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INITIATION AND FREEMASONRY

By

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Freemasonry does not exist in isolation. It is true that we perform our rituals behind closed and guarded doors but we do so, not to separate ourselves from society, but to allow ourselves a time of timelessness. With our rituals we are stepping into the very heart of what it is to be fully human and for that period of time we are fully focussed upon letting the outer guide us towards the inner. In our rituals we are all stepping, however confidently, or hesitantly, towards that greatest doorway of all. But we are then confronted by a riddle: to be able to enter, we first need to be initiated into its secrets; yet to be initiated is to enter - the price of the key is the key itself. Clearly we need to explore this further.

Freemasonry is a journey of initiation and that remains the basic and most profound reason for its being. But firstly, what inspires anyone to seek initiation? The answer is well put by the Sufi initiate and poet, Rumi:

“Jars of spring-water are not enough anymore.

Take us down to the river”.¹

And we must learn to swim in this river. To be initiated, we need to be part of the process itself, for initiatory ritual needs our involvement; requires that we give ourselves over to it. The ritual alone will not take us along the path we seek; rather, it is our participation in it which joins us to this journey towards insight and knowledge.

The ancients knew this path very well and their leading figures valued it. Cicero, an initiate in the Mysteries and chief Augur of Rome, wrote:

“For among the many excellent and indeed divine institutions which your Athens has brought forth and contributed to human life, none, in my opinion, is better than those mysteries. For by their means we have been brought out of our barbarous and savage mode of life and educated and refined to a state of civilization; and as the rites are called ‘Initiations,’ so in very truth we have learned from them the beginnings of life, and have gained the power not only to live happily, but also to die with a better hope.”²

Seneca wrote that there were,

“...initiation rites, by means of which are revealed, not the mysteries of a municipal temple, but of the world itself, the vast temple of all the gods.”³

So, let us be clear: initiation involves an encounter with the sacred. For initiation is linked to transformation. And here we touch upon something which is integral with our very humanness – however much sceptics and critics may try to deny it.

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But first, we need to take an overview of the landscape through which we make our journey. A basic question is: when did humans first encounter the sacred? This is impossible to tell. Perhaps the real question is: when did humans first lose their intimate contact with the sacred and become aware of their separation; that is, become conscious of an independent “Self”? I think that this is symbolised by the story of Adam and Eve being ejected from the Garden of Eden. But again, this is impossible to tell. However, there is one related question which I believe we can make an attempt to answer: when did humans see a distinction between the terrestrial and heavenly worlds?

I would argue that this is marked by the change in burial practices which palaeontologists have noted. About 120,000 years ago we find evidence of deliberate cave burials in Israel.⁴ Those who were buried in these caves were early version of our species *Homo sapiens sapiens*. From around 100,000 years ago, we find burials of another species, the Neanderthals, of which some 60 examples are known. In short, this practice existed across species and across cultures and remained consistent from that time on; up to the last Ice-Age some 150 ceremonial burials are known.⁵ Of course, such burials could have been designed simply to avoid the smell of decomposition or disease. Even though it is odd that burials should have occurred in caves which were also inhabited, we cannot draw any strong conclusions from this fact.

However, there is more: a number of the Neanderthal graves reveal not only the act of deliberate burial but also ritualistic associations. The earliest is in central Asia, around 100,000 years ago, when a young Neanderthal man was buried surrounded by pairs of goat horns; another about 75,000 years ago found at Le Moustier in France, the dead man was covered with red ochre, his head lay on a mound of flints, and the burned bones of cattle were spread around him; in a cave at Shanidar, Iraq, one individual seems to have been laid down upon a bed of flowers.

Now, what does this mean? These are not just burials designed to avoid health hazards, there is something more profound involved here.

We cannot avoid concluding that such a marked event, such respect for the dead, reveals that these early humans had a concept of another world, another mode of existence. These burials inform us that ancient peoples knew of - or believed in - the simultaneous existence of two worlds; that physical world of existence where we are born, grow old, and die; and that non-

physical world into which death leads us. With these burials they marked the transition from one to the other, from the temporal to the eternal. These burials record – one can say – the process of initiation.

Do we have the right to draw that conclusion? I believe that we do.

Tens of thousands of years after these early burials occurred, writing developed. In Western culture, it originated in Mesopotamia with primitive commercial records. By the 3rd Millennium BC these simple pictograms had evolved into a complex and sophisticated language.

