

freemasonry – the journey, or the destination?

Since the beginning of time, man has been travelling. It is not in his nature to remain still for long, nor to confine himself to one homestead or place of work. Man is by nature a searching, questing being. Primitive man was obliged to travel to seek new sources of food, or to avail himself of greater safety in his surroundings, safety from natural hazards as well as safety from enemies. But travelling was itself hazardous. The very word ‘travel’ comes to us through French, and an archaic English meaning of the word ‘travail’, a word used in the Christian liturgy, was that of ‘painful effort, trouble, work.’

So man’s natural urge to travel was also encompassed by difficulty, testing, tedium. And as he travelled, he learned. As he travelled, he was constantly subjected to changes of environment, changes of perspective, constantly arriving at new ways of looking at things. Today, I would like to invite you to submit yourselves to a change of perspective in your masonic pursuit. We shall take a pretty mundane example: a change of scenery such as you would find in ascending a winding staircase, where you would see first one wall ahead of you, then a second as you turn the corner, then the top of the staircase, then a door beyond that. As we journey in any medium, we experience a change of scenery. As an example, I would like you to think for a moment how our Order started life in the 18thC. Picture for a moment a group of men, powdered wigs, knee breeches, swords, brocade or damask coats, lace ruffs and all the other elements belonging to that imagery, grouped together round a lodge carpet on which are depicted some of the emblems of the Ancient Art, and the initiate, still blindfolded, standing at the west end of the carpet facing east, about to be led up to the altar to take his obligation. Impress that image on your mind for a moment. It’s not the product of my over-fertile imagination – I am simply describing any one of many old engravings that are to be found in any number of masonic exposés of the period. And while you have that image in your mind, consider also that, in those days, the vast majority of Lodge meetings were held, *not* to conduct a degree ceremony at all, but rather to engage in moral, philosophical and intellectual debate, discourse, exposition.

Let’s think again about the 18thC. – the Age of Enlightenment. This was an age when men were learning to loosen the shackles imposed on them by the ruling classes and by the church. It was an age in which the citizens of France dared to think about throwing off the yoke of the tyranny of the aristocracy and ridding themselves of a greedy monarchy. It was an age in which the colonials of the New World dared to think of independence from the oppressive English government they were subject to. It was the age when the philosopher Immanuel Kant, frustrated that the clergy and the scholars still guarded jealously the right to tell men how and what to think, issued a call. It was a call to the greatest freedom man would gain since Magna Carta. In what became a battle-cry of the Enlightenment, Kant said loud and clear ‘Aude Sapere!’ – well, he said it in latin, so it wasn’t all that clear – ‘Aude Sapere! Dare to know!’ although nowadays, having read Kant’s work, we might say ‘Have the courage to use your own reason, your own questing mind, and not simply to parrot the learning imposed on you by others!’

In this hothouse of moral and intellectual striving, where the search for Truth took precedence over everything, Freemasonry took its rise. Lodges became the haven for men eager to give expression to freedom of thought, who could do so without the fear of censure from the authorities. The membership of Lodges in those days was dominated by true radicals, revolutionaries.

Let’s fast forward to today. Today, a person comes to Freemasonry for initiation. Nowadays, in the 21stC., it is very likely that before his initiation he has little real concept of what is required of him. This organisation he is coming to join – he may know that it has charitable and philanthropic motives, but what does that entail, what will be required of him in particular? He may also be apprehensive – he has heard something about blood-curdling oaths to swear, but after all, his sponsors seem to think he will do alright, so there’s probably no need to worry. He has some vague notion that he will have to learn a lot of rules about correct behaviour, protocol and so forth, and it is possible he has heard something about ritual. But what is this Freemasonry thing? Above all, is it a static philosophy, one in which nothing much will be required of him except simply to sit there and listen, or is it, on the other hand, a dynamic pursuit, one in which his faculties will be put to the test? Tested if not physically, then at least intellectually or morally?

