

Masonic Symbols, Physical And Conceptual

By

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Presented to A. Douglas Smith, Jr. Lodge of Research, #1949

On

October 31, 1998

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INTRODUCTION:

All of us are familiar with symbols. And I suppose when we first think about symbols we are reminded that

- Religions have and use symbols - the Cross, the Crescent, and the Star of David, to mention only three.
- Nations have symbols -- monuments, the Tomb of the Unknowns, the Great Seal, and the Flag.
- Corporations have symbols. They too have flags, trademarks, emblems, slogans, and even colors (IBM -the big blue), and colors and shapes (McDonald's - the golden arches).
- And organizations, particularly fraternal organizations have symbols.

Freemasonry, one of the oldest fraternal organizations, has been defined as a beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols. And so it should come as no surprise, that our fraternity has its symbols and emblems and no surprise either that symbols and symbolism are particularly important to the Craft.

But before we get into specific symbols, we ought to spend a minute thinking about symbols in general. Indeed, when we think about symbols, we realize that we literally cannot think **without** symbols. They are all around us. Numbers are symbols, words and language are symbols. Your name is a symbol representing you. Money is a symbol. Surely a hundred dollar bill has little intrinsic worth, it is just a piece of paper. But we treat that particular piece of paper with some degree of care. And think about two one-hundred dollar bills: one is child's play money, the other is U. S. currency. What is interesting is that they are both symbols. Neither of them is just a piece of paper, but they have different meanings and one piece of paper is worth more than the other.

This business about different meanings has led non-Masons and even some Masonic writers to say that Freemasonry is a secret organization, and that Masonic symbols are simply a way "Freemasonry conceals its secrets from all except the Adepts...or the Elect, and uses false explanations and misinterpretations of its symbols to mislead those who deserve only to be misled, to conceal the truth from them, and to draw them away from it."¹ But this is itself misleading. There is much more to Masonic symbolism than secrets or secrecy.

Let me explain. It is true that symbols have different meanings at different levels and so may mean something to the non-Mason, who is not schooled in Masonic symbolism, and have more lofty meaning to the educated Mason. To show what I mean let us examine a simple nursery rhyme that we are all familiar with and then listen to what is said about it in a poetry text book:

First the nursery rhyme:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Now here is what the text says by way of interpretation:

"Although this poem is familiar as a nursery rhyme, we should not ignore its symbolic significance. For "Humpty Dumpty" is not a children's verse at all. It is, rather, a warning about the dangers of overarching pride. Pride, of course was the sin of Adam, the first man, who to quote Milton's great epic poem *Paradise Lost*, 'brought death into the world and all our woe.'"

"Why is Humpty Dumpty a symbol of pride? Primarily because as an egg sitting on a wall, he is in a very dangerous position, a position in which he should never have placed himself. By sitting on the

wall, Humpty Dumpty attempts to go above and beyond his limits as an egg....In sitting there Humpty Dumpty tries to overreach himself, to be like a man, something he decidedly is not."

"This is analogous to the position of Adam, the first man, who wanted to be like God. Like Adam, who attempted to reach beyond the limits of his nature, Humpty Dumpty brings about and deserves his fall. In fact 'fall' is the most important word in the poem. Literally, it describes Humpty's precipitous decline and consequent destruction. Symbolically, it represents the *fall* of man from grace into sin. Like Adam, who was cast out of Paradise and who suffered physical hardship resulting from his excessive pride, so Humpty Dumpty, the nursery rhyme Adam, is broken by his fall, never to be made whole again."²

Quite a different slant on a simple old nursery rhyme, don't you think? But it demonstrates, and I suggest quite clearly, how symbols can be understood and appreciated at different levels.

Now it is not only the difference between the understanding of the child and the adult, or the Mason and the non-Mason, but even the new Mason and the experienced Mason.

During our Virginia ritual there is recited some verses from Ecclesiastes, (chapter xii, verses 1-7). You may remember how it goes during the Master Mason's Degree:

"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; while the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars be not darkened" and so on.