And with this new means of expression what did they choose to reveal? What stories did they tell of humanity and its destiny? They told the story of a man, Gilgamesh, who travelled from this world into the next. A story which is probably very ancient indeed, for it is most unlikely that they simply made it up to take advantage of the invention of writing.

Gilgamesh was described as a king of ancient Uruk, a ruthless and violent man. But he became gripped by a fear of death; he wished to find the secret of eternal life. Dressed roughly, he abandoned his throne and left the city to begin a life of wandering. He chose to enter the Other world, as he said, in order to “Let my eyes see the sun and be sated with light”. He journeyed through the Other world, through the vast regions of darkness to the place of light; he emerged into a brilliant and beautiful garden overflowing with fruits. But, once there, by failing to stay awake, he was not granted immortality and was required to return to this world.

He had the vision, but afterwards had to return to his earthly task until death should finally call him. But Gilgamesh was, by any definition, an initiate. For Initiation is the entrance into direct

experience of that eternal “other” world, one suffused by Divinity, perceived to this very day in ⁵
the form of an endless, clear, living light.

Research currently progressing at the University of Wales – contrary to the endless sceptical arguments bandied around by philosophers of religion – has revealed the existence of a “common core” to religious experiences which cuts across the differences of faith and culture. 1000 members of Christianity, Islam and Judaism have all described having religious experiences of “intense light and a sense of encompassing love”. The University researchers suggest that humanity “share a common spirituality regardless of religious affiliations”.⁶

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Every humane society allows room for variations in human aspiration; those which do not, tend towards the fascist where all have to march to the same drum. Ancient societies, recognising this, often had, behind their domestic, commercial and military activity, behind their official religious cult, organisations called generically, “The Mysteries”. Through the Mysteries, society allowed two ways of understanding the symbolism and rituals which were presented publicly.

The Mysteries existed for the ultimate satisfaction of those who wished to know more, who wished to seek the very source of that divinity which was symbolically, but superficially, expressed in the popular religions and their public cult and practices. And, by knowing more, these initiates into the mysteries became better human beings.

We can view Freemasonry as generally fulfilling a similar role in modern society. Freemasonry attracts not so much those who are dissatisfied – for that is another matter – but those who wish

to enrich their lives by gaining insight and knowledge, and in so doing, enrich the lives of those⁶ about them through their morality and charity.

Yet Freemasonry itself is a society and within its rituals and practices we can also see evidence of a dual understanding of their meaning. The difference in Freemasonry is that the two perspectives are equally available to all brethren. They are separated simply by understanding; it is the way we look at what we are doing which is the key.

But sadly, all too often, we do not look clearly at what we are doing in our rituals nor understand fully the words we are speaking. It is too easy, in the struggle to remember the words, to let their meaning slide by. Ritual needs to be not just performed, but experienced. Each ritual takes place in a timeless *now*. Each ritual involves a confrontation – as gentle or as intense as we wish to make it - with this timeless *now*.

The Mysteries of the ancient world had, as their focus, an initiation. And this process, commonly, took place during a ritual period of 3 days. But the heart and focus of this period was the initiation itself when the candidate experienced a great and shimmering light, the Light of Divinity which embraced him. And he, or she, in turn, embraced it. Apuleius, an initiate into the great mysteries of Isis, described how he travelled to the underworld to stand at the very edge of death and that,

“In the middle of the night I saw the sun flashing with bright light. I came face to face with the gods...”⁷

After such an experience, the initiates were enjoined “To keep silent”. And, to their credit, none ever spoke; no texts exist of the inner workings of the Mysteries.

That this initiatory vision of the beyond and death itself were connected was well understood from very early times. Plato wrote that those who practiced philosophy correctly “are practising nothing other than dying and being dead.”⁸ Themistius (or, in fact, probably Plutarch) concurred:

“The soul (at the point of death),” he said, “has the same experience as those who are being initiated into great mysteries...”⁹

And the connection remains true today – why, indeed, should it ever change? Let us not make any mistake: we are not here speaking symbolically; we are speaking literally. The Divine world exists, literally, of this, there is no doubt, however much we may be forced, by the limitations of language, to express it symbolically. And it exists, not in some far away place, but right here, right now; it suffuses our universe and any others which might exist. What’s more, it is *all* that exists.

Furthermore, it is possible for us to cross over to this Other world, to glimpse its splendour, before returning to our allotted tasks here. That is, until we die, when we retrace that route but without returning.