Let us be clear about one thing – on the surface, Freemasonry doesn't have to be either one or the other. Freemasonry after all has no dogma. In everyday practice in Freemasonry, there is no right or wrong way to do things. The central points of our masonic code are of course immutable and may be recognised by a visitor to a foreign Grand Lodge, despite differences in detail. But what may be good masonic practice in one country or jurisdiction may well be regarded as unacceptable in another. So, that which our new aspirant finds when the blindfold is removed will become for him or her standard masonic practice. He will know nothing different. He may have the misfortune to be initiated in a social and dining Lodge, and if that is so, there may then be great importance placed on his membership of Freemasonry being a civic attainment, or on using his membership to get to know as many members as possible who can be of use to him in his business or his career, or importance placed also on gaining a high masonic rank as quickly as possible. In such a scenario, there will be little for him to study, and what there is will be of the most superficial kind.

I would like to invite you also to view the subject matter of what I have been speaking about in the context of beginnings. The liberal thinkers who, in the 18thC were throwing off the shackles of the ruling classes, were standing at a threshold. When the French revolutionaries had banished the aristocracy, they may have found themselves staring into an abyss – what do we do now? Where do we go from here? They too were at a threshold. Once the Bostonians in the New World had thrown the tea into the harbour and subsequently rid themselves of their English colonial rulers, many must have asked themselves, what now? When a humble working man or woman had listened to Immanuel Kant and had timidly accepted his challenge to 'dare to know!' what was the next move? Were not all these poised on the brink of the most exciting journey of their lives? They may not have been entirely sure where they were going, but they were ready to move forward as never before.

Brethren, in a world where such things had such importance, when a Lodge was a refuge for right-thinking men to express their opinions on moral and social progress, without being muzzled by the secular or ecclesiastical powers, I submit that it is unthinkable that our forebears were, first and foremost, concerned with how quickly they could become District Deputy Grand Master, or how many of their Lodge Brethren they could subvert to advance their business interests, or how many hundreds more might be initiated, as is the practice in some Grand Lodges in the world.

Let's start by remembering that, although in the 18thC Lodges met every month and often more frequently, an initiation might only take place, say, once every four years, and that initiate might then wait a number of years before being passed to the second degree. We can calculate that under those circumstances an initiation would have taken place once every forty meetings. And what do you suppose the Lodge was doing during the other 39 meetings? Records were normally never kept, or only incompletely. But there are indications. In London, the Burlington Lodge of Instruction, in 1810, taught the younger Brethren by means of lectures. Although we have only scant evidence of what those 39 meetings might have entailed, we have enough circumstantial evidence to draw an outline of masonic practice. Consider, for example, that a candidate for initiation was taken first to a chamber of reflection, as is still the practice in many countries outside Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry. This took place before the candidate was taken to the door of the temple to seek admission. In that darkened and sparsely-furnished room were a table, chair and writing materials. On the table were a number of objects: a skull, a lit candle, a bell, an hour glass. On the walls were a number of inscriptions, warning the candidate against coming to Freemasonry with the wrong motives. A seeker in this situation had already set out on the most exciting of journeys. He was required to state, clearly and in writing, what were his motives for coming to Freemasonry: what did he expect of the Brotherhood: what could the Brotherhood expect of him. And these replies were then carried into the Lodge and read aloud so that the Brethren could decide whether or not he was a worthy man to be made a Mason. We may be surprised to learn that, as often as not, they ruled that he was not worthy to proceed.

This was of course not a physical journey, but a journey for the heart and mind. I asked you earlier to imprint on your mind the image of the initiate, still blindfolded, standing at the west end of the carpet facing east, about to be led up to the altar to take his obligation. This initiate then is standing on the

threshold of a journey, physically not a long one, but in itself an allegory of a much more significant journey, a journey no less important than that of any peoples freeing themselves from oppression or tyranny. A journey no less important than that of a person learning to think for himself, for this initiate is now embarked on the journey of discovery, the discovery of himself, and through self-knowledge then the knowledge of his fellow-men and the universe he inhabits. Alongside Kant's dictum 'Dare to know!' we have another. 'Man know thyself,' said Pythagoras, 'then thou shalt know the universe, and God.' And once this initiate reaches the altar, the blindfold will be removed, and light, material, figurative and spiritual light, will be imparted to him.

