life as a Christian.

A stronger testimony

Many Muslims I meet Google my name and find out about my ministry with Muslims. An international student from Oman came to me once and said: 'You know what I like about you? We know who you are and what you do. This is why I can trust you.' She told me about missionaries who had invited her to their house and she could not figure out their motivation. She suspected all along that they were covert missionaries.

Does this mean I am opposed to people who use pseudonyms?

Not always. Brother Andrew, for example, never revealed his real name. He travelled behind the Iron Curtain and smuggled millions of Bibles into the Soviet Union. No one can accuse him of not being bold in his ministry. Most notably he smuggled one million Bibles into China in 1976 which helped trigger a revival of the Chinese church.

In my work with the Kurds in Northern Iraq, Open Doors helped us smuggle Kurdish Bibles in hidden compartments of trucks carrying humanitarian aid through Turkey. They also smuggled a printing press disassembled into small pieces hidden in the body of three vans. It took their three engineers/drivers three weeks to reassemble it. We used it to print gospel literature.

In the early 1970s, at a time when Kurdistan was closed to foreigners by the Iraqi regime and the Kurdish language was banned, I had to smuggle myself into Kurdistan pretending to be a Kurd without ever lying about it. I just dressed like a Kurd and travelled in public buses with Kurds. Because of my accent, I pretended to be asleep so no one would talk to me during the five-hour bus ride from Baghdad to Suleimaniyah. The Bible in Kurdish became God's tool to spread the gospel among the Kurds.

Jesus and Paul

Some argue that Jesus did not reveal his identity initially. It took the disciples a while to figure out that he was the Messiah, Son of the Living God (Matt. 16:16). This argument does not apply here because Jesus's divine identity is something unbelievable that would shock the public. Peter only knew this by divine revelation. However, Jesus was public. He did not do things behind walls. Even when he did he told his disciples: 'What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs' (Matt. 10:27).

Although Jesus gave some of his disciples new names, they were never secretive about their identity in Christ. Peter, in a weak moment of fear for his life, denied Christ. This was not a strategy, it was sin. He repented bitterly for this. Jesus told us that if we deny him he will deny us, if we are ashamed of him, he would be

ashamed of us (Matt. 10:33). We need to be careful not to promote a sinful denial of Jesus in the name of wisdom.

Jesus and Paul both escaped when there was imminent danger. The gospels note that 'His time had not yet come' (Jn. 7:6). And this is exactly what I believe – my time has not yet come. When it does, just as Queen Esther said: 'If I perish, I perish' (Est. 4:16).

Conclusion

Pseudonym or not, we are a community of faith. We trust God with our lives and ministry. Fear is contrary to faith and faith is the cure for fear. Whatever reason we may have for concealing or revealing our identities, we must not conceal Jesus from the lost sheep whom Jesus loves. He sends us to reveal him to them and gather them to his sheep-pen.

Postscript by Don Little

Having pondered these six perspectives on security, identity and faithfulness to Christ, it is my prayer that the wisdom of these saints and fellow labourers will inspire you to ever greater zeal for Christ and empower you with Spirit-led sensitivity regarding the impact our decisions have on those whom we seek to serve in Christ's name.