Dear Abby:

What Were You Thinking?

An Indian-American writer reacts to a recent advice column on "foreign" names

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m not mad, exactly. And betrayed isn’t the right word, either—I don’t
I really seek out advice columns, and I’m not a regular Dear Abby reader, so her recent highly publicized, casually racist edition doesn’t make me feel like anyone has let me down. But as someone whose life is closely tied to the question discussed in said column, I do feel some very specific things.

Last month, an advice-seeker nicknamed “Making Life Easy” wrote to ask Dear Abby about starting a family. The wife, born and raised in India, wants to give their future children Indian names. Making Life Easy has reservations about the idea, as these names are “often difficult to pronounce and spell,” and would like to opt for “Western” names, saying they are more suitable because the couple will live in the United States.

“How can I make my wife understand that having ‘unusual’ names makes certain aspects of kids’ lives more difficult?” is the actual question posed.

One would hope to see a scolding. A call to be open and accepting of others. An explanation that our nation is a melting pot, not a sanitized mayo jar. But instead, Abby agreed with Making Life Easy. In part of her response, she explained the burden of a foreign name. She told her letter-writer that while their wife has a lovely idea in providing an Indian name, practically speaking, Abby hopes she will “rethink this.”

“When we’re teased, it’s usually because that foreign name belongs to a foreign-looking person. The name isn’t the problem.”

The column blew up on Twitter earlier this week, and over the past few days has sparked a handful of articles noting Abby’s insensitive and uninformed response. Rightfully so: it’s dumb, bad advice. And the question itself is equally questionable.

I say this with an extra dose of authority on the subject. I’m Indian-American, and my parents grew up in two different religions. My dad
is from a Christian family where everyone has “American” sounding names; my mom is Hindu, and most people on her side of the family have names that are not common in the U.S.—myself included.

Let’s unpack Abby’s response a little bit.

“Popular names in one country can cause problems for a child living in another one.”

Everyone with a difficult name shares the same stories: Dreading roll-call at school. Getting a funny word on your Starbucks cup. Finding similar-sounding English words to assist in pronunciation. Eventually growing into your name, and realizing it helps you hold on to an identity in a place where people like Abby find that identity inconvenient.

In one important way, having an uncommon name actually makes life easier. My name is a litmus test for ignorance, one that I’m always administering regardless of whether I like to do so. I once had a college professor who, on the first day of class, asked us to write down a nickname we preferred, if any. I wrote “Shwin,” which I still go by sometimes. After reading this, she said, “Schwinn is a bicycle company here. Is it a bicycle company in your country?” (It is!)

Had I been a Mike, or a Bartholomew, I never would have exposed this part of my professor’s character—but it still would’ve been there. This way, I knew.

“Why saddle a kid with a name he or she will have to explain or correct with friends, teachers, and fellow employees from childhood into adulthood?”

Abby is telling a half-truth here. Indian names, as a broad category, are difficult to pronounce for some. Especially if you are not from India, have never worked with someone from India, or have a specific phobia about asking someone how to pronounce their name. Chances are, even if you don’t know someone Indian, someone you know does.

Still, there is no doubt that at some point, the child will have to
explain and correct his or her name. But correcting someone’s pronunciation is not as difficult as, say, talking to your child about why non-white people are often treated poorly.

“Not only can foreign names be difficult to pronounce and spell, but they can also cause a child to be teased unmercifully.”

As I child, I was teased. Abby is correct in her assumption that foreign names can become points of ridicule, especially in grade school. There were several times I recall asking my mom why she picked mine. (Her answer: because she always liked it.) But as I grew, I came to appreciate having a unique name, a part of me that was tied to my family’s heritage. I also came to understand that when the teasing happens, it’s usually because that foreign name belongs to a foreign-looking person. The name isn’t the problem.

“Sometimes the name can be a problematic word in the English language.”

Unless the wife cannot understand English, she has absolutely considered this issue, and would not pick a name that is problematic. Next.

“... And one [name] that sounds beautiful in a foreign language can be grating in English.”

*English* names can be grating in English!

And while we’re on the subject, both the writer and Abby are operating under false premises. The writer doesn’t want an Indian name because they’re difficult to spell and pronounce. But you don’t press a button on the Indian Name Machine and watch a dial spin until your baby is magically assigned a label. You’re actually allowed to pick any Indian name you want, including one with an easy spelling. Off the top of my head, Asha, Akshay, Ravi, Veena, Nikhil, Mikhil, Kavita, Nikita, Suresh, and Ashish are all available options.

But that’s beside the point. People and their names don’t exist in the world for the convenience of others. Centering a conversation about
choosing an Indian name in this way is xenophobic at worst, and intensely self-centered and ethnocentric at best. Abigail Van Buren, better known to most as the original Dear Abby, is credited for the quote: “True, a little learning is a dangerous thing, but it still beats total ignorance.” The current holder of the pseudonym, her daughter, Jeanne Phillips, doesn’t exactly do her predecessor proud.

I’m trying to keep it all in perspective. After all, it’s just an advice column. But I worry: if people read this in the newspaper, as the advice of an Advice Expert, they might think it’s actually good advice. Instead it’s just feeding into a larger ignorant sentiment that makes life difficult for many us. We don’t pick our names.

And if we could, many of us would pick the names we have. I think my unusual Indian name is extremely cool. I recently added a pronunciation guide, as provided in the dictionary (USH·win), to the top of my résumé; I’ve had several people tell me it was helpful. And I’ve had people of all different backgrounds compliment my name. My standard response? “Thanks. My mom gave it to me.”