This is initiation – standing for a moment, on the threshold of this eternal Divine world. It can never go away or be lost; it can only be forgotten, the maps to its entrance mislaid. And here lies the importance of ritual: for part of this process involves being reminded where that door is, and what lies beyond.

Initiation takes place in the eternal here and now; it is a spiritual transformation aided by ritual which raises one’s consciousness so that profound, rather than mundane, events might be given the chance to occur. But first the foundations of personality and social conditioning must be

shaken, even shattered; the candidate must move beyond the safety and comfort of his ordinary world; and above all, he must have courage.

All this knowledge can be found embedded in the rituals of our three degrees of Craft masonry: it is this upon this wisdom which Freemasonry is built, its journey is one towards knowledge of the Divine world. And along the way, we learn our responsibilities to *this* world.

Regrettably, there have been custodians of Freemasonry over the years whom have not remained true to the profound depths of its vision. They have focussed upon the words of the ritual rather than their meaning. Even worse, there are those who would shy away from any deeper understanding. They dismiss it as too esoteric forgetting that to join Freemasonry is to join a way of life in its deepest sense. But then, there will always be those who seek promotion rather than insight.

There are many ancient parallels with our own Mystery of Freemasonry: Apuleius describes the Mysteries of Isis as having three initiations; the Mysteries of Mithras had seven stages. Freemasonry too shows many instances of the symbolic use of three or seven: three degrees; seven to form a perfect lodge. We know too that Christianity had an inner Mystery tradition - that of the "Kingdom of Heaven" which is somehow linked with three days and a darkened cave or tomb.¹⁰

We find an echo of this in Freemasonry: symbolically, the 3 Degrees take 3 days: each is opened in the East at sunrise by the Master prior to the day's work; each is closed in the West at sunset by the Senior Warden. And the need for Light is made dramatically apparent to the candidate in the First Degree. But, at this point, he understands this simply as the light by which he might see

the external world – as a new-born infant might - for he has not yet been drawn into a deeper understanding of the term.

Our 3 Degrees teach various things:

(Firstly) They demand a promise: to continue progressing through the initiation, to keep the secrets which are revealed and to obey the principles of masonry and its brotherhood.

(Secondly) They explain the responsibilities of the brotherhood: morality, charity and brotherly love.

(Thirdly) They involve a symbolic journey over 3 symbolic days - a pilgrimage, a quest. And this comprises the heart of the rituals. The work for the initiate is his quest which is revealed as that for the Lost Word and one which is not fully resolved until the journey is completed in the Royal Arch.

The moral duties are well covered, well understood – and, exemplified by the huge amounts of money donated by Freemasonry to charity each year – well learned by all brethren. The quest, however, is rather more hidden.

The Third Degree speaks of the grave and beyond; and of knowledge of yourself. The Second Degree speaks of the hidden mysteries of nature and science. And yet, curiously, declines to pursue them. We must pursue them for ourselves. The First Degree speaks of the initial hesitant step which becomes the foundation stone both of Freemasonry itself and of that inner temple which each man must laboriously construct, smoothed ashlar by smoothed ashlar, from a foundation in Moral Truth and Virtue.

At the very beginning of the First Degree ceremony, the candidate for initiation is blindfolded: he is put into a state of darkness, symbolising the normal, unenlightened state of man. From ancient times many such initiations began in this manner for the candidate was literally beginning that sacred journey from darkness to light. The Lovatelli Urn, here in Rome, depicts such a candidate entering the Eleusinian Mysteries; his or her head covered by a veil.

An early masonic ritual from 1751 - written in French but published in England - explains that the blindfold and the subsequent perambulation around the the Lodge is to remind the candidate,

“that a man, who is in darkness, should advance towards the light and seek it.”¹¹

To enter the Lodge itself three great knocks are given on the door. That this is very ancient practice was revealed in 1730 by Samuel Prichard in his text, *Masonry Dissected*, which recorded its use.¹² These symbolise the three great blows to the head by which the Master Builder of the Temple of Solomon was murdered. But a text of 1744 moves beyond this basic interpretation, explaining instead, “Knock, and it will be opened unto you; ask, and you will be given; seek, and you shall find.”¹³ We enter freely; and just as freely we ask to move onwards.

After the Candidate is admitted there comes one of the most powerful statements of intent in all of Freemasonry. The Candidate kneels, the Chaplain asks for Divine Aid for the guidance of the ritual and the future progress of the candidate: that he might always serve God; that this Divine wisdom – *assisted* by the secrets of Freemasonry – might enable the candidate to view “the beauties of true godliness”; and that this might be put into the service of God, not the individual.