But we will not – we cannot – acquire that precious knowledge of self and universe by standing still, by obligating ourselves to listen, to obey, to submit ourselves to the regulations of Freemasonry. Our profession as Freemasons is most assuredly a dynamic pursuit, not a static one. We must move forward in order to fulfil our Masonic vocation. And all the allegories concerning journeying are there to help us. In times gone by, in all pursuits of self-discovery and self-improvement, as well as spiritual quests, a pilgrimage was necessary. Indeed, in many jurisdictions, the Fellow Craft second-degree Mason is known as a Journeyman, in German 'Geselle', for in the second degree he is embarked on the journey of life itself, a long and sometimes arduous journey. In the ancient world, the deities who controlled certain areas of life were unable to operate outside those areas. Their power to favour or to destroy only operated within their own area. So a man from the mountains who found himself in the plain and was in need of divine help, had to make a pilgrimage back to his place of origin, back to the mountains, in order once again to be one with the deity controlling the mountainous regions. Pilgrimages therefore are journeys with a sacred or spiritual intent. Spirit and quest play a crucial part in Freemasonry. Were it not so, we would not invoke the name of the Great Architect or say prayers. And so it is equally crucial that we address the nature of spirituality and how it relates to our Craft. Spirituality encompasses matters of the spirit, a concept tied to a multidimensional reality. Spiritual matters regard humankind's ultimate nature and purpose, not as material biological organisms, but as spirits or energy with an eternal relationship beyond the bodily senses, beyond time, and beyond the material world.

The spiritual and eternal is contrasted with the physical and the temporary – and may include an emotional experience of awe and reverence. Spirituality may also include the development of the individual's inner life through practices such as meditation and prayer, including the search for God, or the supernatural, or a divine influence.

In mythology and literature a quest – a journey towards a goal – serves as a symbol. Quests appear in the folklore of every nation and also figure prominently in non-national cultures. The objects of quests required great exertion on the part of the hero, and the overcoming of many obstacles, typically including much travel.

In Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry we have further allegories of the virtue of journeying, of pilgrimage. In the second section of the second Emulation lecture we have the following exchange:

Q. Did you ever travel?

A. My forefathers did.

Q. Where did they travel?

A. Due east and west.

Q. What was the object of their travels?

A. They travelled east in search of instruction, and west to propagate the knowledge they had gained.

Looked at another way, they travelled eastwards, into the rising sun, because they were seeking the warmth, the sustenance, the light, and above all the light of knowledge. East and west have significant and recurring importance for the Freemason. He always travels east in search of instruction and knowledge, and through those two, wisdom. It is no accident that we in the western world have always looked east for knowledge, enlightenment and wisdom.

But there are also occasions when the Freemason must travel west. I draw your attention to the opening of the Lodge in the third degree in Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry:

Q. Bro JW, whence come you?

A. The east.

Q. Bro SW, whither directing your course?

A. The west.

Q. What inducement have you to leave the east and go to the west?

A. To seek for that which was lost which, by your instruction and our own industry, we hope to find.

As we know, this journey is a journey towards death, the death of Hiram Abiff, a journey in search of lost truth, of lost spirit, and of faltering hope, and at least one version of the legend tells us that the body of Hiram Abiff was buried to the west of the Temple. Whereas throughout history we have travelled east in search of knowledge, we have seldom travelled west. And in western Christian mythology at the time of Columbus, a journey westwards, particularly over water, was an image of death. How much more courageous therefore does Christopher Columbus' journey look now, westwards across the Atlantic into the *setting* sun, the darkness of the unknown! How much more courageous must be our own personal journeying westwards, even if not towards death, then at least journeying to discover unpalatable things about ourselves, our own failings and blemishes, which we need to repair before making a claim for our wages in the middle chamber. But this pilgrimage is essential if we are to make *moral* progress. In religion and spirituality, a pilgrimage is a long journey or search of great moral significance. Sometimes, as we saw earlier, it is a journey to a shrine of importance to a person's beliefs and faith.

