

Shibboleths and other tells

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-22

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A shibboleth is a custom, principle, or belief distinguishing a particular class or group of people, especially a long-standing one regarded as outmoded or no longer important. It has an important history that I will tell you about later but a few days ago, I couldn't help but think of it as I read the Herald's *Column 8*:

“Reading about Newington Old Boys reminded me of my experience as principal of a private school in the eighties with the Old Girls Union,” says Patty Dyson of Lane Cove North. “They had collected some money and wanted to donate a gift to the school. As computers had just become available, I begged for a couple of Apple II computers for the staff and library. My plea fell on deaf ears. Instead, they paid to replace the grey bitumen entrance drive with a red gravel one as that was what they had had in the '30s!”¹

You see we make judgments about people on all sorts of signs and symbols. Their choice tells us that the alumni are out of date and out of touch. We can laugh about it but they wouldn't see it.

If I came to work with my Teddy Bear, you might think I'm childish. If I live in Sydney or Melbourne and used expressions like, “struth!” or “Dead-set” you might think me a country bumkin. (which they did)

A 'tell' is a poker term – it is the ticks and body movements that we make without knowing that gives another player a clue about the hand we hold. ²

Symbols and talismans are important to us and sometimes say more than we would care to admit.

How many of you had a lucky penny? When I was growing up a rabbit's foot on a key chain was a common birthday gift³. When I left home, I was given a Mezuzah to wear around my neck – that is a tiny silver case with an Old Testament scroll inside. As a child, you probably had a toy or a blanket that made you feel secure – but

¹ Sydney Morning Herald, Column 8, February 28, 2024 – 9.00pm

² Like when my mother drew a deep breath before speaking, I knew I was in trouble. Or when you see the corners of a waiter's mouth turn down when you ask for tomato sauce

³ Rabbits' feet date back centuries both in African spiritualism and European custom believed to bring fertility and prosperity.

somewhere along the line, you gave it up. Some people still remember the trauma of when that symbol was snatched. Some can't remember when they left it behind.⁴

In language and in actions, shibboleths represent what is no longer relevant. If you go to the Doctor's today and she waved a pole with an image of a snake over you, I doubt whether you would be satisfied with the service.

But symbols have an enduring purpose. The snake symbol is internationally known as representing doctors and pharmacists. Whether you speak the language or not, you know you have the right place.

When you pass a musician with an open case and a few coins in it, you don't need to ask whether they would like a donation. (although I have to admit, I was puzzled that the busker had a large Q code displayed in his guitar case – until I realised, you can give direct. People don't carry change anymore – so even coins displayed in a case have become a shibboleth)

A few months ago, my husband and I were visiting a country Victorian Town. There was a large curiosity shop on the main street and in the window, amongst the statues and old tea pots was a magnificent menorah. (a menorah is the traditional candelabra used in the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah) It was a beautiful, modern work of art – totally out of place in a window full of antique crockery.

So, of course we went in. We asked about the menorah and with that, the elderly Dutchman told us his story. He was born in 1942 during the German occupation of Holland. He migrated to Australia not long after the war. As his parents aged, he returned to the Netherlands more frequently. In more recent years, he noticed a menorah in his aunt's apartment but he didn't know what it was. And more recently, an unused one in his mother's house. As his mother was failing, in her final months, even in her final days, and with much prompting and insistence, she told him his story.

Through luck or bureaucratic collusion, by changing just one or two letters of their family name, his family had a Christian surname. That allowed them to live a relatively 'normal' life during the occupation provided they erased any, and all, symbols, language, food preferences, habits, expressions or anything else that might identify them as Jewish. He was born in the middle of this and so there was no bris, no rituals, no symbols – nothing. He grew up ignorant of his heritage...until he was in his 70s.

⁴ My son had a little bear that fitted in the kangaroo pocket of his overalls. One day, we left it in Bourke having visited a bi-lingual pre-school. He decided on the trip home that the aboriginal children needed it more than he did.

