



Publishing Nonfiction Books on Spirituality

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MODULE 5

Commentary

In Modules 1 through 3, commentary was provided as downloadable audio files. However, by Module 4, the laptop computer I used to record the audio went defunct, so the course materials that should have been presented as audio, with the category label "AUD" were just the PDF documents of my transcript notes prepared for audio recording. For the final Module 5, what should be the audio lecture portion of the course is now presented as written commentaries. Much of the commentary was written with the intention of being script, so please forgive the casual, informal style of the content. In the course syllabus, all Commentary files will bear the category label "ESS" for blog-style essay.

The Nom De Plume

The nom de plume. Writing under a pseudonym. This topic may feel a bit out of place among the other lecture topics for this module, but I was asked to address this topic by several individuals, so here we go.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, it was relatively common for occultists, especially occultists who held high rank or were of notable social status, to write their esoteric texts under a pen name. Jean-Baptiste Alliette was an occultist who wrote under the pen name Etteilla, the letters of his surname backwards,

Alphonse Louis Constant was another renowned occultist of the 19th century, but perhaps you are more familiar with his nom de plume, Eliphas Levi. Or how about Gerard Encausse? Does that name ring a bell? No? Okay, how about Papus? Ah, yes. Papus of *The Tarot of the Bohemians*. Yeah that was Gerard Encausse's pseudonym.

There's also the conspiracy theory behind the author and occultist Comte De Gabalis, said to actually be the pseudonym for Francis Bacon, which is, well, a household name when it comes to American history.

Pen names aren't limited to the occult, however. There's, of course, one of the most famous nom de plumes of them all, Mark Twain. The man behind that pseudonym was Samuel Langhorne Clemens. The famous short story writer O. Henry, a name anyone who has taken a high school English class will have heard of, is actually William Sydney Porter. Voltaire

was actually François-Marie Arouet. I suppose pseudonyms were kinda trendy back in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Some of you may recall Ann Landers, who wrote a syndicated advice column. Guess what. There is no Ann Landers. Behind Ann Landers is Eppie Lederer. Ann Landers was Eppie's pen name. By the way, ever heard of the advice column Dear Abby? "Abby" was also a pseudonym, for Pauline Phillips. And Pauline Phillips was Eppie Lederer's twin sister. By the way, in case you're wondering about the different surnames, the maiden name for both Eppie and Pauline was Friedman.

Perez Hilton, a household name associated with Hollywood gossip, is a pseudonym for Mario Armando Lavandeira, Jr. Woody Allen is also a pseudonym, for Allen Stewart Konigsberg.

Anne Rice, did you know, is also a pen name? Howard Allen Frances O'Brien is her real name. Yes, Howard. It's an interesting story there. Her mother decided to give her a traditionally masculine first name because her mother thought it might give her daughter a leg up in the world.

The real man behind the name Anthony Burgess, best known for *A Clockwork Orange*, is John Wilson. Ayn Rand is also a pen name. Her real name was Alisa Rosenbaum. Bell Hooks, many might know, is actually the pen name for Gloria Jean Watkins. Benjamin Franklin wrote under a pseudonym, Benevolus. Franklin wrote under many pen names, actually. Silence Dogood, Alice Addertongue, Busy Body, Caelia Shortface, Martha Careful, Polly Baker, and Richard Saunders were all pen names of Benjamin Franklin. You know what, I think I may have had fewer AOL screen names back in the 90s than Benjamin Franklin had pen names.

Ekhart Tolle, dubbed the "most popular spiritual author in the U.S.," is a pseudonym for Ulrich Leonard Tölle. George Eliot, the 19th century novelist, many probably know already, was a pseudonym for Mary Ann Evans. She wrote under a male name hoping it would help her novels sell better. And it did. But did you know that George Orwell was a pseudonym? The real name behind that pseudonym is Eric Arthur Blair. George Sand, another male-sounding pseudonym for a woman, was actually Amandine Dupin. Lewis Carroll is also a nom de plume, for a man named Charles Lutwidge Dodgson.

Sorry. I totally just geeked out there and made you go along for the ride with me.

Let me tell you about my experience with the nom de plume.

When *Holistic Tarot* first got picked up for publication, I was still working on law-related research and writing for publication. By the way, under my real name, I'm published in various legal fields, such as health law, feminist jurisprudence and constitutional law, oh, and also antitrust. I just mention that to give you a sense of who I am. Not to mention I'm still working as a full-time attorney, so knowing how judgey and conservative people in my professional field can get, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that I would go with a

pseudonym. In fact, it was either go with a pseudonym to publish *Holistic Tarot* or not publish a tarot book *at all*. Those were the two options I gave myself.

