

Through Ritual to Enlightenment
Thirteenth Annual
Wendell K Walker Memorial Lecture
delivered at Independent Royal Arch Lodge No. 2
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Worshipful Master and Brethren, I thank you for according me the honour of delivering the Wendell K Walker Memorial Lecture for 2003, the more so in view of MWBro Wendell Walker's English connections. I note that he was a graduate of Exeter University in England, and was also from 1982 Grand Representative of the United Grand Lodge of England at the Grand Lodge of New York. I would like my visit to you today to be some recognition of MWBro Wendell Walker's work in cementing relations between our two countries and our two masonic jurisdictions.

A paper I wrote some years ago for the English publication Freemasonry Today reminded the readers that the proper means of instructing young masons was not by repetition of degree ceremonies but by a system of set lectures. I made this discovery on reading Colin Dyer's Emulation – A Ritual to Remember. In the late 18th and early 19thC, lodges of instruction did not teach degree ceremonies, so much more engaged were they in philosophical and moral debate. My discovery of this fact resonated with my own feelings on the matter, and was one of the stages in a journey I had undertaken, and still continue to make today, a journey whose name may be expressed as follows: Are we as Freemasons so bound up in the form of our craft as to have lost sight of the content behind the form? Let me put it another way. A christian priest or minister may pronounce the words of the Eucharist from beginning to end in the belief that by speaking the words he thereby fulfils his obligation, without taking the words into his heart, without feeling them, and without knowing, deep down, what the words are telling him. I do not of course suggest that this is true of all priests, merely that it can happen. And I have, over many years as a Freemason, come to the conclusion that some Freemasons intone the words of our beautiful ritual, often with great expressiveness and after having spent great effort memorising them, but without having a sense of the words, of how they affect and influence their lives, without, in short, having a sense of the divine. Many lodges in the world do not suffer from such myopic attitudes, but sadly the majority do seem to.

It was not always so. In England the history of ritual development provides some intriguing insights, and we may here digress for a moment to trace a little of the history of Freemasonry in England in the 18thC. In 1717, at the time of the constitution of the first Grand Lodge in England, Freemasonry consisted of only two degrees, both of which were very strongly christian in content. In the 1720s the third degree was added, or more correctly the second degree was split into

two to form the second and third degrees, and at this time the de-christianizing of the ritual had begun. Our sensitivity to the mystical was in question; the Royal Arch degree was removed from its proper place at the heart of craft Freemasonry. The experience of the English in their empire-building in India and other parts of the world meant that the influence of religions other than the christian were brought into play, and in your own country there were instances of amerindians, who recognised shamanism, embracing Freemasonry.

In 1751 the authority of this first English Grand Lodge was challenged by the establishment of a rival Grand Lodge, dubbed the 'Antients', who wanted to retrieve those elements of our ritual which they perceived to have been unjustly abandoned. This Grand Lodge, which also went by the name of the 'Atholl' Grand Lodge, was largely responsible for establishing Freemasonry in the New World so that, incidentally, some of the ritual forms today practised in the United States are probably older than those practised in England. In 1813 however the two rival Grand Lodges in England buried the hatchet and devised ritual forms acceptable to both, which were approved by the new United Grand Lodge in 1816. At this time the de-christianizing of the ritual was completed. It is generally accepted that this de-christianizing resulted in the jettisoning of much of the focus on spirituality, leaving in a sense just the husk of the ritual – the baby was thrown out with the bathwater.

Before this union of the two Grand Lodges, an integral part of this ritual was a system of question-and-answer or catechetical lectures, by means of which young masons were instructed. These lectures were split into three distinct degrees, one for each masonic grade. The proficiency that had to be displayed in them by the aspiring candidate were the means of his advancement. At this time, most work in lodges of instruction was dedicated to these lectures, with only occasional practice of the degree ceremonies themselves. The catechetical lectures in the ritual practised in the Grand Lodge of New York are certainly derived from the same source as the English ritual – the similarities are too marked to suppose otherwise.

