

Called By Name: Poetry Practice

Adult Sunday School Pop-Up – Facilitated by Jan Rosenberger

A 50-minute guided writing session exploring identity, memory, and grace through name-based poetry.

Class Flow (50 minutes)

1. Welcome & Framing (5 minutes)

A brief, invitational opening:

- “Our names carry stories—given, chosen, inherited, mispronounced, reclaimed. Today we’ll explore how God meets us in the stories our names hold.”
- Light grounding: invite participants to write their full name at the top of a blank page of paper (first, middle, last, or chosen/ancestral name).
- Then, read **Kevin Henkes’ *Chrysanthemum* – it’s short, or an excerpt.** While it’s a children’s book, the theme is profoundly adult because it explores the vulnerability of loving your name, the sting of mockery, and the journey toward embracing identity.
- Then, ask someone to read **Psalms 139:1, 13 – 18** as the anchor text for the day (We are fearfully and wonderfully made by God!). **Isaiah 43:1 – 3a** also works well too!

2. Warm-Up: Name Story Sparks (10 minutes) – time this.

Instruct them to write quickly and bypass their inner critic using these targeted prompts:

1. **The Origin Story:** *How did you get your name? Was it a fight, a compromise, a tribute, or an accident? If you don't know, what do you suspect or wish happened?*
2. **The Sound & Feel of Your Name:** *List the hard sounds, soft vowels, and awkward combinations in your name. What shape does your mouth make when you say it?*
3. **The Ledger of Usage:** *Who is allowed to say your name in full? Who shortens it, mispronounces it, or mangles it—and what emotions live in those variations?*
4. **The Alternate:** *If you could shed your name or if you had to pick a name that matches your internal landscape right now, what would it be?*

Invite participants to jot freely—no polishing, no overthinking.

3. Teaching Moment: One Approach to Name Poetry (5 minutes)

Review this adult-friendly poetry practice, **The Redefinition Acrostic (aka “The Subversive Acrostic”)**

1. **The Concept:** One way to elevate the childhood acrostic into high-literary adult imagery.
2. **The Exercise:** Write an acrostic using your full name or surname, but banned rules apply: no direct adjectives (“B is for brave”). Instead, each letter must start a line that contains a micro-narrative, an object, or a specific memory from your life.

3. *Here's an Example for J-A-C-K:*

- Jars of pickled peaches sealing in the basement dark.
- Aluminum screen doors slamming at 5:00 PM.
- Coal dust settled permanently in the creases of a knuckle.
- Knives sharpened until the steel looks like a smile.

4. Main Writing Time (15 minutes)

Invite participants to begin drafting. Tips to keep them moving:

- Start with one vivid memory.
- Let one letter of your name open a door.
- Don't explain your name—let images do the work.

Offer gentle background music while people are working if you think this will be helpful.

5. Optional Sharing & Blessing (10 minutes)

In pairs or triads (depends on class size) – it is also easier to be vulnerable in smaller groups:

- Share 4–6 lines or one stanza of your poem.
- Partners respond with **noticing**, not critique:
 - “I noticed the tenderness in...”
 - “I heard a theme of...”
 - “This image stayed with me...”

Close with a simple blessing:

“May the name you carry—given, chosen, or unfolding—be a place where God meets you with truth and tenderness.”

Handout / Other Take-Home Prompts

- Write a poem that argues with your name's meaning.
- Write a poem where your name appears only as sound—never explanation.
- Write a found poem using a document that bears your name (birth certificate, letter, program).

Facilitator Notes (for you)

- Adults appreciate depth—lean into identity, belonging, and spiritual resonance.
- Keep the tone playful but reverent; this is identity work wrapped in creativity.

Take Home Prompts (Handout)

Prompt 1: The Etymological Dig (Deconstructing Meaning)

- **The Concept:** Look up the literal, historical, or cross-cultural meaning of your name (e.g., *Claire* means clear/bright; *Aisha* means alive/living).
- **The Exercise:** Write a poem that argues with or proves your name's literal definition. Contrast what the dictionary or your ancestors intended you to be with who you actually turned out to be.
- **Line Constraint:** Every stanza must feature an element of the natural world that contradicts or mirrors your name's meaning.

Prompt 2: The Sound-Map / Phonetic Elegy

- **The Concept:** Treating the name not as a word, but as a sequence of musical notes or a physical footprint.
- **The Exercise:** Write a poem where the name (or a syllable of it) acts as a recurring bell, refrain, or anchor word. Focus entirely on sensory details from the rooms, cars, or phone calls where that name was spoken with love, anger, or official authority. Do not explain the name; let the environment around the name do the heavy lifting.

Prompt 3: The Official Record (Found/Bureaucratic Poetry)

- **The Concept:** Exploring how our names live on paper (birth certificates, hospital bracelets, court documents, wedding registries, or rejection letters).
- **The Exercise:** Pull language from a legal, medical, or administrative document that bears your name. Redact or cross out 80% of the words (like a blackout poem), leaving only the fragments that tell a secret history or expose the coldness of institutional naming.