

THE MEANING OF MASONRY

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As we meet some of these times without the focus provided by a candidate to participate in degree work, there is much danger that we may lose some of that sense of self-growth and personal uplifting that is, after all, the intended purpose of our ritual.

That ritual is, of course, an allegory - a fictional story. It is a story that has been carefully and even brilliantly crafted to carry within it the message of moral behaviour and life development necessary for all mankind. I want to discuss that allegory with you for a few moments. And lest you feel I am generating a piece of personal fiction, let me hasten to hide in the shelter of my masonic authority.

In the mid 1920's, there was published a volume called "The Meaning of Masonry", authored by W.L. Wilmshurst, Past Provincial Grand Registrar, West York, England. The fifth edition of 1927 was reprinted in the U.S. in 1980 with a foreword of praise by Dr. Allan Boudreau, Curator and Librarian of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of New York. I am condensing the language even more than I want to, to save time, but the statements that follow are supported by Bro. Wilmshurst in his opening lecture.

When the pronoun "I" is used, it is Bro. Wilmshurst speaking. I'm not tiring you with "Quote" and "Unquote" drumbeats.

Our degree work is a story, an allegory that uses some historical facts in connection with some legendary events which may have been invented by ancient writers; mixed with some detailed data added by the Masonic authors. Its use of

language is inspired and beautiful to read and hear, in a similar sense as is true with the Bible, from which so much of it is derived.

As a ritual, it is about 300 years old. It was put together as a teaching tool by men who were zealous and dedicated in their search for human development and knowledge. In every past era, bodies of mankind have banded together to enlarge and teach the so-called "Mysteries"; the truths of human life, certain instructions about divine things, about human nature and human destiny that would be ignored or profaned if left for the multitudes to bandy about.

These mysteries were formerly taught on the highest hills and in the lowest valleys. It is, of course, common knowledge that great secret systems of the Mysteries (referred to in our lectures as "noble orders of architecture", i.e. of soul-building) existed in the East, in Chaldea, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, Italy, amongst the Hebrews, amongst Mahommedans and amongst Christians. Even among uncivilized African races they are to be found. All the great teachers of humanity, Socrates, Plato, Pythagoras, Moses, Aristotle, Virgil, the author of the Homeric poems and the great Greek tragedians, and along with St. John, St. Paul and innumerable other great names were initiates of the Sacred Mysteries.

The forms, the languages, the methods of expressing the Sacred Mysteries was forever changing but since ultimate truth is and can be but one, so the doctrine of the mysteries is always the same. Behind all the religious systems of the world, and behind all the great moral movements and developments in the history of humanity, have stood what St. Paul called the keepers or "Stewards of the Mysteries". From that source Christianity itself came into the world. From them originated the great school of Cabalism, that marvellous system of secret oral tradition of the Hebrews, a strong element of which has been introduced into our Masonic system. From them, too, also issued many fraternities and orders, such, for instance, as the great orders of Chivalry and of the Rosicrucians, and the school

of spiritual alchemy. Lastly, from them too also issued, in the seventeenth century, modern Speculative Freemasonry.

We cannot, now, trace the early development of Freemasonry in detail. We would be more buried in sand than is contained in the Sahara. Suffice to say that the movement incorporated the slender ritual and the elementary symbolism that, for centuries previously, had been employed in connection with the medieval Building Guilds, but it gave to them a far fuller meaning and a far wider scope. To wrap a moral philosophy in the vocabulary of a common trade like construction was a very natural thing to do. 5000 years earlier the Egyptians had fashioned a ceremonial system within the trade of shipbuilding which taught precisely the same things as Masonry does. The tools with which we are familiar can be used to lead us into new discoveries. So, with Masonry, we are not literally perpetuating a system stretching back into antiquity. But we are perpetuating a doctrine of moral development as ancient as mankind himself.

What, then, is the message of Masonry that lies behind our ritual words? What is the Mystery which our Masonic sentences are intended to disclose to us as "Accepted" Masons?

To state things briefly, Masonry offers us, in dramatic form, a philosophy of the spiritual life of man and a diagram of the process of regeneration. The philosophy is consistent with the doctrine of every religious system outside of our Order, but it explains and more sharply defines, the doctrines common to every religious system in the world, whether Christian or non-Christian. At the Lodge room door the clamour of sectarian differences are left behind and the peace of common purpose descends upon all. Hence it is that every Master of a Lodge is called upon to swear that no innovation in the body of Masonry (i.e. in its substantial doctrine) is possible, since it already contains a minimum, and yet a sufficiency, of truth which none may add to or alter and from which none may take away.

The admission of every Mason into the Order is, we are taught, "an emblematical representation of the entrance of all men upon this mortal existence". Ah! What happens then to the nagging questions that come to every thinking mind? What am I! Whence come I! Whither go I! Masonry offers emphatic and luminous answers. Each of us has come from the East, the eternal source of all light and life, and our life here is described as being spent in the West, the opposite of our source and of our destiny. Upon admission to the Lodge, a candidate finds himself in a state of darkness and enters as a blind, helpless babe.

Entering from the West, he is guided and taught by his soon-to-be Brothers that the primal source of life is not the West, not in this world; that existence upon this planet is but a transitory sojourn, spent in search of the genuine "secrets", the ultimate realities of life; and that as the spirit of man must return to God who gave it, so he is now returning from this temporary world of "substituted secrets" to that "East" from which he originally came. The whole impact of this E.A. degree and those that will follow is meant to impress upon the candidate that his soul had a prior existence before this human form and here must perform the duties of its human development while it prepares to return to the "East" from whence it came.

How better to symbolize the entrance upon this world of learning than by the White Leather Apron which we receive unstained as a covering of our mortal body and a symbol of the industry we shall need to display to prepare ourselves for our Eastward journey. As the apron protects the body so does the body itself protect the inner soul. Here, then, is the real significance of the apron. It is indeed the badge of innocence. This human body is that which is "older and nobler than that of any other order". Let us never forget that if we never do anything to disgrace the badge of flesh with which God has endowed us, that badge will never disgrace us.

The initiate to the First Degree finds himself in the Northeast corner of the Lodge. Thereby he is intended to learn that at his birth into this world the

foundation stone of his spiritual life was duly and truly laid and implanted within himself; and he is charged to develop it. Two paths are open to him at this stage; a path of light and a path of darkness; of good and of evil. He is intended to see that on the one side of him is the path that leads to perpetual Light of the East, into which he is encouraged to proceed, and that on the other is that of spiritual obscurity and ignorance into which it is possible for him to remain or relapse.

The ceremony of our First Degree, therefore, is a swift portrayal of the entrance of all men into, first, physical life, and second, spiritual life. It is the degree of preparation, self- discipline and purification.

In the words of the psalmist "who will go up to the hill of the Lord, and ascent to His holy place? Even he that hath clean hands and a pure heart". Hence we wear white gloves and aprons as emblems that we have purified our hearts and washed our hands in innocency. For that reason we ask our candidates if they have anything in the way of money or material value on or about them; in other words, if they are subject to any physical attraction or mental defilement, their real initiation into higher development will be delayed until they rise above that burden.

After this purification comes contemplation and enlightenment. That is the story of the Second Degree, and perhaps, some day in the future, we may get a chance to examine it in a similar light.