

Call Me Ishmael

WHAT BETTER WAY TO EXPERIMENT WITH ANONYMITY THAN TO ADOPT A NOM DE PLUME? So ignore the byline and call me Ishmael. Suspend your belief in the convenient reality of your existence. Move outside that corner of this world you call your life, if only for just the next few minutes. Enter the Actuarial Zone, a world of assumptions in which reality is just a special case. What you see may not be real, and I may not be who you think I am. I'm in the zone, and you've been sucked in after me. I've gone incognito in order to experience, firsthand, the advantages of anonymity.

Ah, apparently that pesky byline continues to give me up. You need another set of assumptions you can apply in the Actuarial Zone to overcome this difficulty. Well, then, let Ishmael do a little substituting of appearances for facts, something the apparent author could never do given his actuarial training. Ishmael is really a guest columnist who was recruited by the person you think I am to take his place while he ventures off, like a valence electron, into a world of soulless anonymity, free to roam and speak his mind without fear of attribution.

And look what I, Ishmael, have done through this carefully crafted adventure into the Actuarial Zone. I've freed one person, the nominal author of this piece, from unwelcome recognition, and have created another person, me, whom you know no better than the name I've given myself. Clever of me. Already it's apparent that one of the byproducts of anonymity is cleverness.

In the Actuarial Zone

As I walk about the zone in thoughtful pose, mentally organizing my plan to thwart the right-wing anti-privacy conspiracy, I feel a strange sensation. I find boldness where before there was only timid resolution and acceptance. A sense of egocentric self-importance envelops me. By shedding my shell of identity I've allowed the true me to grow without bound. My insight has sharpened. My wit is unsurpassed.

My opinion is the only one that counts.

Wow! Anonymity is power! With it come visions of absolute truth, clear insights into the motives of others, and the will to enlighten the world. A person

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with anonymity is unstoppable, unassailable, unbeatable. No wonder a secret identity is an essential part of every superhero's existence! An anonymous person has no restraints, no limits, no obligations. No wonder everybody wants privacy. Ishmael has found his niche.

But the discovery that privacy fuels the powerful engine of anonymity is a bit frustrating. Privacy isn't an easy critter to corral. The federal government, for example, guarantees our right to privacy in some areas, while asking deep, probing questions in the 2000 census. It's all very confusing. Fortunately, I, Ishmael, am in the zone, and I'm feeling the power. Truths are being revealed to me as my powers of anonymity crank up through my lengthening separation from the identified world.

In a flash it comes to me: Privacy is a quality associated with unrevealed knowledge contained in a sequestered, limited-access chamber. For something to be private, its existence must be known but its substance unknown. But even that's not the whole story.

For example, some things about each of us are entirely obvious, but civilization grants us a veil of privacy. We are, after all, not dogs who sniff each other when introduced. (And if we do happen to catch a stray odor, we're careful not to mention it.) So, one level of privacy exists for the obvious but ignored per-

sonal factoid. In fact, governments institutionalize this type of privacy by requiring that we ignore certain bits of information about individuals.

Other kinds of privacy, however, need to be demanded. You have to give up enough information to effectively initiate the privacy you want. If you want to be left alone, you have to tell people where you're going to be and then tell them to leave you alone. If you don't do that, people will keep bumping into you accidentally.

Third is a category of subtle things upon which privacy concerns have recently settled—personal records that detail an individual's medical condition or financial status, for instance. This is information you may not even know about yourself, or it could be knowledge you're required to give up to get something of greater value. It's information about you that could be useful to others. To protect you, the law thwarts the natural tendency of others to share this knowledge with everyone else.

And there's the defining crux of what privacy is about—information or knowledge that's kept purposely confidential from not everybody, but from a lot of other people.

For a while I believed a mind was required for privacy to have any meaning at all. Minds linked in some mysterious way to the physical brain are, after all, the repositories of information and knowledge. Privacy results when you are able to keep information about yourself out of my mind. I was comfortable in this belief until I saw the following astonishing report.

Joe Paterno and Arnold Palmer were backing legislation in Pennsylvania that would extend privacy rights to any Pennsylvanian's image, even after death. Interestingly, the bill would extend such rights for only 40 years after death.

At first, this seemed to contradict my theory that a mind is a necessary element. But after passing a sign for a place called Resurrection Cemetery, also in Pennsylvania, I realized that Pennsylvania is a special place, requiring special laws.

Days of Yore

Now I'm wondering: Has the privacy issue gotten better or worse over time? In the small communities of colonial America, there was probably very little privacy. Everyone knew everything about everyone else. But as communities grew into large, anonymous cities and the population became more mobile, this became almost impossible—until recently.

Technology has created an electronic "mind," millions of multi-gigabyte hard drives that store data on all of us, organized by a number the federal government assigns to each of us. By processing and comparing and correlating, computer-driven systems have figured us out. They know everything there is to know about us: where we live, where we work, what we eat, where we eat, what we read, and many other things that can't be revealed.

But so what? Is it any different than it used to be when everyone in town knew everything about everyone else? I suspect, with the new-found insight anonymity has given me, that it isn't the loss of privacy itself that's most upsetting. Rather,

it's that the private personal record has allowed others to correlate a possible future to your known past. By doing so, they've made you predictable and, in a sense, stolen your identity.

It is just like it used to be. But today, you can't solve this problem by moving away and starting over. The whole world is now too small for that. So, like Ishmael, you seek the safety of anonymity. And the same technology that conspires to eliminate all privacy from the planet also provides your salvation. It's a natural progression from tree trunks to bathroom walls to the booths at Gino's East to an anonymous posting on a discussion forum. Feel the power of anonymity.

Don't Abandon Yourself

But is that the only way to go? Anonymity requires that you abandon yourself. Adopting an anonymous persona means starting over, but the destination is still the same. Ultimately, what's known about you will make you more predictable. And your descent into predictability will be even quicker because anonymous people tend to be shallow.

But some people have found the answer, the course that leads to a truly private life. They've done this by destroying their real self's tie to its past. They've become uncorrelated rather than anonymous. They exhibit erratic behavior to stymie the engines that exist to put them into compartments of similar expectation.

You can see these successes any day, sitting on the sidewalks of New York City. You, too, can tap the powerful tools they've developed and free yourself. Maintain your identity but, through deception and seemingly erratic behavior, create barriers to predictability. Live the uncorrelated life. You'll know you've succeeded when you hear your best friends whispering to each other that they don't know you anymore.

How much further you want to go beyond that is entirely up to you. It all depends on how valuable you believe the reward. I suspect there's no better way to protect the privacy of your genetic code than to live a free and independent life on the streets of New York. ●