

August 6, 2026 Finger Pointing



"Money is only the means of purchasing something of real worth that is not money." - Wendell Berry

It struck me as a larger truth when Wendell Berry went on to say: "To live almost entirely [...] by purchase is to depress the worth of every actual thing to its price. And so, the symbol limits and controls the thing it symbolizes". Price and worth are not always the same, of course, and worth is highly subjective depending on the person, the circumstances, and their needs and desires. Price, while not fixed, is far less caring. Certainly, on a happier day away from Bosworth Field, King Richard III would not have offered to trade his royal crown for a single horse (at least as Shakespeare tells it). But at that moment, he really wanted to skedaddle!

Symbols- whether money minted, flags woven, tattoos inked, crowns or rings forged, crosses burned or worn, monuments placed, or images fashioned all have purpose of sorts- whether for good or ill- but are not of themselves that which they represent. Meant as outward signs or inspirations to remember and uphold revered (or reviled) ideas, values, heroes, or struggles, they are not the thing they symbolize. How easy it is to forget that...to wrap ourselves in a flag and lose sight of the principals and ideals it symbolizes. Dead people can't use money, but countless souls have died for it, and many more for the lack of it. "Til death do we part", yes, but wouldn't you trade the gold band on your finger for life-saving surgery for the one who placed it there? Of course you would, in a heartbeat. Heck, take the whole finger or hand! For too many, life is spent trying to make a living rather than having a life. For most of us, all too often the symbol can indeed limit and control the thing it symbolizes. Alan Watts refers to this error as "...to mistake the symbol for reality, to look at the finger pointing the way and [then to] suck it for comfort rather than follow it." Buddhism, (from which I suspect Watts borrowed) uses the less graphic analogy of the "finger pointing to the moon" being intended to direct our attention to the moon, not the finger.

But, should you pose clutching and kissing a symbol trying to fool someone into thinking you know or care what it symbolizes- well, then maybe you'll get to see the finger flashed too.

Have a Not-Sucky Thinksday