Well, I heard this many times. I understood most of the individual words, but I never felt very comfortable that I was sure that I understood everything that was said. Of course, this is not a **Masonic** secret. Any Bible scholar would know immediately, but the Masonic ritual which was trying to teach me something, inspired me to look further to uncover the fuller meaning.³

And the verse takes on added meaning when we understand the symbolism behind it. And so let us read it with the symbolism in mind:

"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth," while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them. **This refers to the advent of old age.**

"While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars be not darkened." **This means that in old age there is a general decay of the powers and the facilities of the mind. The understanding is obscured, the memory fails, and the will becomes more feeble.**

"Nor the clouds return after the rain." **This refers to the succession of infirmities and pains which attend the "Winter" of Man's life.**

"In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble," **refers to the arms and hands which tremble in old age.**

"And the strong men shall bow themselves." **This alludes to the lower limbs which bend forward and weaken in advanced age and also refers to the spine which tends to bend as the years take their toll.**

"And, the grinders cease because they are few." **This refers to the loss of teeth so common among the aged.**

"And those that look out the windows be darkened." **Here the windows connote the eyes which no longer function properly and vision becomes dim.**

"And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low." **This passage describes the common facial expression seen in the elderly when the lips are compressed and flattened because of lack of teeth. Since the gums are used for mastication, the diet changes to soft food and the sound of chewing is gone.**

"And he shall rise up at the voice of the bird." **Man sleeps so lightly in old age that he is aroused from his sleep by the twittering of a small bird.**

"And all the daughters of music shall be brought low." **Music can no longer charm the old person, if his hearing has become impaired.**

"Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high and fears shall be in the way." **Here we find a poetic reference to the difficulty for the old person in climbing hills or ascending stairs. Note also the fear of crossing the "way" or highway.**

"And the almond tree shall flourish." **The flower of the almond tree is white and refers to the gray hair of the aged.**

"And the grasshopper shall be a burden." **In the weakness of old age weights cannot be borne and even light labor becomes burdensome.**

"Or ever the silver cord be loosed." **The silver cord is supposed to denote the spinal cord which passes through the entire length of the spine and which is weakened by old age.**

"Or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern," **The fountain is supposed to describe the heart which, weakened in old age, can no longer pump the blood through the circulatory system.**

Here we have a wonderful description of the dry, the emaciated, querulous old man. All these physical signs indicate the approach of the time "when man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets; then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." And in this last sentence is expressed the belief in the immortality of the soul.

Well I think this goes a long way toward explaining about symbolism in general and begins to explain about Masonic symbolism in particular. And, of course, the point is that Masonic symbolism seeks to convey important moral lessons and principles. Thus, it is that without an understanding of the symbolism, we have only a pale and impoverished understanding of what is being conveyed.

But, you may ask why not speak more plainly to begin with. Why does Freemasonry use symbols at all. Well, whether we are talking about religions,

nations, corporations, or organizations -- as we did at the beginning of these remarks -- there are two basic reasons for symbols.

First, they serve to distinguish members of a group. Whether it is a religious symbol, a badge, or a Masonic emblem, the wearer of the symbol identifies himself with the group so that he can be recognized as such. Thus, a Masonic ring or a Masonic emblem identifies the wearer as one who purports to be a Mason. And various laws forbid non-members from using Masonic emblems, just as other laws forbid those who are not police, or military officers, or CIA officials from wearing or using police, military, or CIA symbols, emblems and identifications.

Of course, not everyone plays by the rules and so there are other forms of identification to test affiliation. And so it is with Freemasons. There are less public ways by which one Mason may know another to be a Mason.

The second, and more important reason for symbols, is that they have significance as a shorthand to capture values and principles. Symbolism, the art of representing abstract truths and ideas by concrete things, can sharpen our perceptions and push us toward a fresh observation of life, can increase our understanding of the world and of ourselves, and can excite our capacity for wonder and enlarge our appreciation for truth and beauty.⁴

MASONIC SYMBOLS:

With all of this background as to why Freemasonry has symbols, let us review a few of the symbols we are all familiar with and perhaps rediscover what they mean.

We know that Freemasonry traces its origins back to what was known as Operative Masonry, for example, to the stone masons who were builders. As Freemasonry expanded its membership to include, in addition to skilled craftsmen, persons from other occupations, it evolved from Operative Masonry to Speculative Masonry. But in keeping with its roots, builder's tools came to form an important part of Masonic symbolism.

In Operative Masonry, the tool is an implement or device which either informs its user of facts not easily available or not otherwise perceivable at all to his five senses, or which alter the shape, form, substance, or position of materials. In Speculative Masonry, these tools also inform our senses and our sensibilities, and they help shape our lives.

THE SQUARE & COMPASSES:

Let us start with perhaps the oldest and most well known Masonic symbol, found on Masonic rings and lapel pins -- the Square and Compasses with the letter "G."

