

Traditional Symbolism & Human Dignity

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SYMBOLISM is the vehicle that conveys Masonry's essential traditions, its distinct character and its psychological impact. William Preston, one of the authors of the ritual used in Masonic lodges today, said it perfectly when he defined Freemasonry "a regular system of morality conceived in a strain of interesting allegory, which readily unfolds its beauties to the candid and industrious enquirer."¹ He also tells us that the Craft "was formed on the purest principles of morality, founded on allegory and explained by Holy Symbols," because "...objects which particularly strike the eye will more immediately engage the attention and imprint on the memory serious and solemn truths."²

Today, symbolism is a little bit of a lost language. Although we encounter and react to symbols constantly, the symbols in our culture are disconnected fragments. There is no longer a homogeneous Western society with a standard array of symbols, and this makes it difficult, at first, to understand Freemasonry and what its symbols are supposed to mean.

This is one of those cases where a closer look at the word can shed some light. Our word "symbol" is from the classical Greek word *sumbolon*. It originally referred to something, such as a die, a wax seal or a stick of wood, which was broken in half.³ Although strangers, the bearer of one would recognize the bearer of the other when the two pieces were combined. Literally, *sumbolon* means "a thing thrown together" (that is, from the two pieces, to form the whole).

That's what it means on our level—me to you. But in the world of ideas, the symbol we see is the worldly "half" of an idea that is otherwise entirely invisible. Although intangible, we can still recognize these ideas when we see that the symbol-halves we possess are able to be "fitted" to them.

Consider the stop sign, a mundane symbol familiar to us. It is a simple octagon in red with the word STOP in white. But it signifies a complex body of

1 Preston's original Apprentice degree lecture, as cited in Colin F. W. Dyer, *William Preston and His Work* (Shepperton, UK: Lewis Masonic, 1987), 207; cf. similar language in Webb, *Freemason's Monitor*, 57.

2 P. R. James, William Preston's First Lecture of Freemasonry. *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, vol. 82 (1969), 127 & 131.

3 Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon, Ninth Edition* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940), 1676–7.

law—the traffic code. We do not stop the moment such a sign is seen, regardless of our actual proximity to it. Nor do we remain frozen forever, hoping to discover a GO sign. This is because, within us, to a greater or lesser degree, we have learned a complex series of rules which are the invisible “other half” of the stop sign. A full articulation of the meaning of the stop sign would have to include not only the traffic code *in toto*, but all of the socially accepted but illegal modifications thereof (the “rolling stop,” etc.). And woven deep into the sign, beneath all of the legal rules and subjective guidelines that it implies, we find its basis: the sanctity of life. A simple shape it may be, but it refers to an invisible library that is of great importance for our safe travel.

Traditional symbolism, as found in the world’s great philosophical systems and within the initiatic tradition of Freemasonry, works in a similar way, except that the unseen concepts to which the symbols refer are Ideals or Principles of a philosophical nature.

Symbols form the very fabric of Masonic experience, but the question remains: why? Why could the founders of Freemasonry, whoever they were, not have simply written a pamphlet to convey their basic ideas? As most will be aware, the Masonic experience involves a progressive advancement through a series of complex degrees, each of them with intricate language and visual signs. So, perhaps, instead of a pamphlet, maybe they should have written a book?

The various Masonic rituals and lectures of the last 300 years do in fact offer very specific reasons for the Craft’s use of symbolic instruction. One of them is to keep the secrets from being understood by those who have no right to them. Another is to keep the teachings from being destroyed by what is termed the “ruthless hand of ignorance.” Another has already been mentioned: that symbols “more immediately engage the attention” and thus are more effective at imprinting serious lessons upon the mind.

Maybe another way to say it is that symbolism is necessary for the accurate and durable transmission of the profound lessons that have been passed down through this particular initiatic system.

