

WE ARE NOT ALONE

I guess I should not have been surprised. After all, when I first tried to establish an AOL account many years ago I discovered that "James Wacht" had been taken. So was "James Wacht1", "James Wacht2", "James Wacht3" and so forth. I finally had to settle on "James Wacht243". Who were the other 242 "James Wachts" I wondered. It's not as if my name is so common. Whenever I would travel I would always look up the name "Wacht" in the local telephone directory. Rarely, if ever, would I find anybody with that name. The "Wacht" lineage was not very long. My father was from a small family as was my grandfather and his father before him.

Google opened up a whole new world to me. Like most curious people I would occasionally Google my name to see what would turn up. Other than the occasional reference to me in some obscure trade publication or some references to "wacht" in German language websites, none of which I could read, I was blissfully anonymous. In cyberspace, I was very much alone. And for some reason, I found it very reassuring.

But then it happened. Like Robinson Crusoe first discovering Friday or Tom Hanks finding Wilson, I stumbled upon him, "James Wacht", and he wasn't me! There he was, on Google. I was shocked and curious. My initial reaction, however, quickly changed to dismay when I started reading his links. While we shared the same name we could not have been more different. I am a middle-aged, middle-of-the-road, businessman married with two teenage children. My web presence is carefully cultivated to portray an image of moderate conservatism (despite my somewhat liberal political leanings) and stability so as to reassure potential clients and customers. My nemesis is a twenty something performance artist, covered from head to toe with exotic tattoos and multiple body piercings, all of which he displays in graphic detail in semi-nude photographs that he has posted on the web. It was a genuine "OMG!" moment. It was like looking in the mirror and seeing the reflection of a person who didn't look anything like you staring back at you and giving you the finger. I was confused, bewildered and more than just a little bit indignant. On the one hand, I felt as if a prankster was playing a bad joke on me, yet on the other hand I was completely freaked out that people might confuse me with my new alter ego. The cyberspace image that I had carefully cultivated over so many years had been completely subverted by this imposter. Worse, there was not much I could do about it. I thought about posting something on Google trying to clarify that the other James Wacht wasn't the real James Wacht but that wasn't exactly true. In fact, he has as much of a claim to the name and its identity as I do. And, in true Internet irony, he is probably as upset about the fact that his carefully cultivated image as an avant guard, cutting-edge performance artist has been compromised by its association with me. I thought about trying to register my name as a protected trademark but realized the absurdity of that. After all, I was not exactly "McDonald's".

It did not end there, however. On the internet I soon discovered, there is no place to hide. He eventually discovered me on Facebook and reached out and contacted me. I was now confronted with a dilemma. Did I actually want to communicate with my alter ego? Was there the risk that if we actually met that we

would wind up canceling each other out like matter meeting antimatter? Curiosity got the better of me and I friended him. We tried to determine if there was any family relationship (thankfully, there was not) and I figured, hopefully, that we were done, since, other than our names, we had nothing in common. He was not so easily discouraged. He started posting comments on my wall, most of which were completely nonsensical and extremely bizarre. I decided this was one relationship that I need to end and finally, after several weeks, I defriended him.

Like the great unknown, cyberspace can be a frightening place to explore. Even though my experience with my alter ego occurred many months ago, I am still unnerved by the experience. For my entire life I lived with the misconception that I was the only "James Wacht" that existed. It made me feel unique and special. This illusion has been rudely and abruptly shattered. My brand has been diluted. Somehow, I suspect it would be the same feeling we might experience if we were to discover that there was other intelligent life form elsewhere in the universe. Sometimes, we just want to be alone.