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Deciphering all the new symbols and signs we need to function

By [Joanne Cleaver](#)

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Driving recently in New Hampshire, my husband and I suddenly were faced with the inscrutable: a road sign bearing what appeared to be a stripped gear. advertisement

The sign indicated that we would soon be navigating a circle with four short prongs. What was it? A new type of lane for vehicles running on some kind of renewable energy? A circus? An endless loop of the sort that shows up alarmingly often on my iPad? A metaphysical statement on the futility of driving in New Hampshire, where road rules are only a suggestion? (State motto: "Live Free or Die, And We Mean That Literally.")

Too soon, we found that the circle with the stubby prongs was a rotary (also known as a roundabout or traffic circle) — the New England alternative to traffic lights, because most people roll through stop signs anyway, so we may as well yield to driver stupidity, as well as physics. Yankee insight into human nature is underrated.

Why didn't the highway sign simply say: "Rotary ahead. Live free or die!"

Because some designer or construction engineer thought that one picture was worth six words.

That is the delusion universally harbored by digital designers, marketers and those who decide what goes on road signs: Why use a couple of words when you can say it with a picture?

Except, it's a picture. What exactly is it saying?

That is what I asked myself as I pondered the photo-sharing symbols that suddenly populated my iPhone and iPad screens after they underwent brain transplants (otherwise known as upgrading their operating systems). Gone was the familiar arrow whooshing to the right, which I have come to understand means, "share this hilarious saying or deep insight with somebody, right now!" Instead, I studied a thin, empty rectangle with an arrow sprouting straight up.

What did it mean? Push the photo into a folder? Go to another photo? Clearly, something was going somewhere. But what? And where?

After a few wrong-turn swipes, I realized that the arrow now pointed upward, to the sky ... to the cloud! Oh! And that after I swiped cloudward, I would be allowed to take a right turn via another arrow, to actually direct the photo to my mom. Relieved, I had a fleeting moment of triumph. I had read its mind! The upward arrow is the new right-swooshing arrow.

Except it isn't. Other sites, unenlightened sites, continue to use the right-swooshing arrow for sharing. So now I have to remember two arrow dialects, both for the same function, when one word — "share" — could do the same job better, everywhere.

This is an ancient problem, as the Egyptians could have told us. There's a reason we say something is "written in hieroglyphics" when we mean that it is inscrutable and impossible to decipher. A picture is imprecise because it is a symbol, and symbols are open to interpretation. Just ask the people who staff Ikea's help desk. What to me is a clear-as-day right swoosh arrow that means "send this kitty photo to mom" is to others a mysterious cipher invoking the counterclockwise rotation of Earth that does not help them send a kitty photo to their moms.

Hence, the alphabet, which at one time was considered progress. Yet now, perhaps striving for a wordless world of universally intuited symbols, designers have decided that words are passe.

Et tu, Pinterest? You are all about pictures, comprising the refrigerator door of the universe, but even so, you can't spare a few words. The other day Pinterest also conducted a brain transplant on itself and suddenly, trying to find my own boards was like trying to find my way around a favorite grocery store after a remodel.

I searched for the search symbol, which a Waldo-minded designer moved to the bottom of the screen, when it used to live up in the upper right corner. Some poltergeist has rearranged the kitchen cabinets of Pinterest, like an over-helpful mother-in-law.

Just this sort of confusion is why we have labels, which, thank goodness, are still typically words. Nutmeg. Tax records, '00-'09. Junk drawer. Labels work because they tag things, and things and simple actions are easily matched with words, while complex actions and concepts are not. Can we all agree that a picture is no longer worth a thousand words, but maybe, just one or two ... especially when there are no words to begin with?

Recently organizing a pile of household items that I don't really use and but still really want, I found myself carefully wrapping and packing a big glass thing. It's a bowl, on a blown glass stem, but it's nearly big enough to qualify as a birdbath. I used to fill it with beaded fake fruit (don't laugh, for the first two days it looked like a sparkly still life, before it slid into dusty thrift store territory) and it looked elegant and Pinterest-worthy (if I could find the right boards again). It's too big to be a compote and too small to be an urn, too decorative to be a serving bowl and too wide to be a vase.

I layered this thing into a big, sturdy cardboard box, swaddled it in clean paper and settled it in for a long stay in purgatory until it was time to move on to garage sale heaven. I seized a magic marker to label the box and came to a full stop.

Until I picked up my phone, snapped a photo of whatever it is, printed it out and taped it to the side of the box. I'll gladly label it with the right word — when I figure out what that is.

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