All the evidence is that in the eighteenth century the spiritual and philosophical instruction given was on a much more informal level. The ceremonial and procedure, the attention to dress and to precedence and seniority were to come much later. Paradoxically, the codifying of these lectures into set forms, which took place at the start of the 19thC, went a long way to codifying masonic behaviour as a whole, and led to the rigid patterns we know today in masonic procedure and ceremonial. Nonetheless what we have inherited, although lacking in flair and spontaneity, does impart something of the real hard learning to which a young mason in those days had to submit. As an example, we may consider that section of the first degree lecture of which copies have been distributed, and which contain much material well known to New York masons. [fourth section of first lecture]

Today, and since the early 19thC, these lectures are grouped to form seven sections in the first degree, five in the second and three in the third. Together with the three degree ceremonies, they are in England today regulated, under the

name 'Emulation Ritual', by a body known as the Emulation Lodge of Improvement, which is the ultimate authority in England in all matters pertaining to this, the most widely practised ritual. Yet even in England, the lectures are today known only to a minority, and the real philosophical and spiritual intent behind them is largely lost.

Yet if we examine the ritual forms which we have inherited, we discover that much of the spiritual content remains. We discover that all the way through our ceremonies we are encouraged to research our inner selves. Wherever we look in masonic ritual, the constant theme is one of knowing who and where I am, and knowing my true relationship to my fellow-man and to the universe which I inhabit. Even a cursory reading of the degree ceremonies leaves no place at all for the assertion made by some Freemasons, that our Order is 'a social and dining club with a few ritual appendages', an assertion which betrays a wilful ignorance.

The decline in spiritual awareness and in the following of spiritual quests is of course nothing new. The surprise is, that western society does not appear to have noticed how deprived of spiritual nourishment we have become. We pretend, through an obsession with technology and science, that the spiritual is not as important as the air we breathe or the water we drink. All the major western religions have suffered erosion through the onslaught of materialism. Humankind seems intent on satisfying his sensual appetites, to the detriment of the core of his existence, that spiritual pillar at his centre, whose function is to keep him upright, and to connect at all times the physical and spiritual worlds, like Jacob's ladder.

In a world where humankind has largely dismissed institutional religions, man seems to assert that he needs nothing of spiritual values. Yet against his rational judgement, he still feels the need for a dimension other than the physical and material. Social evils and psychological distress are increasingly realized to be the product of the pursuit of purely material goals. It may not be true to say that western institutional religions have let us down, although many perceive this to be the case. It is certainly true to say that more effort seems to go into maintaining the institutions than in nurturing the spiritual message.

So, if spirituality today is on the wane, should we perhaps trace human history back to that point when it was in the ascendant? Certainly spirituality is older than organised religion as we understand it today, with its administrative apparatus, ornate buildings and hierarchies. We have only to consider vestiges of ancient spiritual practice, such as the many clusters of megalithic stones in various countries of the world, or tens of thousands of years earlier, burials of neanderthals carried out in a ritualised manner. These testify to the fact that many centuries before institutional religion there existed a quest for knowledge about human nature and the purpose of human existence.

In the western world, these quests came to belong to a general body of thought referred to as the Mysteries. The core of the Mysteries rested on one crucial fact – for the Ancients there existed two parallel worlds, both of which we inhabit at

the same time. There was the physical, material, sensual world – a world with edges – and there were the vast, limitless, eternal, non-material realms, not limited by physical phenomena, and not available to ordinary perception, but which were still a part of our universe. In these realms, the arenas for the exploits of the gods of mythology, events occurred which were governed by the same natural laws existing in our world of ordinary experience, events which had an important influence on the daily activity of human life. As Kirk MacNulty points out, the closest of these non-material domains exists in our own psyche, since every time we dream, we are participants in such supernatural events, the boundary of the inaccessible part of that domain being the threshold of our own consciousness, a threshold which we may have created ourselves, an artefact of assumed cult belief, not a biological reality.

The Mysteries were schools which provided the gateway to those non-material realms, and to the knowledge of the natural laws operating in them. They existed for the satisfaction of those who wished to know more, those who wished to understand divinity, directly, for themselves. How did they do this? Incorporated in the practice of the ancient Mysteries was a process of initiation, a process directly comparable with masonic initiation.