It is at this point that the candidate is led, blindfolded, on a circuit of the Lodge floor. His journey leads him to the east, where, upon a sacred book, he takes his obligation. Only then is he restored to light.

With this, he comes to the end of his first journey in Freemasonry; yet, it immediately proves to be the beginning of another. And this is the way of Freemasonry. Each apparent ending stands one upon the threshold of another journey.

The symbolism of the First Degree cuts to the essentials. From the moment the aspiring candidate for initiation enters the Lodge, he is on this ancient journey from darkness to light. For him, at that time, it is purely symbolic. But as the Degrees progress, as his life moves forward on its own journey now assisted by Freemasonry, he will have many opportunities to find a much deeper meaning beneath the words. Opportunities he may advantageously be encouraged to accept.

The peak moment of this mysterious journey comes in the 3rd Degree with the charge. I should like now to take a closer look at it and try to seek its' meaning. What vision is seeking expression in the words?

We can divide this charge into 3 sections:

The first section speaks of the '**mysterious veil which the eye of reason cannot penetrate**'; it expresses the relative darkness within which our lives are conducted, a relative darkness which cannot be relieved by means of our use of reason; something more is needed.

Now most masons uttering this are not aware that it is a thoroughly revolutionary statement; one which grows out of an argument at least 2500 years old. The earliest philosophers, those who came before Socrates and Plato such as Parmenides, Empedocles and Pythagoras, were not just skilled in argument but were all healers, doctors and shamans as well as philosophers. They didn't just talk or argue about divinity, they also *experienced* it.

They had, as both scholarship and archaeology has proved, very close links with the teachings of ancient Egypt: archaeological excavation of certain early Greek tombs – particularly some at Thurii, in Southern Italy - have revealed thin gold plates bearing ascension texts deriving from the Egyptian 'Book of the Dead'. But this title is modern, the ancients called it 'The Book of coming forth by day' – or, of coming forth into the Light. We can see the connection.

The earliest known Egyptian text, *The Book of the Dead*, took into its title *Sakhu*, meaning *transfiguration*, indicating that it aimed at transforming a person into a “spirit that has become one with the light.”¹⁴ We are here reminded of the injunction made by Hermes Trismegistus – a Classical persona of Egyptian *Tehuti*, or Tot, Thoth, the great initiator - who stated, “But perceive the light and know it”.¹⁵

Unfortunately, in the late 4th century BC, Plato sliced off the experiential side from philosophy and developed the practise we now recognise, that is, a search for the heart of reality based upon argument, upon intellectual display. So, great as he was, he did us all something of a disservice. He began the process of cutting philosophy off from its mystical roots.

Plato's student, Aristotle, completed the emasculation: he had no room for anything beyond that which could be apprehended by means of human reason. Reason, in his opinion, was the only

way to truth. It was not until some 800 years later, in early Christian times, that a Platonist called Plotinus, who had a profound personal experience of Divinity, brought philosophy back to its mystical roots. And his younger contemporary, Iamblichus, proceeded to introduce the use of ritual as well as elements from the Egyptian temples. This broad and mystical approach is now called Neo-Platonism but this word is, of course, a modern nonsense. For these two philosophers just returned philosophy to its experiential origins.

Reason is all very well, it is certainly rather useful and it underpins our scientific and technological culture; and also, via Descartes and Kant especially, our philosophy. But it deals only with the phenomenal world and our reality is much greater than that. Reason alone cannot comprehend the irrational, the metaphysical, the spiritual. Reason alone cannot penetrate that mysterious veil which shields all of us from 'the prospect – that is, the vista - of futurity', in other words, the vista of eternity.

It cannot do so – and here is the point – unless assisted. Assisted by what? The charge in the English ritual answers: by that '**Light which is from above**'. By the influx of true knowledge which is experienced as a blinding Divine Light. This is pure mysticism. This is the Sun rising in the middle of the night of which Apuleius wrote.

The second section of the charge insists, in no uncertain manner, the importance of '**knowledge of yourself**'. This echoes the preoccupation of the ancient Mysteries: above the door of the entrance to the Greek Mysteries at Delphi was carved the words: "Man, Know Thyself".

What does this mean? It means not just to know your own likes and dislikes, it means much more than this. It means to *know*, that is, to experience, what the true self is. Here again we are

moving beyond the external superficial world in search of something much deeper, much more profound. It is asking, who are you truly? Why are you here? What is required of you?

