

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage
Unitarian Universalist
Theology and Spirituality

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Signs and Symbols

A distinction can be made between signs and symbols. A sign indicates a known thing; a symbol points to something unknown, perhaps unknowable. Signs are in the realm of science; symbols lead into the realm of the spiritual.

Does this mean that people who use symbols don't know what they're talking about? Yes, in a way. They are groping for something, and they are using symbols to feel their way.



Because signs refer to the known, relationships of signs can be compared to the relationships of the things they indicate to see if they match, as for example differential equations can be matched to the paths of moving bodies.

Symbols must be used in a different way. Symbols may be used to take

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soundings of the depths of our lives. They are judged by the fascination they hold and by their affect, by sudden tears behind the eyelids and a catch in the throat, by hairs prickling on the back of the neck or a hollowness in the bowels. Symbols are felt in the body.

Signs may be explored by experimentation and logic; symbols, by association. A symbol may be "amplified" by examining its use in myth and by examining related symbols.

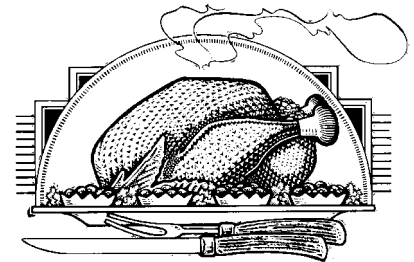
There are said to be four levels of response to symbols, the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. The first level merely takes the symbol literally. The second level finds allegories, where elements of the symbol are taken to refer to other things. In our continuing examination of the Labors of Theseus, we are mainly elaborating the myths allegorically. The third level takes the symbol personally. The symbol seems to be talking to you, telling you things about your own life. At the fourth level, the symbol and the personal involvement seem to fall away, giving experience of the mystery beyond.

As an example of the allegorical and moral levels, a friend reports that during a recent crisis in his life, he was quite affected by the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the imagery of Christ crucified, and the song "The Mary Ellen Carter" by Stan Rogers. He said, "My voice would catch; I would fight back tears; I would repeat

them to myself over and over again. They all evoked the same thing: death and resurrection. It was a message I needed just then, and it would not have been adequate to say, 'Things feel pretty bad now, but if you make a few changes, they'll probably get better.'"

Here are a couple of questions to reflect upon: First, is God a sign or a symbol? In either case, what does that make theism and atheism?

Secondly, is your name a sign or a symbol?



The Labors of Theseus, part

(We continue our view of the myths of Theseus as a boy's growing up.)

The fourth outlaw Theseus met was Cercyon, who would force travelers to wrestle with him and would crush the life out of them. Theseus used his skill at wrestling to crush the life out of Cercyon.

There are some problems in life that we must wrestle with. They come with

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the responsibilities of young adulthood, particularly starting a family. You cannot side-step them; you cannot walk away from them - not and be an adult. They require strength and skill to overcome.

The last outlaw Theseus met was Procrustes, an inn keeper who had two beds, one large one small. Short guests he would place on the large bed and rack them until they fit. Tall guests he would place on the small bed, and chop off the parts that stretched off it. Theseus left Procrustes on one of his beds; it is not recorded which.

We are always being judged too much or too little. Others always try to shape us to their expectations. The last obstacle to adulthood is to reject those efforts to make us something else, and for that, we must already be something. This we only achieve when we have a firm identity, which typically comes in our late twenties. It corresponds in Maslow's hierarchy to self actualization.

With all the outlaws he met, Theseus followed what we might call the Brazen Rule: Do unto others as they would do unto you - first.

When Theseus reached Athens, the sorceress Medea was living with his father King Aigeus in the palace and had borne him a son. She recognized Theseus immediately and warned the king of an assassin sent by his brother Pallas. She advised Aigeus to invite the would-be assassin to a feast and put poison in his drink.

So Theseus was invited to a banquet by Aigeus. As first toasts were about to be given, a huge roast was brought in, and Theseus handed Aigeus his sword to cut it with. Aigeus, recognizing his own sword, dashed the cup from Theseus's hand and embraced him. Medea fled back to Asia, never to

be seen in Greece again.

A recurring symbol for a man's soul is a woman, in this case, Medea is the father's soul that makes him fear and try to destroy his own son. This fear, striving against, and destruction of sons by fathers and fathers by sons is a recurring theme in Greek mythology. Here the resolution was this: Aigeus recognized the sword Theseus held was his own which he had left for Theseus. The sword is a symbol of manhood. The son offered his manhood to serve his father. The father recognized his son's manhood as his own. The father recognizing his son's manhood as his own is the resolution of father-son conflicts that, I suspect, we still use most successfully.

For Reflection

Consider the ritual of saying grace, i.e. offering a short prayer at a meal asking a blessing or saying thanks. Suppose you are an atheist or agnostic, but wish to perform this ritual. You would rather not use the word "God." How would you say grace? Do you address a god-equivalent such as "Spirit of Life?" Do you say, "We bless this food"? Or something else? Try them out. How do they feel? What are their implications?

Spiritual Intensive Activities

A neighbor discovered the Mullah Nasrudin one night on his hands and knees beneath a street light frantically searching for something. "What did you lose?" he asked.

"My key," wailed Nasrudin. "I can't get into my house until I find my key!"

So the neighbor knelt down to help search. After a long time, the neighbor sat up on his knees and asked, "Are you sure you lost it here?"

"Why no," said Nasrudin, "I lost it over by my front door."

"Then why aren't you searching there?" the neighbor shouted.

Nasrudin said, "Because the light is so much better here."



It is important not to let a spiritual intensive become just a discussion group. If you get together to discuss abstract topics, you will just parade out the opinions that you are already quite well aware of. The spiritual, whatever it may be, does not lie within the realm of the conscious mind.

When choosing things to discuss, you would do well to take stories, particularly myths, folktales, or parables. Better yet, read through a play based on such a story, with each part read by a particular member and with some amount of staging; it will involve more of you than just your intellect. As a specific suggestion, read through the play *J.B.* by Archibald MacLeish, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, (\$6.95 in paperback) which is based on the old testament book of Job. It is a movingly told story of good and evil, of the problem of pain, of justice, and of faith and hope.