

Ribbon Babel

By Nicholas Breyfogle

The socially conscious ribbon is becoming ubiquitous. If the recent Academy Awards are any indication, they are now pretty much *de rigueur* when it comes to fashion. Along with the black tuxedos and the glittering low-cut dresses, many celebrities sported a coloured ribbon on their chest to mark their support for, and promote awareness of, one of any number of social issues.

But it is not only celebrities who are wearing them. In this increasingly socially conscious age, support for different causes is on the rise. Look across any college campus these days and you will also see students with ribbons pinned to their shirts and jackets. For the activist, or even for the socially conscious arm-chair critic, a ribbon is essential.

Few are able to agree on where the ribbon idea came from. However, yellow is indisputably the colour of origin. Apparently, during the last century the wives and girlfriends of United States' cavalry soldiers wore yellow ribbons while their significant others were away in battle. The colour came from the yellow stripe that ran up the pant leg of the cavalry uniform. These ribbons were popularized in the 1949 John Wayne film "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon" that also spawned a title song of the same name. Yellow ribbons reappeared at many different times in the military history of the United States. The Vietnam war gave birth to the 1972 song "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree" (forever immortalized by Tony Orlando & Dawn). Yellow ribbons were worn to demonstrate support for the American hostages held in Iran from 1979 to 1981. The recent Gulf War generated a yellow ribbon bonanza throughout the American heartland.

Ribbons moved away from their military affiliation in the late 1980s when Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) began their Red Ribbon campaign to show support for anti-drunk driving legislation. The ribbons and the red colour were later taken up by AIDS activists.

Ribbons are not always distributed by the sanctioned group who addresses the particular cause. In the case of the pink ribbons for breast cancer awareness, the official Breast Cancer Societies have little to do with their creation or distribution. In October of 1992, Este Lauder began handing the ribbons out at their cosmetics counters. Despite the fact that many of the ribbons now sport the logo of the Breast Cancer Society, the ribbons are still organized through Este Lauder. In fact when interviewed, the Breast Cancer Society somewhat jokingly asked if I would pass on the message to Este Lauder that they would like some sent to their offices. The Society is extremely pleased that others are taking the initiative into their own hands.

Despite their prevalence (choose a cause, find a ribbon), there is much disagreement over the meaning of ribbons. Ask any two people what a particular colour ribbon stands for and you are likely to receive two completely different answers. Here are some of the colours and their meanings:

Red—symbolic of AIDS awareness and support for AIDS

sufferers; used by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) in their red ribbon campaign; worn to show that the wearer is drug free; worn by sexual assault survivors and by those who are acquainted with survivors; distributed in college campuses to mark the anniversary of the December, 1989 Montreal massacre of female college students.

Purple—worn for gay pride or gay rights; demonstrates support for lifting the ban on homosexuals in the military; concern over urban violence and crime (purple is a mix of Los Angeles gangs' colors Red and Blue) and especially for the high death rate among young black men; opposition to domestic violence; associated with women's movements and often taken up by pro-choice advocates; recently displayed to mark the slaying of Dr. David Gunn at his Florida abortion clinic; used a few years ago to endorse gun control.

Blue—promoting action vis-à-vis child-abuse

Green—Symbolic of the disappearance of the rainforests; support of other environmental causes; worn on U.S. college campuses to denote support for need-blind financial aid for students.

Black—opposition to the slaughter in Bosnia.

Pink—Breast cancer awareness and the need for research; also worn for gay pride and gay rights.

White—worn by men to show their opposition to violence against women.

All of these social causes are recognized by ribbons. Yet, just how effective are ribbons as a tool for change? On the negative side, as more and more causes come to use the same colour ribbon, the message is becoming confused and diluted. Some people have begun to wear the ribbons more out of fashion than any support for the cause. For others, ribbons are a quick and inexpensive way of purging their consciences of the social ghosts that haunt them.

But the benefits outweigh the detriments. The ribbons raise social consciousness. Even if there is confusion over the specific cause being touted, the ribbons are a constant reminder that there remain many social issues that we must face. More importantly, however, the ribbons allow people to feel a part of something bigger. In our increasingly atomized society, individuals frequently feel alone and overwhelmed by issues that are so numerous and so complicated. How can one get involved? What can one person do when work leaves little free time and little fiscal or political clout? The ribbons demonstrate on a day-to-day basis that we are not alone in our personal struggles. Furthermore, ribbons act as a bridge to bind the forces that divide. When men wear a red ribbon to show their support for sexual assault survivors, for example, the message is powerful and they are given a place in a social movement that women, the principal sufferers, have understandably not always left them.

Ribbons demonstrate an important change. Not only are we as a society coming to terms with the myriad social problems that surround us but we are no longer leaving the resolution of those problems to the political sphere. We are becoming a society that themselves acts to bring about change.