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SYMBOLISM AND CERTAINTY

By

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The old man declared "I shore do believe in education, because if you ain't got none you got to use your brain." The sad thing is that so many diploma holders agree with him.

The piece of paper you receive at this graduation is nothing more than a symbol of your completion of a prescribed curriculum. Symbols are handy. How could your mother get teary-eyed over 212 credit hours? How could your girl look at you with such pride that you have plowed through 316 books? How could your fraternity brother tease you about completing eight term papers, three independent study courses, and a dozen all night study sessions? But a diploma--that's something else. That is a symbol. A symbol is something anybody can handle.

Symbols are useful in human affairs. They simplify what is not simple. They provide a shorthand for instant communication, give us the feeling of a common understanding. They are easy targets for emotion. And here the danger lies: they give the outward appearance of certainty.

Did you know that 25% of all the people who ever lived are alive today? And symbolism seems to have proliferated on an equal scale. Every institution, every organization, every cause has its symbols: from the flag, to the red cross, and the red feather, and the blue cross, and the green cross, the peace symbol, the clenched fist, even to hair styles and dress styles, to posture and mannerisms. None of us can completely avoid their use. We all read symbols, and much of our reading is not in the conscious mind. We fail to think about what we mean by our own use of symbols and about what we read into other people's symbols. Too often a symbol is read as a certainty. When so read it assumes more authority than it ought to have, and man can become slave to it.

Symbols have no more authority and certainty than we give them. They can be helpful when used as a rough shorthand, dangerous when used as precision tools. They can be enlightening when used to dramatize ideas, deadening when used as mental roadblocks.

Recognizing the difficulties of meaning and variations in usage does not mean we should underestimate the power of a symbol--as Adam did when he shrugged "Oh, well, it's only an apple."

You are graduating, they say, in a time of crisis. Of course the world has been in a crisis since Adam so misjudged that apple. The doom criers have been wailing in every generation, waving symbols, castigating people in neat categories, despairing of a future. But always there have been some who believed in the promise of the future, who did not require certainty as a prerequisite for action, nor symbols as a substitute for thought.

For the past few years you have been a part of the academic community. You came, in a sense, as a consumer--to expose yourself, not just to ideas, but to the stimulus of a vast range of human experience systematically made available. Hopefully you have learned to be a participant in the academic world--to be one who will carry the habit of seeking and learning through the rest of your life. The mission of a university should be to teach the skills of seeking knowledge with an open mind. An educated man should be able to reach conclusions which can be acted upon, but he must be always ready to accept and assimilate new evidence.

If you believe that every man who affects a peace symbol is willing to deal with others in a peaceful fashion--if you believe every flag waver is devoted to the freedoms for which this country stands--you are simply naive. If you believe the opposite--that the peace symbol denotes an angry spirit and the flag a repressive power structure--you are abdicateing reason for a pseudo-sophistication. It is possible and popular to get this kind of sophistication made to order to fit your

current prejudices. Thus your mind is spared the inconvenience of taking in new ideas and the discomfort of adjusting to new combinations.

But if we are to come through our present problems with constructive responses, we must guard against the presently popular tendency (even among the so-called educated) to categorize people and groups: A long haired student in blue jeans is not necessarily dangerous. A businessman in the conventional suit, shirt and tie is not necessarily out of touch with today's youth. A black man who wears sunglasses and an "Afro" is not necessarily a Black Panther. A good math professor is not necessarily infallible in social philosophy. A politician is not necessarily a defector from idealism. A police officer is not necessarily of the political right. And a college graduate is not necessarily educated.

Such categories are like binoculars. They may help us perceive and make sense of the view over a wide area; but person to person communication is warped if we insist on using them at close range.

The most serious danger however is letting ourselves be put into categories, letting the complexities of our own ever changing life view hide behind the simplicity of a symbol. We begin by the mental laziness of fitting others into neat little pockets. Then, with such wonderfully clear labels, it is natural to become angry at the mistakes "THEY" are making. In this frame of mind it is all too easy to think in terms of "WE" as the enemy of the impersonal "THEY" and thus to accept for one's self the simplicity of a slogan. The only cure is an occasional spell of independent thinking.

So as you receive your diploma today, accept it as a sign not only of achievement, but also of potential, determining to use your own mental powers in judging people, issues, and movements. Don't betray the educational opportunity that has been yours by categorizing people on the basis of symbols. It won't hurt for an educated man to use his brain, too.