He said me, 'you know I always knew – something. I FELT Jewish'.

He's not religious man nor a practicing Jew but he has the symbol in his window that is an invitation. Like a neon sign that says – "I am open – for connection". Is there anyone out there?

Our lives are full of shibboleths and symbols. I'll give you a brief history of shibboleths before we move on.

It is a Hebrew word for stream. In the Old Testament, there is a battle raging and there were spies and infiltrators afoot. And there was only one crossing at the Jordan. The general picked a code word that an enemy soldier could not say without his accent giving him away. It immediately identified the soldier as 'not one of us'.

So in a way, shibboleth is the first password in the Bible. And like all passwords (and some ideas and symbols), it has a use-by date: Like the name of your cat or dog is no security against hackers.

Just as we are about to finish, let's look at our own symbols. If you were in the place of the elderly Dutchman, what symbol would you put in the window to call in your kind? (The people you want to connect with.)

(pause)

How many people in this room have a cross around their necks? (pause) Why?

Is it your security blanket? Do you hold it and scare off evil like an exorcist?

Is it a connection to a loved one or your family? The way you carry them with you?

You wear the symbol of Jesus' death upon your body. Is it a warning or protest? Why do you wear a cross and not a dove? Or a fish?

I'm sure you remember why our cross doesn't have Jesus on it but for those new to the church, I'll explain. Our Puritan forefathers thought that was idolatry. They forbade it...but it is also to remind us that our faith is based before the cross – that is the life of Jesus, his teaching, is as important as his death. We do not live for death – but for life. It is one of the reasons our faith communities are so eager to leap to Easter Sunday and not necessarily practice Holy Week in its fullest.

Is the cross you are wearing a call out – a sign for others of a similar mind to make contact or conformity, a way to say, I am one of you? Perhaps the Dutchman's mother put one around his neck as protection.

As we go out today, I'd like you to think about the signs and symbols, the stories and amulets that you have had – and discarded.

Humans really like their effigies on plinths and poles. As we passed International Women's Day, one person noted that Only 31 of 321 statues in Danish cities are of women, with the rest being of men, horses or fantastical creatures, such as mermaids⁵. Of those, only five named statues are of women, 70 are dedicated to men, while 26 are of animals. What we see counts. How many statues of women have you seen? How come they are not represented in our squares as heroes?

You know that we have shibboleth's in the church. Even a long time ago, a young person could be a 'Elder' because we haven't changed the language around those who care for others. When we speak of God as gender specific when there is no place that the divine is given a gender except in the mouths of man. And I stress *Man* because women's voices have been largely left out of our Canon.⁶

And I'd like you to be aware of how we are surrounded by symbols. We speak another language in pictures. Look at road signs; keyboards; and every household appliance. We speak another language in visuals: how we dress and body language; the symbols we wear; and how we use emojis (1/2 of which I still don't understand). And we are surrounded by centuries of good luck charms, amulets and talismans from all cultures transported into ours: acorns; elephants; horse shoes⁷; scarab beetles; and greeting cats.

I leave you with 3 questions: What are the signs you use to open yourself up to another? What are the charms or ideas you keep that have passed their use-by dates? What is it that you touch or hold – that makes a space for God?

So I pray: ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." Loving God; I have things that I've held up too long and must let go, talismans that are no longer relevant. Holy Spirit let those drop away as I raise my eyes to you. I pray light beyond death, hope above surrender and connection above all else. Amen.

⁵ Mythical beasts outnumber women: Denmark eyes 'totally crazy' statue imbalance By James Crisp, Sydney Morning Herald, March 8, 2024 — 8.00am

⁶ Gospel of Mary - Wikipedia

The Gospel of Mary is a non-canonical text discovered in 1896 in a fifth-century papyrus codex written in Sahidic Coptic.

⁷ Do you think modern brides have any idea why they are given decorative horseshoes? They actually date back to Roman times and pre Christian Celtic traditions