There is no evidence that speculative Freemasonry arose purely as a social phenomenon. On the contrary – there is every justification for the view that it arose as a means of initiating men into a way of moral awareness, responsibility towards society and self knowledge. We may justifiably view it as fulfilling the same function in society as the ancient Mysteries, for whom initiation was a mystical path to enlightenment, where mankind stood within the holy of holies in the great temple to come face to face with the Great Architect.

Now, there is some good news for you, and some bad news. The good news is that in our own masonic system, for those who have no adherence to an institutional religion – and even for those who have – we have a clear-cut route, if we choose to follow it, to self-awareness, self-knowledge and spiritual enlightenment. The bad news is that Freemasonry has all too often become ossified in the form of its ritual. It seems, in some lodges, that the learning of the words and actions has become an end in itself, and the enormous effort put into this learning and the concentration necessary to render the words correctly according to the book have proved so to divert us from the meaning as to obscure it almost completely. We have forgotten the virtue and the beneficial effects of stillness and silence, of the attempts to shut out the outer world, so that, for a while at least, we can be at our own centre, the place from which we cannot err.

We cannot find a better place to study the importance of this aspect than the prayer we say over a candidate on his admission to the temple for his initiation. 'Grant that this candidate for Masonry may dedicate and devote his life to Thy service and become a true and faithful brother among us. Endue him with a competency of Thy divine wisdom, that, by the influence of the pure principles of our Fraternity, he may be better enabled to display the beauties of holiness, to the honor of Thy Holy Name.' We are in effect praying that Freemasonry may

help the candidate reveal – ‘display’ – holiness: in other words, to own that Divinity for himself. Note that the ritual does not charge him to go out and seek the beauties of holiness. And why? Because that holiness already resides within him and needs only to be displayed; but the ritual will gradually teach him that. It is of passing interest here to consider the slight variation in the English ritual: ‘ . . . that he may the better be enabled to unfold the beauties of true godliness, to the honour and glory of Thy Holy Name.’ These are small variations of emphasis, not changing the central spirituality at all, and serve to allow each of us to see the essence of our common craft in a different light.

And it is the essence. Were that not so, our mention of ‘holiness’, of ‘godliness’ and therefore of divinity would be meaningless. Right at the start, we are plunged into the real spiritual matrix of our craft. We are immersed in the spirit, and our candidate is about to discover, to reveal, some fragment of the eternal divinity within himself. This is the start of his journey on the masonic path, and along the way he learns his responsibilities to this our contrasting material world. There is no room for doubt about what Freemasonry is doing here. It will no longer be enough for us to concentrate on the form while ignoring the content. We cannot, as some do, claim that there is no deeper meaning, and that as long as we gain promotion to a higher rank in Freemasonry, then that’s all there is to it.

What are the other clues in our ritual indicating that our candidate for initiation is embarked on a journey whose meaning and purpose are esoteric ones? The chief one is that he is blindfolded: he is put into a state of darkness, symbolising the primeval, unenlightened state of man. This practice too links our craft to that of the Ancients, who began rituals in exactly the same manner. Yet we may ask ourselves whether blindfolding is enough. We may consider that the candidate needs to be placed in a state of sensory deprivation, of disorientation, albeit a benign one, to enable him to change the focus from the outer, material world, with all its sensory distractions, into his own inner self, to listen to the still small voice, to find himself at the centre and to start his journey towards the light. We may, with some historical justification, consider whether a period of prolonged and total silence is required. Our candidate needs now to meditate, to try to understand his place at the centre of the universe. For this procedure, we have precedents to follow. In England today, the candidate is prepared in an ante-room separate from, but adjacent to the temple, analagous in New York to your room for the preparation of the candidate, opening directly onto the temple. But in the 18thC in England these were called ‘Chambers of Reflection’ and that is their true function. In Germany even today, the candidate for initiation is shut away in such a room, surrounded by emblems of transitoriness and mortality – a skull, an hour-glass, a lit candle and a bell. He is left on his own, to reflect on his relationship to the world, to society and to his own destiny, in near darkness and in total silence. After this, he is blindfolded. In some present-day French rituals, even more extreme measures are undertaken to attempt to disorientate the candidate.

