

## God, Life, and Everything The Power and Limits of Symbol

Just three days to the Fourth of July, so...Happy Independence Day!

Whenever I think of this holiday, I always think of Archibald Willard's "The Spirit of '76." You know it. Three American patriots march victoriously through the battlefield. Two are beating drums (one a boy looking up to the grizzled but determined elder), while the third, head bandaged from unnamed battle injuries, plays a fife. Behind them waves the triumphant flag, Old Glory.

Willard, a Civil War veteran, painted it on the eve of the country's centennial. It is a powerful symbol of unity designed to make you proud to be an American. Based on his Civil War experiences, I suspect he knew there was a strong need for unity. A scene in which all Americans could claim victory together would fit the bill.

There are other symbols of our common nationality. On Independence Day, we will have parades, fireworks, and flags everywhere. Flags, flags, flags and more flags. They symbolize pride, celebration, battles won, and of course, national identity. At their best, they can be like "The Spirit of '76," a healing, uniting device that rallies a people together.

This year, we have probably all been thinking about flags more than usual. After the horrendous shootings at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, there has been controversy over the Confederate battle flag that flies near the South Carolina state house. More broadly, there has been controversy over whether it is a symbol of slavery, treason, or simply heritage.

This is a weakness in symbols. They can give off mixed messages. This is certainly true of the Confederate battle flag. Some southerners I know talk about it being a symbol of their heritage and their ongoing battle for states' rights (whatever they mean by that). On the other hand, others acknowledge that it was only used by the CSA for three years, that their heritage is much deeper than that, and that it was after all carried in battle against the United States of America. Add to that, the issue of slavery, and the fact that it wasn't flown over any southern state properties after the Civil War until the civil rights movement gained traction, and it's a cloudy symbol at best.

Others mention that the US flag has a similarly difficult past and is the symbol of much pain for many. For example, I imagine Native Americans don't look at the US flag in quite the same way that European Americans do. Yes, there's pride and liberty, but there is something darker in our flag that we would do well to acknowledge.

It appears that the Confederate battle flag will soon no longer fly on state grounds in South Carolina. Several other states are questioning their allegiance to the flag as well. Furthermore, a lot of retailers like Amazon and Wal-Mart have announced that they will soon stop selling the battle flag. [I note that they did not stop selling it immediately but are waiting until current supplies are exhausted. Meanwhile, sales of the flag have doubled. Would it be too jaded of me to think that maybe they knew they could bump up sales with this move? Then, in a year or two, they can quietly start selling the offending flag again.]

Anyway, this appears to be a victory for those who fight racism. Right?  
Maybe not.

Many have cautioned that merely getting rid of a symbol - no matter what it's a symbol of - does not necessarily change anything else.

As a member of a religion with LOTS of symbols, I can vouch for that. Our biggest symbol is the cross - a symbol of loving self-sacrifice, of care for those who hate us, of reaching out in love at all times even when faced with violence. The cross isn't just a symbol for us but a guide. Surely, that's why you see it everywhere, right?

I see it on tattoos, on jewelry, t-shirts, and so on. If this symbol were all that powerful, our country would be bursting at the seams with love and forgiveness and self-giving. Instead, we have the unofficial motto of: "Looking out for number one."

Symbol - either the presence or absence of it - does not necessarily affect behavior. Will getting rid of a Confederate flag make its adherents love this country any more? Will it make them change their minds about skin color or cultural bias or the dignity of the poor? Probably not.

Removing that symbol is a shallow gesture unless there are real changes, legislative and cultural, that reconcile the privileged and the marginalized. Without real action, it's just an advertising campaign for a worthless product.

And yet, symbol is important. Removing a symbol signals at least the intent to change. It recognizes that all is not right as it now stands. It says, "We want to do better." I suspect this is more true of "dead" symbols - symbols no longer in official use - than of those still formally acknowledged.

That may be a good thing. While the CSA no longer exists, the USA does. The Confederate battle flag's symbolism is carved in stone - it is the past. The stars and stripes - though stained by many national sins, is still a living symbol. Under this flag, the US can improve, can resolve to be a place that better represents, supports and protects all of its citizens - and to be a better citizen of the world.

Symbols are limited by their mixed messages. They are not all powerful. Changing them does not necessarily change behavior or conditions. But they do have value. And when a symbol can be a symbol of the good change going on in a society, then it can inspire hope and reconciliation. Like "The Spirit of '76."