

SYMBOLISM IN THE FIRST DEGREE

In commencing on this topic of symbolism in the First Degree, we have to commence before a man becomes a candidate. We ask him to give assurance that he believes in a supreme being - even the word supreme being is a symbol, for who of us really knows what that term implies, though each of us has his own and often vague understanding of that term. The letter "G" is a symbol. When the candidate pays his fees there is symbolism attached in that nothing in this world is really "Free". The candidate next gets acquainted with Masonic symbolism when he is striped of all metals, is hoodwinked and partially clothed - indeed literally divested of his own garments and met at the door by a man (the inner guard) who tortures his flesh to remind him that he is taking on obligations and further symbolizing that he is a man and not an animal with conscience. Next he is requested to kneel while divine guidance is requested on his behalf and we realize that his mortal guide is symbolic of the spiritual guidance that is sought on his behalf - so this symbolic journey begins. The first degree itself is symbolic of his entering this life and of his childhood here on earth.

We now proceed to the symbolism of his journey through the ceremony of the first degree. He has, symbolically, been born: has arrived at the proper level of intelligence where he can absorb knowledge and learn lessons.

Before our candidate starts on his journey - symbolized by the perambulation - he is warned that difficulty and danger may await him so he is required to give assurance that he has faith in that Supreme Being mentioned before. That perambulation, or journey if you will, is symbolic of his learning period, presumably to fit him for his adulthood. Even the knocks at the warden's pedestals have further symbolism - the knocks were given to gain his entry into the lodge but those knocks were addressed to inert substance; now they are addressed to a living person by himself, signifying that in our efforts to search the inner world of guidance from above, we are seeking aid from experts who have traveled the road before us. The two wardens, too, could be considered to symbolize certain dormant principles that lie within reach of each of us but that must be brought to our attention before we incorporate them into our daily lives.

This symbolic journey being ended in the west, our candidate is presented to the east with the assurance that he has withstood the vicissitudes of early life and is fitted to achieve the first symbolic plateau of the Craft. Presumably he is still wobbly and unsure of his footing and his surroundings, but he does have the desire to see "Light", and is instructed how to proceed further, still entirely dependent upon his guide. He is arranged at the altar in a symbolic position and certain obligations are required of him, the penalty for failure in performance of which is now also symbolic although in ancient times such dire consequences really did ensue for dereliction of duty or breaking a promise or oath. The obligation itself on first glance seems designed simply to assure silence on the part of the candidate but again symbolism is involved. Masonry could suffer little if any, should its "secrets" be revealed. Indeed, there have been many exposes published. The secrets that must be kept inviolate are the inner secrets of the initiate himself - he must discover the deep spiritual meaning of the Craft for himself and those experiences being extremely personal, he is obligated to retain them within himself and ponder upon them for his own edification.

Wilmshurst - an eminent masonic scholar - states: "Experience will teach him later on the deep spiritual value of silence. He will find that "light and wisdom" are acquired not from anything that can be show or orally imparted to him, but from the gradual assembly of new ideas and their gradual digestion and co-ordination by his own mind for which purpose it is above all things essential that his mental energies should be conserved and not frittered away in talk. To use an electric analogy, he must be an accumulator receiving new impressions and letting them revolve in a closed circuit.

During all this time at the altar the candidate is in a particular position, viz - one knee on the floor (symbolically "on the ground") to signify his partial surrender to the principles of masonry. We might note that each degree has its own position for the candidate to assume at the altar, culminating with him having both knees on the ground to symbolize is complete surrender and compliance with the philosophy of the Craft. In effect, the symbolism at the altar is that a mason must learn, digest what he hears and speak only when he has studied his subject and arrived at a logical conclusion, meaning he is meant to suffer a bit in the process. Then symbolically with his lessons learned, he is permitted to see "Light", which can be interpreted as being Divine Guidance or the inner knowledge that he has of himself, or indeed, a combination of both, for both he surely needs in his approaching adulthood of maturity. The word "Light" itself can be interpreted to mean "consciousness", hence the phrase "Let there be light," can symbolically mean "Let there be a quickening, heightening and expansion of consciousness in that which has hitherto been unconscious.

The first symbol brought to his attention after being restored to light is the V.S.L., followed immediately by the universal emblem of Masonry - the square and compasses. These are noted as being the Three Emblematic Lights, and it isn't by chance that these are the very first symbols seen. It is fitting that they be observed in a kneeling position and facing east, because the primary purpose and basis of the Craft is the V.S.L. - it being the invisible emblem of the invisible cosmic law through which we obtain some vague idea of the Deity, or controlling force that our finite mind cannot fathom, but which we have vowed we believe exists. Here we may note that the Craft's conception of the "Sacred Law" isn't simply the books of the Old or the New Testament; our scope and understanding is sufficiently broad to permit the thinking of other faiths equal status, hence a worthy candidate of most faiths may be obligated on the "Bible" in which he believes, since we obligate a Jew on the Pentateuch; a Moslem on the Koran; an Indian upon the Vedas, and so on. However, in order to obtain universality of thought, we superimpose the square and the compasses and point out that these, regardless of the individual's particular faith, are symbols of mankind's desire and obligation to live in harmony and build with these basic instrument's a society acceptable to the common deity or controlling force each has acknowledged.

