



UP
front

I chose the cover image (with Jenna's help) and its companion on the table of contents page because they are rich with New Year symbolism. They were, according to my iPhone timestamp, taken in January, though not this one. I snapped them during a frigidly invigorating afternoon walk, alone in a speck of Iceland that I probably can't find on a map today.

Symbols and signs are everywhere, if we're open to them. You might question if we will a thing's essence into meaning because of our own needs. But it's difficult to doubt the power of a sign or metaphor as a tool to more thorough understanding.

According to Merriam-Webster, symbolism is "... expressing the invisible or intangible through visible or sensuous representations; ... artistic imitation or invention that reveals or suggests immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truth or states; ... the representation of divine beings and spirits; ... (plainly) a system of signs or representations."

In chicken-and-egg terms, does a thing that holds symbolic value exist solely in its own context and we imbue it with unintended significance? Or does the design of a thing purposely impact our psyches in some divinely intentional way? The philosophical truth of the answer to this either/or question doesn't matter much, since the effects of signs and symbols are noticeable, allusion is instructive, and metaphor works.

Some symbols are straightforward and simple. My photos feature snow, and it's cold this week by Southern standards. Snow is white, and January is a new beginning: The chilly darkness of winter is swaddled in a blanket of unblemished hope.

Symbolic images have layers of meaning. There's a church in the distance (in the TOC pic), then closer (on the cover). It's the only structure in sight (save for a low-slung, utilitarian storage shed in the TOC image). A beacon of comfort and safety among a vast and barren scape. The approach to the church is flanked by trees, their branches empty now, but they will flourish again. There's a recognizable path, but it remains untrodden. Without the convenience of fresh footprints, I must choose the work of breaking new ground and moving

closer to the sanctuary. Alternatively, I can turn back and revert to the course I've already worn, knowing with certainty that the place it takes me will be exactly where I started from.

Markers and signs are visible, but their words are too small to read from where I stand. They say something, but I'm not sure what.

A mountain rises behind the church, as if God is warning: You made it this far; you're re-energized and warm after a stop at my house; but, you've got a long way to go, and much of it will be uphill.

There are shadows that seem to be actively lengthening. The light is gentle and receding. There's an end near, but a beginning following soon thereafter, and again and again and again.

In the photo taken farther afield from the church, there's evidence of more than one person venturing away from the building then gently arcing in a semicircular back towards it. Their walk is not linear; they have eschewed the obvious trajectory, but their destination is clear. The beckoning polarity of the steeple rising from the field compels them back.

A new year. New opportunity, which includes the possibility of mining hidden treasure beneath the surface of everyday routine. I'll take that metaphor as a sign.

Scott A Laurer

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