The "square" is nothing more than a "simple try-square used for testing the accuracy of angles, and the precision with which stones are cut. Since the try-square was used to prove that angles were right, it naturally became an emblem of accuracy [and] integrity....As stones are cut to fit into a building, so our acts and thoughts are built together into a structure of character, badly or firmly, and must be tested by a moral standard for which the simple try-square is a symbol.

So among Speculative Masons, the tiny try-square has always been a symbol of morality, of the basic rightness which must be the test of every act and the foundation of character and society."⁵

The Compasses teach self-knowledge, self-reverence, and self-control. It teaches us to know ourselves -- our strengths, our weaknesses, and our limitations -- as a first principle of wisdom. Lacking such knowledge one goes too far, loses control of himself, and by that very fact loses, in some measure the self respect which is the corner stone of character. And if he loses respect for himself, he does not long keep his respect for others.

The square and compasses work together as tools, As the Square instructs us in our duties to our Brother and our neighbor, so the Compasses teach us the obligation which we owe to ourselves. More specifically, the compasses teaches each Mason the "duty of circumscribing his passions, and keeping his desires within due bounds."⁶

And then there is the Letter "G," which hangs over the chair of the Master in the East. It is a reference to Deity and also denotes the science of Geometry.⁷

The reference to God is obvious. "For Masonry, God is the first truth and the final reality. Everything in Masonry has reference to God, every lesson, every lecture, from the first step to the last degree."⁸ But, as we know, the Masonic way of teaching is less direct and more by influence and atmosphere, and we most often use the phrase, "The Grand Architect of the Universe." This not only fits within the symbolism of the Craft and points to God's role in everything, but also avoids pronouncing the name "God" too often, lest it lose some of its awe in our minds.

While we are on the subject of God, we recall that no atheist can be made a Mason, no meeting begins or closes without prayer, and no Lodge is opened without the Bible open on the altar. But while Freemasonry is religious, it is not a religion. It does not have a theology and does not teach any path to salvation. Men of all faiths are welcomed in Freemasonry, and Masons are careful not to offend the faith of any.

Now the letter "G" also stands for Geometry. For the Operative Mason, for the builder, Geometry was a key science. For the Speculative Mason, we are more concerned about moral geometry, with the rules of conduct, and the courtesy with which one should treat another.

THE LEVEL AND PLUMB:

As the Square and Compasses tend to be thought of together in Masonic ritual, so are another pair of symbols, the Level and the Plumb. Indeed, of the working tools of a Mason, the Square, the Level, and the Plumb are particularly important. And, a measure of their importance, is that they are worn by the three senior officers of the Lodge -- the square by the Master, the Level by the Senior Warden, and the Plumb by the Junior Warden.

As with the square, the ancient builder could hardly have functioned without the Level and the Plumb. And, if in Operative Masonry, it is by use of the Level and the Plumb that we can build something that will be solid, enduring, stable, and strong, so the

thought is carried forward in Speculative Masonry to enable us to build the solid foundation upon which rests our own moral edifice.

And in Virginia, at an open installation of officers, we publicly explain some of the symbolism associated with the Level and the Plumb.

The Senior Warden is told that the Level demonstrates that we are descended from the same stock, partake of the same nature, and share the same hope; and though distinctions among men are necessary to preserve subordination, yet no eminence of station should make us forget that we are brethren; for he who is placed on the lowest spoke of fortune's wheel may be entitled to our regard, because a time will come, and the wisest knows not how soon, when all distinctions but those of merit and goodness shall cease, and death, the grand leveler of human greatness, reduce us to the same state.

And this is clearly the case in the Lodge -- although it is not always the case in other gatherings. The brethren of the Lodge truly meet on the level. Distinctions of rank or wealth are quite beside the point. What job you have and what educational institutions you have attended are of no moment. Each of us, with our different talents and our different strengths and skills, join together to make the Lodge a living institution. And the point is made clear when you consider the way the Lodge and the Fraternity are governed. In few institutions does the Master of a Lodge or the Grand Master have so much raw, arbitrary, and virtually unchecked power. But this rarely goes to our head, for we know that we sit three steps up as Master or Grand Master only for a year, and then someone else succeeds to that power, and we return -- literally -- to sit on the level with everyone else.

Similarly, at installation, the Junior Warden is told that the Plumb admonishes us to walk uprightly in our several stations; to hold the Scales of Justice in equal poise; to observe the just medium between intemperance and pleasure and to make our passions and prejudices coincide with the line of our duty.

