

The derelict cross

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

Over the years I have accumulated dozens of crosses. I purchased quite a few of them myself, such as the crudely poured brass cross I bought from a young girl in Ethiopia, or the small golden one I found in a shop in East Jerusalem. Others have been gifts.

When I attended the Niobrara Convocation, a gathering of Lakota people in South Dakota, I admired the distinctive cross worn by members of that body. Made from stamped nickel, each cross hung from an elaborately beaded necklace that incorporated the red, white and blue shield of the Episcopal Church. Noting my covetousness, a native woman lifted her cross off her neck and placed it around mine. "You take it," she said. "I'm not even sure I believe in it anymore."

Every cross has its own story. Recently a friend brought me a small standing cross from Ireland that was made from pressed sod. From the front it looks like tooled leather, but if you turn it over you can still catch a whiff of Irish bog. I placed it in the library, next to a flat green cross cut from an old slate shingle that was removed from the roof of a church I once served.

None of these is the cross that is currently troubling me, however. That one is about six inches high, made of plain dark wood, with a thin silver body hanging on it. The body is tacked to the cross by three tiny nails, one each in the hands and one for both of the feet. The small head is down and the mouth is open. It looks like something from the 1960s, which is when I first visited the Cistercian monastery in Conyers, Georgia. I was a new Christian and I wanted a cross to hang in my dorm room. The young monk in the gift shop helped me pick it out, along with a couple of books by Thomas Merton and a loaf of brown Trappist bread.

The cross hung on my wall until my graduation from college. Then it went into a box that I carted from place to place for the next 30 years. When I cleaned out the attic earlier this summer I unearthed it, along with some old scrapbooks and a pair of bell-bottomed jeans. I tried to put it in a box for the Salvation Army, but my hand would not let go of it. Meanwhile, the metal loop at the top has disappeared so that I could

not hang it on the wall even if I wanted to. What does one do with a derelict cross?

I could not decide, so I set it in a clear spot on my dresser. The next day I needed the clear spot for a stack of bills, so I put the crucifix on top of them. Underneath the upraised arms of the small body, I could see how many frequent flyer miles I earned last month for charging groceries, gas, new shoes and some theater tickets to my American Express card. After I paid the bills, I needed the space for some papers from my world religions class, so I put the crucifix on them. When I reached for the stack the next morning I realized that Jesus had just spent the night on a color copy of a Tibetan Buddhist sand mandala.

At first this seemed irreverent to me, to keep shuffling a sacred symbol across the debris on my dresser. Shouldn't I put it in some dedicated space where it would not rub up against such unholy junk? But then it occurred to me that I had unwittingly invented a sacrament. Hardly a day goes by that I do not handle this cross, deciding where to put it and noticing how it changes whatever lies beneath it. One day it sits on pictures of my godchildren, the next on a tin of chocolates from Maxim's. Sometimes the small body confers a blessing, but more often it constitutes a judgment. Whose hands have ever been so empty? Whose purposes have ever been so pure?

Lately I have begun to wish for a different symbol to emulate. I think about commissioning a small statue of Peter, half in the water and half out, with Jesus holding him by the scruff of his neck. Or perhaps a silver pendant of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, while Martha threatens her with a wooden spoon. If I could look at one of those on a regular basis, then I might rest easier in my skin, because I know how to sink and I know how to sit. It is dying I am no good at, as my movable cross reminds me every day.

I remain grateful that Jesus did not say, "Be me." He said, "Follow me," but when I imagine a Peter or a Mary on my dresser I realize what I would lose. Neither of them would blink an eye at my check stubs or grocery lists. They were as immersed in such things as I am, and while they may have made better choices than I, we understand each other. They do not want me to be anyone but me.

But that small body on the cross seems to have other ideas. Having let go of everything that anchored him to this reality, he is the open doorway to a far richer one. I am free to walk through him or to stay where I am, but either way he never

stops whispering to me to take the next step. I don't understand him. He seems to think that "me" is too limited a concern.

"I became human for you," he whispered to Meister Eckhart more than half a millennium ago. "If you do not become God for me, you do me wrong." I do not expect ever to solve the mystery of the cross, but I do take heart in the unlikely good news that the cross has already solved me.