

SEMIOTICS 101 PART THREE.

What in heaven's name is '**Semiotics?**'

- The study of signs and symbols of all kinds; what they mean and how they relate to the things or ideas they refer to.
- The study of communication through signs and symbols.
- The study of the way in which people communicate through signs and symbols.
- Someone who studies this is called a **semiotician**.

Semiotics is the art of making connections; of linking disparate, seemingly incongruous, unrelated dots; of seeing relationships between what might at first seem trifling matters.

Our brains are apparently wired to detect patterns; it is what we are designed to do.

The other day Karen and I picked up the Grandkids to look after them while Donald and Janaya were at a wedding.

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For a number reasons, none of which matter, we had two cars. Karen took Neeve and I drove with Indy.

On the way home Neeve, who is three, said to Karen,
“Kazza, there’s a pattern here.”

Karen asked her what she meant.

She repeated,

“There’s a pattern here; there are two cars and the boys are in one and the girls are in another.”

Her little brain is already joining dots.

Jesus called His disciples to be semiotically aware;

Matthew 16:1-3.

Some Pharisees and Sadducees were on him again, pressing him to prove himself to them. He told them, "You have a saying that goes, 'Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky at morning, sailors take warning.' You find it easy enough to forecast the weather--why can't you read the signs of the times?****

Semiotics is the art and science of paying attention.

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The busyness of our world is making us semiotically blind and deaf.

In the second half of the 20th Century the human ability to distinguish different sounds has plummeted.

In 1980's the human ear could subtly detect 300,000 distinct sounds.

In the 21st Century this has dropped to 180,000 sound; a drop of nearly 50%.

God is still writing on walls and appearing in burning bushes, but the sad reality is most of us are missing the show.

{Show the You Tube clip -- Selective attention test.}

Moses was a semiotician.

Exodus 3:1-4

Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. He led the flock to the west end of the wilderness and came to the mountain of God, Horeb. The angel of GOD appeared to him in flames of fire blazing out of the middle of a bush. He looked. The bush was blazing away but it didn't burn up. Moses said, "What's going on here? I can't believe

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this! Amazing! Why doesn't the bush burn up?" GOD saw that he had stopped to look. God called to him from out of the bush, "Moses! Moses!" He said, "Yes? I'm right here!"

Moses had every reason to be semiotically dull.

He'd been at this job for 40 years.

There had been 14, 640 days before this 'one day.'

There was no premonition as he awoke that morning that this would be different from the 14, 639 that had preceded it.

It was just a common, ordinary, garden-variety day that would be spent with his Father-in-Law's flock.

Nothing more, nothing less and after 40 years you would imagine, nothing else!

But God works by stepping into ordinary days and ordinary lives.

Into this ordinary day God sends a disrupting, semiotic event.

Now even with this, Moses could have turned away.

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It wasn't as if he hadn't seen one before.

On stormy nights he had seen lightening strike a tree or bush and engulf it in flames.

Sometimes in the extreme heat of the desert day these dry old bushes would spontaneously combust.

It's known that some of these bushes had oil deposits in their leaves so they would make quite a sight as they burnt.

You'll notice in the text that it wasn't the burning of the bush that caught Moses' attention; it was that it burnt but was not consumed.

Exodus 3:3

“This is strange,” he thought. Why isn't the bush burning up? I will go closer and see.”

It was at this point when he decided to go off the ordinary path and examine this semiotic event; away from the normal course of events, that God stepped in and met him.

“Then Moses said ... I will now turn aside ...”

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“So when the lord saw that he turned aside to look ... “

Moses stepped aside from his responsibilities for a moment.

He headed in another direction and walked towards that which had captured his attention.

‘When’ he did this, **‘then’** God encountered him.

When I say, “God is still writing on walls and appearing in burning bushes,” I hope you realize I don’t necessarily mean literally.

It raises an immediate question; what form might a burning bush take in my world?

Let me make some suggestions.

1. An inexplicable person can be a burning bush.

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Have you ever encountered someone who acted in such a counter-cultural way that it deeply challenged your view of reality?

I recently heard a story of a woman who made a very costly mistake at her work place.

It was probably serious enough to get her fired.

Her immediate boss took the blame for the mistake. Because of his senior status he wasn't fired as she might have been, but it was serious enough that it would of course affect his immediate career path.

The woman was staggered that he would take the rap for her.

She had experienced lots of bosses who were quite happy to shift the blame onto her for mistakes they had made but had never experienced one that had taken the blame for her.

She later thanked him and asked him why he had done it.

Graciously, and without being 'preachy,' he explained that he was a Christian; how that Jesus had taken the

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blame for him and it was the least he could do to do it for her.

This was a 'paradigm bomb' for this woman.

She had always assumed that religious people were 'blamers.'

She inquired what church he attended and started doing the same.

An inexplicable person became a burning bush for her.

Inexplicable, by the way, has some interesting synonyms – bizarre, curious, strange are among them.