The "plumb is a symbol of rectitude of conduct, integrity of life, and that uprightness of moral character which makes a good and just man. In the

art of building, accuracy is integrity and, if a wall is not exactly perpendicular as tested by the Plumb-line, it is weak and may fall, or else endanger the strength and stability of the whole."⁹ And so it is with each of us. By every act of injustice, by every lack of integrity, we weaken ourselves, and weaken the security and sanctity of our communities. No one of us is perfect, but the true Mason seeks to build an upright character by the test of the Plumb.

And when we think of all four of these symbols, we are struck by how their moral meaning, have entered into common, everyday speech.

- We speak about giving someone a square deal, of being square with someone. And, of course, "a square man" is one who deals honestly.
- We hear about corruption in our governmental institutions and we talk about those involved as people who have "lost their moral compasses."
- When we say something or someone is "on the level" that is an affirmation of truth,
- and also in affirmation, we hear the phrase, "You are plumb right in what you say."

THE APRON:

Let us move to another of our symbols, and one that next to the square and compasses, is perhaps the most familiar Masonic emblem. I am, of course, speaking of the apron. In the Virginia Masonic funeral service we say:

"This Lamb-Skin or White Leather Apron is an emblem of Innocence, and the time-honored badge of a Free and Accepted Mason - more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle; more honorable than the Star and Garter, when worthily worn."

Upon initiation a Mason receives a white leather apron which is generally kept safe "at home against the day when the members of a Lodge can do no more for their brother but lay him away under its protecting and comforting folds."¹⁰

And during his life he wears a white cotton apron at Lodge, or perhaps an officer apron or a past

Master's, past District Deputy Grand Master's, or Past Grand Master's apron. But the simple white apron is all that most of us prefer.

In Operative Masonry, the apron was always more than something to protect one's clothing. It held one's tools and it was worn so as to distinguish between the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason. But most important it was the badge of honorable labor because the right to wear it was given only to tried and tested men. And it is not different in Speculative Masonry. The right to wear the Masonic apron is only given to tried and tested men.

I would add one additional thought. When we say that "it is an emblem of innocence," we do not mean naivete or inexperience, but rather purity and "this symbolism is carried out both by color and material; white has always been the color of purity, and the lamb has always been the symbol of harmlessness and gentleness." And this has been applied to the Mason by one author as follows:

The innocence of a Mason is his gentleness, his chivalrous determination to do no moral evil to any person...his charitable forgiveness of his brethren when they willfully or unconsciously do him evil, [and] his dedication to a spiritual knighthood in behalf of the values and virtues of humanity by which alone man rises above the brutes and the world is carried forward on the upward way."¹¹

CORN, WINE & OIL:

At a number of Masonic ceremonies, including a public one -- the laying of a cornerstone -- we use three symbols of great antiquity: corn, wine and oil.

- The corn of nourishment, symbolizing health;
- the wine of refreshment, symbolizing prosperity; &
- the oil of joy and gladness, symbolizing peace.

Corn, (literally any type of grain), wine, and oil were used from biblical times in consecration ceremonies and they "were the wages paid to our ancient brethren. They were the "Master's Wages" of the days of King Solomon."¹²

MASTER'S WAGES:

And speaking of "Master's Wages" we should review that term. Of course, in Operative Masonry, then as now, the craftsman was paid for his work. But equally in Speculative Masonry, the brother who labors in Masonry receives the equivalent of corn, wine, and oil.

- By practicing virtue, he tills the fields of his own heart and builds the temple of his own "house not made with hands."
- By practicing brotherly love and relief, he gives labor to his neighbor, or carries stones for his brother's temple.
- And by being an active member of the Lodge, he gives of his time and efforts to maintain and improve our Fraternity.

In sum, the Speculative Mason receives no material wages for these labors, and the work done in a Lodge is paid for only in coin of the heart. "But these symbolic wages are no less real, for they strengthen and nourish the spirit."