The attention of the candidate is next directed to the three lesser lights which symbolize the world in which we live. His surroundings and his work to be accomplished and the vacant space in the centre of the room with its square pavement upon which he is now kneeling, but will later be standing and walking doing life's work. Here too, a valuable lesson is given to the concealment of one of the points of the compasses. The candidate learns through this symbol that he opened the door a small crack in his Masonic journey and that each

study and self-searching must be done before more knowledge may be imparted to him.

Having received the lessons so far, he is now deemed ready to receive the "secrets" of the degree and these in themselves are but symbols. It is what they signify that constitutes the secrets and we leave it to the candidate to translate these "secrets" into the basis for his daily living. Masonry takes us one step at a time through life to the ultimate goal not achieved here on earth - the knowledge and the understanding, in other words, the "oneness" with the Grand Architect of the Universe. The instructions regarding how these secrets are to be received are, too, symbolic. The standing perfectly erect symbolizes erectness of character and could allude to man's progress. "Upright" - the word has always signified rectitude of character as well as bodily posture. The word that is communicated at this time is explained as being the symbol of "strength", but it can be expanded to denote other attributes such as "power", "energy", etc.

In Masonry, as in life, there is a reward for diligence and virtue. So upon being vouched for by the S.W. as being worthy, the Master gives instructions that he be rewarded by being invested as a proper mason - the apron itself being replete with Masonic symbols: its shape is that of an equilateral triangle superimposed on a square. The triangle is the primitive and universal emblem of the spiritual and formless and it is interesting to note that this symbolic triangle rests upon a quadrangle or square which symbolizes the material or "that which possesses form (or body)," and since human nature is a compound of both, the apron is a picture of man himself. These symbols of a triangle or the square are as old as humanity itself, hence the apron is very truly described as being "A badge older than that of any other in existence." It is also the badge of purity (lambskin) to guard against "spot or stain", alluding not so much to physical as moral protection.

Our next step is at the "North-East corner" - a lesson both symbolic and practical. Practical charity is of great importance to each Mason but this lecture also is symbolic of one's learning in early youth the "charity" of mind towards others - a sharing of talents and, hopefully, the banishing of bigotry in every form from one's thoughts, giving the other fellow full scope for believing as he does and not being so vain as to think our own thoughts and way of life is better than his. The "superstructure" referred to is his new awareness of others. The consideration he is bound to show if he is to be a true Mason.

The "North-East corner" lecture is probably the most dramatic of all in the Masonic ritual and rightly so because it points up - stories if you will, the character a Mason must assume towards people as a whole if he is to be true to the teachings of the Craft. The next short journey in our symbolic search for knowledge is to the station where the "working tools" are presented. Our candidate has been advised what to do in the North-East corner and he is now instructed how to do it. The tools presented (24 inch gauge) pointing up the allocation of his life to spiritual things; to material pursuits and to sharing what he has with others less fortunate in not only material things but in knowledge and intellect as well. The other 2 working tools presented symbolizes that effort, coupled with the necessary tools are necessary for the practical business of daily living. Other working tools will be presented in other degrees but here again masonry presents only so much at each stage as a man progressing from childhood to adulthood can be expected to learn as well as absorb.

The Tracing Board lecture is "veiled in allegory", but is in fact a resume of the journey the candidate has taken. It starts by picking up a piece of property suitable for erecting a building; laying out the boundaries of that building, erecting it, putting on the roof and finally finishing it. This symbolic building is indeed man himself and the furnishings are but symbols of how he should comfort himself and why - building to the future and being guided by the knowledge and experience of the past. Even a symbolic lesson may be gained when the candidate is permitted to assume his "personal comforts" - those outer trappings that had for a while hidden the real man, who has been initiated as a man - he should now realize that these clothes really aren't too important. It is the man underneath those clothes and the thoughts in that mans' mind that are the marks of a mason. If he has learned his lessons properly, he will realize that clothed (meaning comfortable physical!

y) Or suffering discomfort through lack of physical covering, then he is serene in mind taking life's vicissitudes as they come because his mind is now attuned to that of the G.A.O.T.U.

The "Ancient Charge" contains little symbolism; it is a practical lecture pointing out to the candidate what is expected of him as he lives his daily life.

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