

Symbol and Simplicity

by *Eric Sabelman*

Quakers strive for simplicity, but like everyone else, have difficulty achieving it. The task we have taken on is not to divest ourselves of mere things, but of the symbolic value attached to things.

This is not new among Friends. The struggle to detach ourselves from symbols led William Penn to title one of his major works *No Cross, No Crown*, in which he made the case that Quakers owed allegiance to something higher than the institutions symbolized by cross and crown.

Our Meetinghouse is as plain as we can make it, but we cannot escape surrounding ourselves with symbols. The flowers on the mantel and the trees outside the window symbolize the natural world in which we dwell. Turning the lights on symbolizes our consumption of energy. The tiles above the fireplace glazed with pictures of California wildlife were donated by an environmentally sensitive Friend as a symbol to future Quakers of the creatures once common to this land – a thoughtful reminder, but not a step toward simplicity.

I am not the best person to speak of simplicity: I am sentimental, and keep a lot of stuff with no use but to remind me of the people and places I once knew.

The role of a symbol is to focus one's attention on the idea it symbolizes. It inspires crowds to salute and cheer, but it is little help in seeking the truth through silent worship. Only if you focus on the mandala until it loses all meaning is it an aid to meditation.

To worship as Quakers do is to enter a room lined with doors. A symbol is designed to help you open only one door ... the door through which the symbol invites you to pass to find what it promises lies on the other side. But the object of Quaker worship is to open all the doors.

Every word I speak is symbolic; to each is attached a meaning derived from our common human experience. Even the word "God" is a symbol; to avoid invoking all the meanings attached to this word is why Quakers use it sparingly. Worship without symbols is necessarily silent.

A few years ago, when four peacemakers were held hostage in Iraq – among them Quaker Tom Fox – we called a public Meeting for Worship with a concern for the freeing of captives. Since non-Quakers would be attending, we printed a program, and I looked for a symbolic image for the program's cover. A 1950s voting rights poster from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had such an image: the hands of slaves breaking their chains. A powerful symbol indeed. (<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/FreedomNow/scans/GM0008-01.jpg>)

Simplicity is nothing less than throwing off your chains and being free.

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