Aside from the journeyings east or west, we can regard this in another dimension. When the aspirant first puts on the blindfold outside the door of the Temple, the effect is to direct his attention away from outside distractions, into his inner self. He leaves the circumference of the circle bounded by two grand parallel lines and sets out on his journey to the centre, that point from which, once he has reached it, he cannot err. The centre, as we know, is a place where he must go in order to be with himself and to know himself and to own himself. The journey towards self-knowledge is the most important in all Freemasonry, for without it, the next journey is impossible. And what is that next journey? The next journey is the return journey from the centre of the aspirant who has begun to know himself, and is ready now to journey outwards to his fellow humans to be in harmony with them. We need this for the moral progress we aspire to in Freemasonry, for an understanding of the universe we inhabit, and ultimately to approach the throne of God.

Although we have mentioned death, we have not yet addressed the third journey, the greatest trial of all. To those who are not acquainted with the English Emulation ritual, a passage from the third degree may be of interest, delivered before the candidate is raised. The Master has reminded the candidate of the import of the first degree, after which he says:

Proceeding onwards, still guiding your progress by the principles of *moral* truth, you were led, in the second degree, to contemplate the *intellectual* faculty, and to trace it from its development, through the paths of heavenly science, even – to the throne – of God – Himself. The secrets of nature and the principles of intellectual truth were then unveiled to your view. To your mind, thus modelled by virtue and science, nature however presents one great and useful lesson more. She prepares you, by contemplation, for the closing hour of existence; and when by means of that contemplation she has conducted you through the intricate windings of this mortal life, she finally instructs you – how – to – die.

'Proceeding onwards', 'guiding your progress', the 'paths' of heavenly science – the 'intricate windings' of this mortal life – the whole speaks to us of journeying. And the third degree is not so much about death: it is about the journey *back* from the grave, it is about man's *triumph* over death, the fact that we *can* be regenerated, put off our old fallible, incomplete self, to be re-born to a higher state of consciousness. And it is true that a genuine Master Mason can be recognised for what he is – someone who has travelled the

journey, not in miles or kilometres, but a journey in experience, in trials and tribulations in order to gain some stability, some harmony in his life.

This Master Mason does indeed come back from the grave, just as he came back earlier from the centre after discovering himself and his own nature, but unlike Orpheus who, on returning, committed a fateful mistake and lost Eurydice, our Master Mason returns from the grave a new man, victorious, in possession of full knowledge of himself and of his qualities.

I have to say that such notions sit very uneasily with the practice in some jurisdictions of initiating many men at one time in one place. We certainly cannot become initiates on the masonic path by some vicarious process involving a sample initiation being conducted in front of us, in some way conducted on behalf of a group. Such a procedure may make members – it does not make Masons. We may wonder what is the sought-after destination of such a short journey. But as far as our Masonic journeying is concerned, I submit that there is no destination to be sought after. We are concerned only with the journey. Unless we believe ourselves to have attained the same level as Lord Krishna, or the Buddha, or Jesus, or the prophet Muhammad, we will probably not attain spiritual perfection in this life. But we can attain fulfilment by experiencing the joy of travelling the path, by constantly seeking more knowledge and wisdom, by continuing to ask questions, questions of ourselves and of others, by refusing to be hide-bound by religious dogma or ideological precepts, by ‘daring to know’, daring to think for ourselves and by working out our own salvation.

The poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht was asked one day by his friends what he wanted written on his gravestone when he died. They were all in a pretty jocular mood, but Brecht was quite serious. ‘Write,’ he said, ‘that in my life, I was uncomfortable, and that I intend to remain so after my death.’ He did not intend to stop asking questions, to stop seeking the truth, and I submit that nor should we. Don’t stand still Brethren. Keep journeying. It’s what the spirit is for.

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