

As many of you know I have, over many years accumulated a wide collection of crosses. I have Native American crosses, Orthodox crosses, Ethiopian crosses (like the processional cross in the corner), and any number of contemporary crosses. I recently did some research on one particular cross – as late as the 19th century the British called it a “*gammadian cross*” - which is actually what I call an “embellished cross. It first shows up in recorded history in ancient Mesopotamia and stood for positive spiritual principles and values. That’s at least 6,000 years ago and – obviously – at least 4,000 years “B.C.” – “Before Christ.”

My research showed, however, that this embellished cross is even older than that: that it’s “prehistoric;” a series of them were found on a late paleolithic figurine of a bird, carved from mammoth ivory. Now we’re talking over 30,000 years ago!

It turns out that this embellished cross is a symbol that has spread across our planet – it shows up in ancient Chinese art and in very early Hinduism and Buddhism; it shows up the middle and near East; it’s a symbol you can see in some of the earliest Christian Churches in the Holy Land, especially in the Galilee region dating to the 5th Century. The Armenians called it the “arevakhach” cross. The Celts adorned their artwork with this “*gammadion cross*.”

This embellished cross shape speaks of peace – it’s a symbol that, almost more than any other, is shared by different cultures – almost universal.

Would you wear one – as a symbol of peace, of positive spiritual principles and values shared across faiths? Sounds like a good way to encourage interfaith dialogue, doesn’t it?

But you know it already. Its ancient name is a “Swastika” and you’ve seen it (or actually a mirror image of it – a reverse of it) as a black cross in a white circle on a red flag. This cross of peace is now indelibly printed in our psyches, unbreakably linked to horror, murder, and death. It is the symbol for evil – it has the power to overwhelm conscious thought.

I use that word – “symbol” – intentionally. This red flag with the white center and the black swastika has enormous symbolic power, it overpowers all else, it has meaning beyond fabric, and red, white, and black colors; it connects us to ideas, experiences, realities beyond ourselves, beyond our limited reality to something much bigger and more powerful, to a “beyond” that generates energy out of all proportion to its simple reality of red, white, and black colors on a piece of fabric; it’s evocative – it echoes within us and in some profound and in this case frightening way it draws an evil, murderous past into all our presents. For those of us old enough to remember, it also generates real anger. It is very real and very tangible.

What I’ve just described about this flag is a perfect definition of a symbol – a hideous, negative symbol, but nevertheless a symbol.

The Nazi flag is also a metaphor – it contains within it a story that is no “just” a metaphor; not (as some thing of metaphors), “reality minus;” not somehow less than fully real. It’s the opposite; it’s more than real, more than temporal or limited. It connects us to a whole story that can help us understand the world in which we live and provide a rich entry point into the profound stories of

our lives. A very simple example would be Shakespeare's famous line "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances..."

Here's another symbol – a positive, expansive symbol: The Statue of Liberty. It's original truth is quite different than the way we look at it now. It wasn't an American idea but the brainchild of French historian and abolitionist Édouard René de Laboulaye who was inspired by the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. But it was as much about the overthrow of repressive Second Empire in France, proclaiming that France and liberty were, again, one. It was, in other words, a very French thing, and most Americans took little interest in it – so much so, in fact, that even as the Statue was being prepared for delivery, funds to build its base were woefully short. And so, in a last-ditch effort to raise the money before the statue arrived, a Pedestal Fund auction was set up. It was for this event that Emma Lazarus wrote the sonnet that now adorn's Lady Liberty's base.

The poem utterly recasts the meaning of a statue Emma Lazarus had never seen. It re-imagined the statue as a symbol of America's renunciation of conquest, empire, and pompous aristocracy; The statue was – and still is – a "New Colossus," who was – and still is – a "Mother of exiles" whose "mild eyes" and lifted torch would from then on – and still do – welcome the poor and downtrodden from all lands. The poem turned the Statue into what's called an "aspirational metaphor", and "aspirational symbol."

The symbolic power of the Statue is most fully made real in Lazarus' poem; it expresses an ideal of American identity, that in the words of Lazarus' biographer Esther Schor proclaim a welcome to immigrants, saying not "America First," but "America, at last."

The Statue of Liberty is the hope-filled vision of possibility, not the callous guardian of self-interest; it is the warm beacon of welcome, not the stark, night-time searchlight of an exclusion zone.

And for us on this day, it has power, because the truth is that the Statue of Liberty finds its inspiration, it's symbolism, and its metaphorical freight deep in our human past, at least, if not exclusively, in the beams of light described in the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration story is a brilliant metaphor that speaks to us of the power of God to transform lives; it speaks of a connectedness with a past that draws out the strains of religious liberty in Law and Prophets and focuses them on the person of Jesus, the one who proclaims the mercy, justice, and freedom that comes from God. It speaks of a brightness of being that invites, that offers a warm welcome to all no matter what their/our background stories might contain; that promises the new possibilities that come with an enlightened self-awareness – that promises joy, and peace, and love.

The glowing face of Jesus is the symbol of that transformation, of those promises of that proposed reality.

The Transfiguration story is not an exclusive claim to corner the truth of faith but a broad

exclamation of relief and joy that we have been given both a vision of, and an invitation into, the kingdom of God

There is, in the story of the Transfiguration – and, for that matter, the story of the Statue of Liberty and the poem that redefined it – a truth that’s just out of our of reach, a reality just beyond our grasp. That’s the way it is with great, positive symbols and great positive metaphors: they offer a vision of something that we know on a profound level is real with a capital “R” and true with a capital “T” and yet remains out ahead of us, inviting us on, calling us to strive to live into the fullness and richness of authentic human identity, which always – always – has to do with the positive human values of love, and joy, and peace, and compassion, and relationship, and welcome, and embrace.

That vision still endures, that hope still lives, and that promise will never die for it is the “lamplift[ed] beside the golden door,” not only of this nation, but of God’s reign.