Most days, I'm glad I went with the pseudonym and recurring incidences in my professional life validate what a great idea it was to go with the pseudonym. Like I don't have enough biases to deal with already, what with the sexism and racism I have to work through trying to break down glass ceilings, bamboo ceilings, looking too young for a lawyer so getting mistaken for a secretary, paralegal, and honest to god even getting called "little lady" at the office before. The weight of stereotypes and preconceptions I need to deal with in the corporate setting as a young, Asian female is enough. I don't want to add to that the stereotypes and preconceptions that would come with my professed spiritual or religious beliefs.

Also, I've learned you can't say occultist, occult, esoteric, witchcraft, tarot, or even the word astrology without inviting a torrent of follow-up questions. And in a professional setting, I'm not chatty. I like to keep things very professional and I don't want to tempt anyone to diverge down a rabbit hole of questions about what is tarot, what is its history, and how did I even get into such a practice in the first place. Too many questions! Don't...want...to...answer!

So generally, I'm really glad I went with the pseudonym. I like keeping my occult work, oh, dare I say it, occult. I feel more in control of the narrative people spin of me, and wow, I can't stress the advantage of this enough—not having to field a million and one questions from people who don't actually even care about tarot, craft, Taoism, or the occult. When people meet me in real life, I get to choose what I want to tell them about myself. I get to choose who I tell about my so-called double life. It goes in the other direction, too. Among those who know me as Benebell Wen, I get to choose who also knows my everyday identity. In a peculiar yet powerful way, it helps the person whom I've trusted and me to feel immediately closer, to forge stronger interpersonal bonds. So, in my humble opinion, I've enjoyed a higher quality brand of friends.

There are moments when I regret it, though. For starters, I can't shake off the feeling of duplicity. There were several times when I went to sign people's books and if there's a lot of chatter around me and I'm part of that chatter and I'm not thinking straight, when I go to sign my name, I start to sign my real name only to stop after the first letter, do a silent "oh, shit!" and then start drawings lots of loops and curly cues to try to transform that letter into a B.

There's also a pretty egotistical slant to my regret, too. I have several accomplishments under my real name that I am quite proud of, and of course, several under Benebell Wen I'm quite proud of, and I find that I can never brag about both at the same time. One time this fellow meeting me by my real name started to mansplain to me about how to write and publish a book, since he self-published his first novel as an e-book. At the time, I really wished I could have shut him up by doing some passive-aggressive humble brag about how I'm a bestselling author, but couldn't, because I didn't want to disclose to him that I wrote

and published under Benebell Wen. So I had to grin and bear it, pretending to be impressed by his writing and publishing expertise.

Should *you* write under a nom de plume? You'd be surprised how often I get asked that question like I'm some sort of authority on the subject. Honestly, I have no idea whether or not you should write under a nom de plume. I don't really know your situation.

I can tell you that it sucks to write under a nom de plume because it never stops feeling duplicit. A well-known Hollywood actress who is also a client of mine had an interesting personal story to share with me once when she and I commiserated about the nom de plume. She works under a stage name. She remarked how initially, when fans or anyone for that matter would approach her in real life and call out by her stage name, she wouldn't respond because she'd forget it was her stage name. I had similar initial experiences as well, where in real life someone would call out to me with "Benebell" and I'd ignore that person because the name wouldn't register as my own.

I'll even give a more specific incident. The renowned Wald Amberstone once called me on my home phone and asked for "Benebell Wen." This was before he knew my legal name. (Now he knows, of course, and knows to call with the real name if he wants me to answer, haha.) At the time, "Benebell" did not register in my mind, because it was not a tarot or metaphysical context and I was at home. So I replied, "I think you have the wrong number." He called back a few more times, and each time I said he had the wrong number. Finally, he e-mailed me and said he believes I may have given him the wrong phone number since he tried calling several times over the weekend. That's when it all clicked. Oops. Oh right. "Benebell" is me. I'm Benebell.

Trying to be two people is dreadful. It's not fun. You'll slip up and forget you're two people. People will secretly (or not so secretly) think you're a phony, duplicity, two-faced. However, for me, the negative consequences of the other option outweigh me thinking it sucks to play by two names. So that's why I go with the nom de plume and why it has worked for me.

Over the years I've come to realize I wasn't alone. Quite a number of individuals have an established public persona in the corporate world who also happen to have strong interest in a metaphysical or spiritual field, which they know would undermine their corporate persona. So they either opt never to publish their amazing works or they go the route of the pseudonym. While I've been open about "Benebell" being a pseudonym, I've since learned of other colleagues who publish in the metaphysical fields under a pseudonym that people don't realize is a pseudonym. All that is to say that the nom de plume is perhaps more common and prevalently used in the spirituality category of nonfiction writing than you may realize, so if you're hesitant about publishing your book because it doesn't line up with your more conservative day job occupation, then the pseudonym may be a way for you to have your cake and eat it, too.