These implicit questions are then immediately answered in the third section of the charge.

This third section begins: “**Be careful to perform your allotted task while it is yet day**”. And how can we be sure to do this task correctly? By listening to the ‘**Voice of Nature**’. This, Brethren, is asking that we act in harmony with ourselves and our world. To do so we need to seek those still moments when the ‘Voice of Nature’ is not drowned out by the rough and tumble of modern life; by the wilful disregard of modern life. We need to seek these moments out, put time aside for them, and to trust them.

The intense darkened moments during which this charge is given in the third Degree allows the opportunity for such moments. When we deliver this charge, we might usefully take it slowly to allow time for these spaces to communicate to the candidate.

We find, expressed concisely and dramatically in this charge, important instructions for building our lives in accordance with our destiny. And what is our destiny? The charge states, using the most ancient symbolism, that it is to “**lift our eyes to that bright Morning Star, whose rising brings peace and salvation...**”

This, Brethren, serves to both humble us and to inspire us. For there is none too great nor too powerful for whom this is not directly addressed.

The Morning Star – it could be Sirius of the ancient Egyptians or Venus of the ancient Babylonians – is not to be taken literally although it is a beautiful and refreshing symbol, a symbol of a new light following the darkness.

This Morning Star arises within, it is the first vision of the Light from above. The New Testament advises,

“...take heed...until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts”.¹⁶

And the experience of this Light brings peace, and brings salvation. By knowing this Light – whenever in life it may come - you have passed through the veil which has previously shielded eternity from your grasp. You have reached the end of your journey; you have discovered the “**vital and immortal principle**” within. You have discovered the word which was lost. This, in truth, is our destiny.

It is this secret, open to all, but recognized by few, which lies at the heart of Freemasonry. It is a secret which needs to be *experienced*, not simply recited. And it is this which is the prime concern of the charge to the newly obligated Master Mason.

Ritual is at the heart of Freemasonry; dining together is the later celebration of its fruits. Without the ritual, there would be nothing to celebrate.

Ritual is a sharing in the timeless. Its unchanging form helps set it free from mundane time. There are those moments when a stillness and a silence precipitates out of the words and the movement. And, sitting in the lodge, one is aware of the soft embrace of the eternal.

And yet, used wrongly, ritual can bring restriction rather than freedom, its form dictating rather than releasing. We need, at least, to make more use of silence and stillness in order to take every opportunity to let the rituals carry us with them.

Freemasonry will always remain a journey: from ignorance to knowledge; from selfishness to compassion and charity. When we come into masonry, with our first words to the Master of the lodge, we attest to our freedom. It is that freedom which allows us to move ahead on our own journey from darkness to light; from sipping at the jars of spring-water to drinking from the great river itself.

¹ Jelaluddin Rumi, *Jars of Springwater*, in *The Glance*, trans. Coleman Barks, New York, 1999, p. 1.

² Cicero, *De Legibus*, II, xiv, 36.

³ Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, xc, 29.

⁴ Timothy Taylor, *The Buried Soul*, London, 2002, p.34.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.31.

⁶ *The Daily Telegraph*, London, 11 April 2001, p.11.

⁷ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, XI, 23.

⁸ Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a.

⁹ Themistius, *On the Soul*, quoted in Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Oxford, 1907, III, p.179. This text is attributed to Themistius but Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1987, p.162.n.11, considers that the author is actually Plutarch.

¹⁰ For Jesus describing the inner teachings as “the mystery of the kingdom of heaven” see *Matthew* 13:11; *Mark* 4:11; *Luke* 8: 9-10. See also Michael Baigent, *The Jesus Papers*, San Francisco and London, p.225 - 233.

¹¹ *Le Maçon Démasqué*, London, 1751 in Harry Carr (ed.), *The Early French Exposures*, London, 1971, p.427.

¹² Samuel Pritchard, *Masonry Dissected*, London, 1730, in Douglas Knoop, G.P. Jones and Douglas Hamer, *The Early Masonic Catechisms*, Manchester, 1943, p.111.

¹³ *Catechisme des Francs-Maçons*, Limoges, 1744, in Harry Carr, *ibid*, p.107.

¹⁴ Stephen Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, London, 1992, p. 159.

¹⁵ *Corpus Hermeticum I: Poimandres*, 6, in Clement Salaman, Dorine van Oyen, & William D. Wharton (trans.), *The Way of Hermes*, London, 1999, p.18.

¹⁶ II *Peter* 19.