I don't mean to incline you to weirdness, but in semiotics you are often drawn to the 'atypical,' the arrhythmic's, the skipped rhythms, the 'odd man out,' or what one business consultant called, 'positive deviance.'

The atypical, for example, is often an important aspect of interpreting dreams.

Often it's the 'odd thing' in the dream that can unlock it.

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Ray's dream of watching the cows come in for milking. In the middle of the herd was a camel.

The camel walked up and stood on his foot so that he couldn't move.

Instead of the normal attire of a farmer – gumboots, he had tennis shoes on.

There were two atypical things in the dream that actually unlocked it – the camel and the tennis shoes.

Inexplicable people don't have to be totally weird – by atypical I mean things like –

- They could be **unsaved**. {Have you ever have a non believer say something to you, that in hindsight, or perhaps even at the time, you knew to be God's voice; a burning bush?}
- They might be a brand **new believer** who really didn't have much in the way of knowledge or maturity, but they brought a word that you knew was God. I remember once when we were facing a significant decision about whether we should leave the church we were in and relocate to another

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location and church. We had just made the decision but I, at least, was wracked with confusion and doubt that we had made the correct one. A new convert knocked at my office door and asked if she could tell me something. I pulled my mind away from the doubt and confusion and the busyness of my schedule and said, 'Sure.' She then said, "I think God has told me something to tell you. The decision you have just made is the correct one," [She didn't know about what we were facing – we hadn't told anyone] She went on, "the confusion that you have been facing will leave," she went on to tell me several other things that were very relevant to my change. She was an inexplicable burning bush.

- They could be a **child**. I know of a family that we facing a major relocation – inter country. They hadn't discussed it with their small children. They talked about the city that they were looking at, but never the country. For example they would talk of moving to Madrid, but never Spain. Their oldest child who was only three at the time came out one day, in the midst of their deliberations and said to her

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mother, “Mum, can we move to Spain?” On another occasion she woke crying from a dream and while being comforted said, “Mum, are their spiders in Spain?” Then on a third occasion, {all in a very short space of time} she asked her mother to show her Spain on the map. You would have to have been semiotically challenged not to think God’s up to something here. That Child was a burning bush.

God’s burning bushes are not always found at the centre of things. To be a good semiotician you need to develop good peripheral vision.

Most of the Hebrew prophets emerged, not from the centre, the temple, but stormed into prominence from the margins.

Jesus, the master semiotician was quite at home on the fringe.

2. An Inexplicable train of thoughts might be a burning bush.

I have noticed that at times God interrupts my thought processes with a flow at thoughts that are clearly not my own.

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Frederick Beuchner says so elegantly that he often encounters God when **‘thoughts that he did not choose to think, choose him to think them.’**

I’m not going to amplify this thought other than to simply say, be alert to these spontaneous whispers.

They can often be, or at lead to, burning bushes.

3. Inexplicable coincidences can be burning bushes.

Have you ever noticed that you are thinking about some subject and at that particular time a song comes on the radio that speaks directly to the subject you have been considering. Or perhaps you have been struggling with something during the week and at church that Sunday the Pastor talks about the very thing you have been grappling with.

You can dismiss this as ‘coincidental,’ or you can turn aside for a moment. I believe that these so-called ‘coincidences’ are often the language of the Spirit to us.

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I have just been rereading a series of **Frederick Buechner** books and I read this story that fits exactly what I am talking about.

His daughter was battling with Anorexia, and it was literally tearing his family apart.

He wrote,

“I remember sitting parked by the I roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter’s illness and what was going on in our family, when out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then. The word was ‘TRUST.’ What do you call a moment like that? Something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while? The word of God? I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both, but for me it was an epiphany. The owner of the car turned out to be, as I’d suspected, a trust officer in a bank, and not long ago, having read of an account I wrote of the incident somewhere, he found out where I lived and one afternoon brought me the

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licence plate itself, which sits propped up on a bookshelf in my house to this day. It is rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen.”

God doesn't always use flashing lights and smoke machines to speak to us.

Sometimes, often times it is divine coincidence. The question is will we see it for what it is, or will we simply shrug our shoulders and move on by with our sheep?

4. An inexplicable dream can be a burning bush.

I've talked about these burning bushes before so I don't plan to dwell on dreams in any depth.

Let me, however, read to you from Buechner again as he tells one experience he had with a dream that is pretty remarkable.

“A year or so ago, a friend of mine died. He was an Englishman -- witty, elegant, multifaceted. One morning in his sixty-eighth year he simply didn't wake up. It was

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about as easy a way as he could possibly have done it, but it was not easy for the people he left behind because it gave us no chance to start getting used to the idea beforehand or to say good-bye either in words, if we turned out to be up to it, or in some awkward, unspoken way if we weren't. He died in March, and in May my wife and I were staying with his widow overnight when I had a short dream about him. I dreamed he was standing there in the dark guest room where we were asleep, looking very much himself in the navy blue jersey and white slacks he often wore. I told him how much we had missed him and how glad I was to see him again. He acknowledged that somehow. Then I said, "Are you really there, Dudley?" I meant was he there in fact, in truth, or was I merely dreaming he was. His answer was that he was really there. "Can you prove it?" I asked him. "Of course," he said. Then he plucked a strand of wool out of his jersey and tossed it to me. I caught it between my thumb and forefinger, and the feel of it was so palpably real that it woke me up. That's all there was to it. It was as if he'd come on purpose to do what he'd done and then left. I told the

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dream at breakfast the next morning, and I'd hardly finished when my wife spoke. She said that she'd seen the strand on the carpet as she was getting dressed. She was sure it hadn't been there the night before. I rushed upstairs to see for myself, and there it was -- a little tangle of navy blue wool."

