

## The Role of the Symbolic

December 17, 1967

We humans live by our symbols. They are our way of reaching our special reality. We cannot live without symbols – not and be truly human. For only by the creation and manipulation of symbols can we (a) comprehend and (b) control our otherwise mysterious and hostile environment. Without our unique ability to create and manipulate symbols, we would be only poor, naked, shivering things, lonely organisms, throbbing life away in the dark, incomprehensible, unmanageable universe.

But give us our symbols – give us sound symbols, our speech – give us sight symbols, our arts – and you begin to make human beings of us. We begin to create, to form out of the void a special reality of our own, one not present in the universe before, a reality of the mind, of the psychic, of what we Christians call the soul – the *imago dei* – something fresh and new under the stars. We become craftsmen, mathematicians. We begin to talk a new talk, one which separates us from the rest of the biological creatures. We begin to talk of “truth” and “justice,” and of “home” and “love,” and of “God.” And we create an infinite number of symbols to (1) catch, and (2) clarify, and (3) control, and (4) change the special realities we have brought to life.

That is to say – there are great clusters of symbols that define and protect everything that makes us essentially human. For example, on a very simple level – think of all the symbols that catch and keep the reality which is sounded by the word, “home.” Do you not think of shelter and food, of family and warm embraces, and voices saying, “I love you” – do you not think of labor, and tears and laughter, of birthing and growing and dying – of firelight and picnics and dancing – of sickness, and sharp tempers, and hurt feelings, and soft affections – of quarrels and strong loyalties – and a thousand thousand other sights and sounds and touches, all symbols, that catch, and clarify, and control, and change that uniquely human reality expressed in the word “home” –

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So I am puzzled by people who think they can do without the symbolic. For one cannot think or speak, or sing, or live any life above the anatomic, without the use of the symbolic. No music without those notes. And what would a banker be without his ability to count “1-2-3”? And love without words is only biology. All essentially, all uniquely human realities are carried by symbols. And that is that.

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So in religion. So in Christianity. The reality of the faith is captured by the symbols – and the clearer and stronger the symbols, the greater the clarity and strength of the faith.

In Christianity, the central figure, The A +  $\Omega$  around which all others cluster, is the Christ-figure Himself – large and luminous, and demanding. His whole life of humility and suffering and triumph is caught up in and carried by clusters of symbols created by the church to preserve his life and to present him afresh to each succeeding generation. Symbols like Baptism + Holy Communion become, for the Christian, contact points with the Christ and his world, at the same time – helping the Christian to identify himself and his own world. These ancient symbols become therefore the Christian’s frame of reference. They talk to us, speak to us, tell us who we are and what we are supposed to do: “you too

are a poor child and slave of God, born to live a life of humanity and compassion.” Thus they not only identify the Christian, but beckon to him, goad him on, guide him.

Yes, the Christian faith, like every other discipline, has its symbols. The loss of them means the loss of Christian identity, of Christian sanity, of Christian security.

In a hyper-cynical era, which often attaches stigma to ancient symbols, we Christians are in danger of losing the realities of faith and hope and love which these old figures have so long carried.

+The symbols we substitute for them are often weak and shabby. They range from rocketry to eroticism and void the heart of eternity.

So give us back the old figures of the faith. Give us back our angels, our shepherds, our wise men. Give us back our disciples, even Judas. Give us back our bloody cross, our open tomb. Give them all back to us, led by the central figure of the Christ – for they grapple with pain and time and death. They beckon us toward the eternity of an undying love.

Amen