Masonic wages are sometimes also classified as "those inalienable rights which every Freemason enjoys"¹³ as a result of his membership in the Fraternity and in a particular Lodge:

- There is the right to attend meetings of his Lodge.
- There is the right of visitation. A Mason away from home -- in this country or abroad -- has opportunities to meet fellow Masons and often to attend their Lodges.
- There is the right to seek relief. No honest man becomes a Freemason thinking to ask the Craft for relief. Yet misfortune comes to the just and the unjust alike and the strong arm of the fraternity stretches forth in times of need to push back the danger and give comfort to the Mason, the widow, and the orphan. Indeed, we only need to visit any Masonic Home to see "old brethren and their widows eased down the last long hill in peace and comfort." And, we come away from such a visit, thankful that there is

such a haven for us, should we need it, even if we hope never to ask for its aid.¹⁴

- And there is the right of Masonic burial. At home or away, a Freemason known to desire it "is followed to his last home by sorrowing brethren who lay him away under the apron of the Craft and the Sprig of Acacia of immortal hope."¹⁵

But in many ways, it is the intangible benefits, the opportunities to give rather than to get that are the Master's Wages which count the most. And truly it is said that a brother obtains from his Lodge and from Freemasonry, only what he puts into it. The more we serve, the more we help, and the more we become familiar with Masonic history, Masonic Symbolism, Masonic Jurisprudence, and Masonic philosophy, the more we earn and receive "Master's Wages."

THE ALL-SEEING EYE

Let me touch upon one last symbol -- and one that we are all familiar with -- the all-seeing eye.

You see this symbol right on the back of a one-dollar bill. And in Freemasonry you will see it in a number of places, most frequently on the Masonic Aprons worn by the various officers.

The all-seeing eye, which never slept and thus saw everything, was long an important symbol. It was a symbol in ancient Egypt, in India, and it is mentioned in the Psalms.

We remember, for example, in Psalm 34: "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open." And in Psalm 121: "See the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps."¹⁶ And in Proverbs 15 (3): "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, Observing the good and the bad."

And so by keeping the all-seeing eye in mind, the Mason is reminded of the omnipotence of God -- seeing all and knowing all -- even the hidden secrets of the human heart. But the all-seeing eye is equally a symbol of justice and mercy, a symbol that the Supreme Architect of the Universe rewards us according to our merits, but also tempers justice with mercy.¹⁷

CONCLUSION:

Well you know that we have today only just scratched the surface of the huge catalogue of Masonic symbols. But all of them, the one's we have talked about and the many we have not, have to be understood as part of a process and in the context of Freemasonry as a whole.

We require the highest standards of personal conduct and we vet our new members through a system of petition, vouchers, investigating committee, and ballot -- all designed to keep out those who are not morally fit. Then by means of ritualistic ceremonies and other educational programs we teach the truths of morality, justice, and patriotism. And we all take obligations fostering friendship, morality, and brotherly love.

The symbols we have spoken about this morning are designed to help to impress upon the minds of our members the cardinal virtues of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth which they should apply to their everyday activities. And though the wording of our ritual and the symbols we use may have an ancient and archaic flavor that points to our historic roots, Freemasonry is more relevant and needed than ever before.

Freemasonry is an organization with a clear sense of purpose and a firm moral foundation. And with its emphasis on the universal principles of brotherly love, relief, and truth, with its tolerance for different views and different beliefs, it can provide the help, the encouragement, and the moral support to individuals, to the community, and to the nation that is so sorely needed.

And so whenever someone understands Freemasonry and what its symbols mean, they will look at the Fraternity and its members in a new light. Then when they see the familiar Masonic emblem they will:

Recognize the square and know that the wearer will deal honestly and squarely with them;

Recognize the compasses and know that the wearer is a person in control of himself and in whom they can have confidence; and,

Recognize the "G," and know that the wearer thinks not of the moment or of some trifling advantage, but acts and lives with eternity in mind.

Notes:

- ¹ Symbolism (The Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association of the United States Vol III, #3, March, 1925) pg. 14.
- ² Reading Poetry: An Anthology of Poems. Robert DiYanni (Glencoe 1989), pp. 44-45.
- ³ The Winter of Man's Life. Bro. J. David Jacobs pp. 252-253.
- ⁴ Reading Poetry. *ibid.*, pg. 4.
- ⁵ The Square (The Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association of the United States Vol II, #4, April, 1925) pg. 5.
- ⁶ The Compasses (The Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association of the United States Vol II, #5, May, 1925) pg. 8.
- ⁷ "G" (The Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association of the United States Vol V, #7, July, 1927) pg. 5.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp5-6.
- ⁹ The Level and Plumb (The Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association of the United States Vol II, #6, June, 1924) pg. 8.
- ¹⁰ The Apron (The Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association of the United States Vol X, #6, June, 1932) pg. 11.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg.10.
- ¹² Corn, Wine And Oil (The Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association of the United States Vol VIII, #8, August, 1930) pg. 9.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 9.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg.5.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 6.
- ¹⁶ The All-Seeing Eye (The Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association of the United States Vol X, #12, December, 1932) pg. 4.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