I could add some other ideas—for example, that the emphasis on symbolism is there to ensure that the lessons will always be adaptable to whatever circumstances various historical periods offer us. However, I think it might be a mistake to think about this in purely functional terms. This isn’t really a mechanical thing. There’s an old story I know—this is from a medieval text that was popular during the Renaissance:

Once there was a man who lived up in the mountains and who was a stranger to civilization—he planted wheat and ate the grains uncooked. Then he happened to come down to the city. A good loaf of bread was served to him. “What’s this?” he asked. “Bread, for eating!” they said. He ate it and was pleased. He asked, “What is this

made of?” and they told him it was wheat. Then, he was served a fine cake kneaded in oil. He had a taste and asked, “And now this, what’s this made of?” Once more they said, “Wheat.” Finally, they brought him a delectable pastry in oil and honey, fit for a king. He asked again, and got the same answer. “Well,” he then boasted, “I am above these things; I eat only the wheat which is the very basis of them all.” Because of his ignorant attitude, he would evermore remain a stranger to these delights, which were lost on him. That is how it is with anyone who learns basic principles and then stops short—who fails to become aware of the delights which derive from the deeper consideration and application of those principles.⁴

I think this captures something vital about Masonry and its use of symbols. Masonry does not claim to have a monopoly on truth, morality, philosophy, brotherly love or charity. Yes, all of these things are available in their rawest form to one and all. What the Masonic initiation offers is something like that delectable treat which the mountain man was not so impressed by—it is a particular, and we (Masons) think remarkably magnificent, formation of basic, universal elements. It is compelling today not only because of its inherent beauty and pure mystique, but the more so since our modern culture has so far divorced itself from the pursuit of a positive, non-materialistic philosophy.

In 1486, a young man named Pico della Mirandola wrote a document which has been called the manifesto of the European Renaissance: the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. In this uplifting text, Pico boldly proclaimed that humanity is worthy of divine philosophy and capable of pursuing it and enjoying its fruits. He said that we should find ways to rival the life of the cherubim, even while living earthly lives.⁵ Pico advocated breaking out of the back-and-forth of worldly philosophy and instead soaring upward on the wings of contemplation: “If, being tired of actions and meditating on the workman in the work, on the work in the workman, we are busy with the leisure of contemplation, we shall

4 *Sefer haZohar* 2:176 A–B

5 Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998). “Let us put in last place whatever is of the world; and let us fly beyond the chambers of the world to the chamber nearest the most lofty divinity. There, as the sacred mysteries reveal, the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones occupy the first places. Ignorant of how to yield to them and unable to endure the second places, let us *compete* with the angels in dignity and glory. When we have willed it, we shall be not at all below them.” (7) “[B]y *rivaling the life of a cherub upon the earth*, by confining the onslaughts of the affections by means of moral science, and by shaking off the mist of reason by means of dialectic...let us purge the soul, that the affections may not audaciously run riot, nor an imprudent reason sometime rave. Then, over a soul which has been set in order and purified, let us pour the light of natural philosophy, that lastly we may perfect it with the knowledge of divine things.” (9)

flash on every side with cherubic light. If by charity we, with His devouring fire, burn for the Workman alone, we shall suddenly burst into flame in the likeness of a seraph.”⁶

What Pico began, others developed—and the various threads of the Western esoteric tradition were woven into many expressions. Historians have shown that by the 1600s, as Freemasonry was beginning to take the shape it still has today, significant students of these Renaissance ideas were members of our order: William Schaw, Robert Moray, Elias Ashmole.⁷ Extensive scholarship reveals that Freemasonry’s symbolism is the heir of the Renaissance and of the various traditions that influenced Ficino, Pico, Leone Ebreo, Giordano Bruno, and so many other great thinkers.

I’m mentioning all of this to make a rather stark point. Of those writers I just mentioned, even though some of their writings have been implicated in bringing the curtain down on the medieval period, none of them are studied today except by specialists. The modern perspective rejects their points of view as thoroughly—and perhaps with even more suspicion—than the church authorities once did.

There’s a scholar named Peter Kingsley whose clarity on this matter is unrivaled:

Western culture is a past master at the art of substitution. It offers and never delivers because it can’t. It has lost the power even to know what needs to be delivered, so it offers substitutes instead. What’s

6 *Ibid.*, 7. The cherubic flaming sword which flashed on every side to guard the way to the Tree of Life (Genesis 3.24) was adopted as a symbol by the early Freemasons, who represented it with a *flamberge* (curved blade) in the hands of the Tiler, who guards the entrance of the lodge. See Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopædia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences* (Philadelphia: Moss, 1879), 780; Kenneth Mackenzie, *The Royal Masonic Cyclopædia* (London: Hogg, 1877), 707; H. W. Coil, *Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia, Second Edition* (Richmond, VA: Macoy, 1996), 252 & 642. The practice fell into disuse, most likely due to the greater expense of the blades. Even so, many surviving examples of the more traditional curved Tiler’s sword, either in current use or on display as valued relics, are known. See N. B. Cryer, *The Masonic Halls of England: The North* (Shepperton: Lewis Masonic, 1989), 6 & 25; B. E. Jones, *The Freemasons’ Book of the Royal Arch* (London: Harrap, 1969), illustration XII.