Now he enters the temple and his symbolic journey towards the light has begun. Here we have the golden opportunity, if we apply the preparation and the ritual

carefully, to bring these symbols to life, not only for the candidate, but also for ourselves. We, who partake in this mystery with the candidate, may regard ourselves as being there to assist him in transforming a symbolic light into a real light.

This candidate then is effectively being asked to suspend his disbelief. We are immersing him in a new world, where the norms in operation in his other life no longer apply. It is a world where there is more to discover within than without. We ask him to own and embrace a divinity to which, up to now, he may have only paid a half-unbelieving lip-service. We ask him to consider that the faculty of reason on its own is not enough, and is certainly not paramount. It deals only with the phenomenal world, and our reality, as we have seen, is much greater than that. Reason alone cannot comprehend the irrational, the metaphysical, the spiritual. Reason alone cannot penetrate that mysterious veil which shields us all from the vista of eternity.

From this we can see that initiation, properly understood, is an intimately, intensely personal journey. It is, potentially, no less than the candidate's own personal, spiritual climbing of Mount Everest. And as we have implied there are no bystanders in the lodge – by joining together with the candidate, we can ensure that his journey from darkness to light is a truly life-changing experience, and we can make of it a collective endeavour. But it is, and remains, as personal as physical birth. It must change him. As such, it is hard to see a justification for initiating more than one candidate at one time. Many lodges in England, who up to now practised double initiations in order to ease the flow of candidates, have re-considered that position in the interests of the proper enlightenment of the individual aspirant for Freemasonry. Whatever may be, 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. It is true that in the First World War there were instances of lodges initiating four or five candidates at one time, on the eve of their leaving for the front – even then, these candidates were not initiated together, but one by one, the ceremonies lasting late into the night; exceptional times in the lives, and in the deaths, of aspirants for Freemasonry.

To sum up then: we are equipped with a very beautiful, very strong ritual system as a means of advancing towards self-knowledge. Our candidate is already imbued with divine knowledge and wisdom, which needs only to be revealed, to be validated. He is on a journey to discover – to remember – his own spiritual links. His progress may be hindered if we pay attention only to the form of our craft and not the content, or if we are distracted by ideas of advancement, or if we seek the wrong things in our craft. It is possible that we need to search not only in the degree ceremonies themselves for the spirituality in Freemasonry.

To address this very aspect, an organisation was set up in 1999 in England called The Cornerstone Society. Its aims are to increase the awareness, particularly of Master Masons, of the real meaning and inner spirituality and beauty of our masonic ritual. The Society seeks to help brethren who are actively interested in developing the crucial aspects of Freemasonry already mentioned

above. One of the leading founder members is the Pro Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, MWBro The Marquess of Northampton, and I would like to quote from a paper he gave at the Cornerstone Society Conference in London last summer:

'It is important that at the centre [of Freemasonry] there is a core of brethren who do understand the spiritual message that our rituals contain. I am sure that like me there are many who joined Freemasonry as earnest seekers after light and wisdom, only to find that much of the masonry as practised in the English Constitution, and indeed in many parts of the world, has forgotten its destiny . . . As a result the learning of ritual has become a drudge and an understanding of its purpose is almost impossible . . . Nevertheless, it has survived for nearly 400 years and possibly more – and as far as I am concerned carries the torch for what could loosely be described as the hermetic tradition. It is my fervent hope that through this Society and other similar initiatives it will rediscover its spiritual heritage and become an active catalyst for the transformation of Man's consciousness.'

Wor. Master, Brethren, I thank you for listening to me with such focused attention. I hope not only to have evoked a perception of our Craft as a spiritual path to self-knowledge, which I believe to have been its original purpose, but also to have forged a few transatlantic bonds in that peculiarly masonic way that bears so much fruit.

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