

Signs

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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What would you think if you were walking or driving down the street and you saw a sign that said, “Honk Less, Love More” or “Follow Dreams, Not Crowds” or “Have a Great Day?” Would these signs make you happier, or at least more inclined to behave decently? Might they help lower crime? Would they boost morale? British artist Killy Kilford seems to think so, and he’s testing his theory in one of America’s most crime-ridden cities: Newark, New Jersey. According to an [article in New York magazine](#), Kilford is planning on placing hundreds of signs like this throughout the city and has “zero doubt” that the signs will make a positive impact on city.

I thought about this idea on the way to work. I imagined seeing a sign on the side of the road telling me to follow my dreams or to smile or to have a great day. Initially, I was very cynical—I thought that signs like this would more likely than not simply annoy rather than inspire me. I have a very low platitude-tolerance threshold at the best of times, and the idea that some government department somewhere was trying to alter my behavior or dispositions with a bunch of formulaic roadside wellness exhortations could just be enough to send me over the edge.

But then I began to think about signs more metaphorically. Specifically, I began to think about the practice of holding up ideals before people as an attempt to influence and/or change their behavior or beliefs. And of course it didn’t take too much thinking along these lines to be reminded that this is pretty much exactly what I do for a living.

I did a wedding last weekend. I stood outside in an idyllic mountain scene in front of two fresh-faced, beautiful young people about to embark upon the journey of marriage, and I read the famous words from 1 Corinthians 13. *Love is patient, love is kind . . . Love keeps no record of wrongs . . . Love always protects, always perseveres . . . Love never fails.* I looked at them after reading these words and said, with as much humor and compassion as I could muster: “I’m sorry to tell you this, but you will never be able to love each other like this. At least not fully, not all the time. This love is beyond us as human beings. Only God can truly love like this. But

this is your true north. Even though you will be unable to hit it with perfect consistency and precision, this is the target you are aiming for in your life together.” They smiled at me as if I had just recited a Hallmark card to them. Their minds may have been otherwise occupied.

I did a funeral several weeks ago. It was an incredibly difficult funeral—the young daughter of a friend who died suddenly on a weekend road trip. I stood inside a packed church sanctuary, and I referenced the famous words from Revelation 21. *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.* I looked out at a sea of tear-stained faces. I felt the pounding longing inside my own ribcage, and I desperately wished that this hope were not so far beyond us. I wished this target would come closer so we could see it and have a chance of hitting it. I wished this for a hurting family bravely setting forth into their new “normal” without a daughter and a sister. But this new heaven and new earth, these rumors of God dwelling among his people, this promise of no more death or tears—these are realities that only God can bring about.

Whether it is in moments of joy and promise or crushing grief, this is what I do. I hold up signs before people—I point to ideals that are beyond human experience, to modes of being that have never been. This is what I do every Sunday morning when I get up in front of people and talk about what it means to follow Jesus, about the peaceable kingdom he invites us to live into. Every single Sunday I hold up a target that I have nibbled around the edges of, but whose centre continues to elude me.

What a strange vocation this is—to continually hold things that have not been, portraits that we have been given glimpses of but have never beheld in all their expansive beauty, ways of living and being in the world that we have had fleeting encounters with, but which have never taken up deep and permanent residence within us, hopes that we desperately need to hold and sustain us in the deep, dark places which have only beckoned to us from distant horizons. What a strange thing, to be the one to hold up these signs.

But this is what I (and countless others) do. Over and over again, in preaching or writing or whatever, I find myself saying something like: This is what we need, but we can’t attain it. This is how we are to live, but we can’t do it. This is the hope that pulls us along, but we have never seen it. This is what we were made for, but we always settle for less. This is what is good, true, and beautiful, but the destructive,

the false, and the ugly refuse to be silenced.

And so when I think of things in these terms, maybe I'm OK with a couple hundred "wellness" signs on the streets of Newark. (Or any city for that matter—yours, mine . . .) We need signs like this. Even if they don't solve all the city's problems (and they won't), they may solve a few. If nothing else, they stubbornly hold up possibility before people. They give us something to aim for. And slowly, incrementally, intermittently, partially they may even alter our course.

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