7 Cf. David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland’s Century, 1590–1710*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and *The First Freemasons: Scotland’s Early Lodges and their Members* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988); Douglas Knoop & G. P. Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1947); Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Restoring the Temple of Vision: Cabalistic Freemasonry and Stuart Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

most important is missing, and dazzling in its absence. And what we're offered is often just a substitute for something far finer that once used to exist, or still does exist, but has nothing in common with it except the name. ... [T]hat's what happened to philosophy.⁸

If Pico would have us become cherubim, it seems the modern world would have us become... what? Nobody is sure, but it probably has nothing to do with contemplation. Although there is a tremendous popular revival in the outer forms of traditional wisdom—including Freemasonry—we must be careful. While the new interest is heartening and should be welcomed, we must also be ready to encourage a comprehensive initiatic experience by promoting the right attitude. The problem is that today's accepted way of bringing something into one's life is to subject it to intense cynicism and scrutiny. Traditions that held their ground for thousands of years, today may be dissected into fragments—and each dismembered element may find itself adopted (*or not*) based upon very little more than personal whim.

Only that which one finds comfortable and reaffirming is retained, while the rest is derided. The fact that one of wisdom's most important functions is to direct our attention to realities which we do not wish to face is blissfully ignored, and modern nihilism dances its macabre waltz with the twitching but unalive patchwork monster it has made from the scraps of living and breathing but supposedly "outmoded" traditions.

And here is where the beauty of symbolism comes to the rescue. Freemasonry teaches that symbols, better than mere words, are capable of surviving persecution and disaster. By symbolism the traditions of the Craft are "transmitted unimpaired," despite the interference of ruthless opponents both without and within. Symbols resist dissection, because we recognize their basic patterns. They may seem at first to be broken beyond repair, lost even to those who would engage them—but that is only so from the outside. When the initiatic path is undertaken with appropriate care and by those who are genuinely ready to receive it, one discovers a surprise: the system is somehow intact. Traditional symbolism supports human dignity by pointing us beyond ourselves and our mundane circumstances, to moral, intellectual, spiritual and philosophical self-improvement.

Thomas Carlyle said that "It is in and through Symbols that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being: *those ages, moreover, are accounted the noblest which can the best recognise symbolical worth, and prize it the highest.*"⁹ Our ability to perceive and respond to the great lessons that have come down to us in symbols only not only defines us, but the times in which we

8 Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 1999), 35.

9 Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1831), 177.

live.

I'm not saying there was once a perfect Golden Age. It's human nature to idealize the past; but let's see it as a challenge to improve the present. Addressing the subject of the mysteries of bygone ages, Albert Pike said that they "were practised as a means of perfecting the soul, of making it to know its own dignity, of reminding it of its noble origin and immortality, and consequently of its relations with the Universe and the Deity."¹⁰ What Freemasonry offers, via its initiation ceremonies, is a glimpse into this "ideal time." It might as well be the future as the past: a time when materialism will never be the final word, and when idealism and humanism will stand undistracted by cynicism. Masonic initiation is one pathway to the recovery of our real dignity as men, one doorway into a world where we meet as equals to explore ideas and values that are constructive, inspiring and empowering.

Freemasonry restores context by directing our attention to unchanging truths. It promotes sociability and true brotherhood. It refers constantly to our higher duties to God, to the world, to our families and to ourselves. And in the application of those teachings within our lives, we fulfill the ancient promise that we must put into practice outside of the Lodge those great lessons taught within it, and cultivate lives of unfeigned reverence and virtue. When the symbols come alive, and resound within us, and truly transform the way we think and the way we act in the world, then alone the real goal is reached; then, at last, is the dignifying potential of traditional symbolism made a reality.

10 Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma* (Washington, DC: Supreme Council, 1871), 415.