Perhaps not a deeply spiritual dream in one way; perhaps even some interesting theological problems posed by it, and yet something like that can truly be a burning bush to us at some dimension of our journey.

5. An inexplicable trouble can lead to a burning bush.

Most of us prefer not to have these sorts of 'burning bush' experiences, but the reality is there are times when the only way God can get our attention is when we are in trouble.

Not all burning bushes are pleasant experiences.

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In the midst of storms we can become very open to God. The storm at sea was a burning bush experience for Jonah the prophet.

When you find yourself in trouble, it's always a good thing to first look to the Lord rather than simply do all you can to get out of the problem.

Sometimes problems and the pain they cause can lead us to burning bushes.

C. S. Lewis famously commented,

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

6. An inexplicable emptiness can lead us to a burning bush.

Like trouble, emptiness isn't a pleasant experience.

We seek fullness and will do all we can to avoid the sensation of emptiness.

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At times God allows all our attempts to achieve fullness to be in vain so that He can reveal himself to us as the I only one that can truly satisfy.

The luxury and splendour of the Egyptian palace left Moses feeling empty and lost and it served as a 'burning bush' call to him.

He went out to see his Israeli brethren and this started a long journey that concluded 40 years later at another burning bush.

Let me read you something from Ken Gire that illustrates what I mean,

"It all began with a dream. In 1955 I was a student at the University of Missouri, enrolled in the school of Journalism. Early that October word came to me that I had won first prize of \$100 in a short-story contest sponsored by the University magazine. It was a real feather in my cap as Missouri boasts one of the four best journalism schools in the Country. One hundred dollars was big bucks in those days. Coupling it with the \$110 monthly cheque I received from the GI Bill, I was

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financially secure. Further I was informed that the prestigious fiction magazine, 'The New Yorker,' would be looking at my future literary efforts with the promise of a job after graduation. I was engaged to a beautiful girl named Barbara and we planned to marry the following year. Other 21 year olds might have been confused and uncertain about the direction of their lives, but not I. I was a seasoned veteran of the Marine Corps. Career and romance were humming smoothly. I was playing with a full deck, knew where I was going and rowing rhythmically with both oars in the water. I felt I was a cut above my classmates, shaped in a different mould.

Then came the dream that blew my boat out of the water. In the dream I was driving a Cadillac up a steep hill and the scene seemed more real than reality. At the crest of the hill was a fourteen-room-ranch-style house with a panoramic view of the valley below. My name was on the letterbox. Parked in the drive were a Lincoln and a Porsche. Inside the house Barbara was baking bread and the voices of four kids ranging from 8 to 18 rang out to greet me. I looked in the rear-view of the

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mirror and decided my white hair needed a trim. I seemed to be between 45-50 years old. As I opened the front door of our house, I noticed the plaque hanging prominently on the wall. It was the Nobel Prize for literature -- awarded to me.

I suddenly awakened from the dream in a cold sweat, shouting, "Oh God there's got to be more!" Am I going to invest the next 25 years of my life struggling to achieve fame, success, wealth and happy domesticity – and discover that that is all there is?

A tremendous restlessness overcame me with a deep dissatisfaction. Why couldn't I be content with the ordinary joys of a normal person? How could this 'something more' be so pressing and urgent if I didn't even know what it was? But there was no turning back. Unsettled and bewildered I embarked on a search for God.

Some of you have all that one could ask for.

You have friends, a good job with a promising career path, discretionary income, an attractive

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girlfriend/boyfriend or spouse and yet there is a haunting sense of emptiness that pervades your life.

You can either look for something else or someone else to fill it or you can allow God to turn it into a burning bush experience where God calls you to Himself and His purposes in a whole new way.

Life is full of semiotic events if we have eyes to see,
This week I was struck by a couple of Scriptures I read.

The first was in **Psalm 54:3 BBE**

“For men who are going after me have come out against me, violent men are purposing to take my soul; they have not put God before their eyes.”

A little later I read this from **Psalm 16:8 (BBE)**

“I have put the Lord before me at all times; because he is at my right hand, I will not be moved.”

The wicked don't put God before their eyes; the righteous do.

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The call is to live ‘semiotically aware.’

Over the holiday period, can I recommend you purchase a copy of Ken Gire’s book, “Windows of the Soul,” and read it during the break?

It is a great book and it is all about Semiotic awareness, not that he calls it that.