

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FREEMASONRY W.Bro. Kai Hughes ©

INTRODUCTION

When the Cornerstone Society was set up in 1999, it was formed because there was no forum to discuss the deeper meaning of Freemasonry. In fact we debated at length what words we should use to describe this deeper meaning and whether we should use words such as esoteric, philosophical and spiritual as these terms may be easily misinterpreted by some.

What I have discovered in those 6 years is how little I knew about the real meaning of Freemasonry. I had a gut feeling there was something else, a deeper reason for our rituals, but I didn't know what. As I went around advertising the annual Northern conference of the Society, I discovered that I was not alone and that most of us have not gone beyond knowing just a little bit about the history of Freemasonry to understanding its deeper, inner meaning.

I realised early on, that it was essential to know and understand the true nature of Freemasonry if we wanted to try and address our current perceived problems in the Craft. It had to be the place to start from, yet Brethren were making all sorts of assumptions for the causes of falling membership etc without actually understanding what the nature of Freemasonry was in the first place. It is rather like trying to treat someone with depression without ever bothering to get to know the person, their background or what has happened to them in the past ie to get inside their mind and analyse their history and behaviour rather like a Psychologist would.

That is why I have called my talk the Psychology of Freemasonry. The dictionary definition of psychology is the study of behaviour, mind and thought, but as the Pro Grand Master said in his first Cornerstone speech, "Heart and Light in Freemasonry", the original meaning of the word is "the science of the psyche or soul". My talk is an attempt to expand on what he and other speakers at the Cornerstone Society have said over the last six years and to try bring the various strings together in a simple way that allows us to search out this inner mind or soul and to see if this provides us with any clues as to why we seem to currently have problems in Freemasonry today. So let us first explore the history of Freemasonry and see if that gives us any clues.

THE EVOLUTION OF FREEMASONRY

Any attempt to explore the evolution of Freemasonry is particularly difficult as any attempt to trace the history of Freemasonry back more than three centuries leads to a grey area that is still unclear.

What is certain is that the roots of freemasonry can be traced as far back as the 16th Century and even earlier. These roots however, were connected to the Guilds, which survived the Reformation and dated back to the Middle Ages. The Guilds were the cornerstone of the medieval economies, part trade association, part religious confraternity and part social services provider. These Guilds had different levels of membership, initiation rituals, funeral benefits and also other benefits derived from the special needs of travelling workers, such as recognition signs.

It is perhaps a sign of the strength of these Guilds that the best evidence we have of their activities comes from the condemnations levelled at them by the civil authorities. The English Stonemasons were being denounced as early as the 14th Century for organising themselves in order to raise wages and in France, the Compagnonnages or Journeymen's Association were coming under attack for similar reasons.

But what I have struggled with over the years is to try and understand how these practical, economic trade Guilds suddenly became populated with powerful, highly educated members of Society. Why would they want to join a club populated by workers, even though they were skilled workers? What was the psychological need?

In the 17th Century we have glimpses of this process of initiating non stonemasons happening.

In 1638 a poem titled "The Muses Threnodie" by Henry Adamson was published in Edinburgh containing a reference to Masonic secrets.

"For what we do presage is not in grosse

For we be brethren of the Rosie Crosse
We have the Masons Word and the second sight
Things for to come we can foretell alright”

In the 1600s, the records of Lodge of Edinburgh (St Mary's Chapel) No.1 record the initiation of a number of so called Speculative Masons including in 1634 the initiation of Lord Alexander and Sir Alexander Strachan of Thornton, Kincardineshire, who was one of the Commissioners of the Exchequer. But more importantly, in 1641 the minutes of the Lodge record the initiation of Sir Robert Moray at a travelling Lodge in Newcastle. This was the first recorded initiation of a Gentleman on English soil. Apart from being General Quartermaster to the Army of Scotland, Morray was an alchemist and a student of hermetic tradition and a Founder of the Royal Society.

In 1646, Elias Ashmole wrote that he and a cousin were among those initiated into a Lodge at Warrington. Ashmole was not a Stonemason either but was an antiquarian collector who was interested in a number of subjects including Hermeticism history and alchemy and was the compiler of the "Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum", a collection of previously unpublished English alchemical writings AND.... He was also a Founding member of the Royal Society.

In my own Lodge, Mother Kilwinning No.0, there are records from the 1670's of the Lodge admitting non-operatives; "In 1673 three gentlemen were admitted fellows of the craft", Sir Alexander Cunynghame of Corshill and David Stewart, brother of the Laird of Blackhall and Joseph Cunynghame of Carlung.. In 1674, the Earl of Eglinton was admitted as an Entered Apprentice and Fellow of the Craft.

So what we have are some examples in Scotland and England of high born and educated men interested in the hermetic tradition joining stonemasons lodges. Why?

Well, the first point to understand is that these Stonemasons' Lodges were not working men's clubs as we would understand them today. The craft of a stonemason required not only great skill but also great intellect. They had to have an intimate knowledge of geometry and mathematics in order to build the great cathedrals of the time.

In addition, the religious and political climate of the 17th Century spawned rumours of secret societies on a grand scale. It was the era of the Rosicrucians and Hermetic thinking was extremely popular in the universities at that time. One of the most important books on architecture to survive the fall of Rome, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's "Ten Books of Architecture" was like a best seller at the time. His book focussed on Geometry drawn from the mystical teachings of Pythagoras and Vitruvius claimed that architecture, since it drew on all the arts, was the supreme art and then finally there was the legend that stonemasons Lodges had descended from the sons of the biblical patriarch Lamech, who carved the secrets of the world on two pillars so that they would be preserved through the coming of the flood. The legend went on to claim that these secrets had passed to the sage Hermes Trismegistus who discovered one of the pillars and that architecture had reached its full perfection with the building of King Solomon's Temple. At the same time elements of this legend had also been used as important symbols in the Hermetic traditions of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

In my view all of this helped to create a situation where a stonemason's lodge, with its symbolism and ritual could be mistaken for some long lost initiation tradition and started attracting members whose interests lay not in the building trades but in exploring symbolism, ritual and magic. In fact the common theme between the Stone masons Lodges and the Hermetic thinkers was Geometry and Mathematics. The impact of these Hermetic elements was, in my view, central to the explosive spread of Freemasonry over the next 2 centuries.

So what made these Lodges so special? Well for Freemasonry in particular, Lodges use the techniques of Hermetic tradition to create a spiritual Lodge. To understand what that means we need to consider the 4 essential elements which contribute to the psychology of a spiritual Lodge. They are;

1. Structure
2. Ritual
3. Symbolism and
4. Secrecy

Each one of these could be the subject of a talk in itself. What I am going to do is draw out the main points in each of these elements.

STRUCTURE

Firstly structure. It is interesting that most orders whether it be Freemasonry, Druids, Oddfellows, Buffaloes etc tend to follow the same structure to their 'Lodge'.

- A room with seating around the outside for members and a space in the centre of the room either for the candidate to be the centre of attention or for some object, such as an altar or tracing board or the letter 'G', to be the focal point of the Lodge.
- The Principle Officers sit in designated places around the room with the head of the Lodge sitting opposite the entrance door. The door itself is always guarded inside and out.
- Commonly, there is generally an ante-room used to place a candidate before entering the Lodge which is often used as a place to reflect and to heighten the senses.

Lodge governance is also another interesting aspect of a Lodge's structure. There are 2 main systems used. One of blind obedience to someone who is supposed to have greater knowledge or special powers. This can be seen in systems such as Wicca or religious cults and as a method of governance it suffers from the same defects as any autocratic system and can allow those whose motives are not innocent to shelter behind some invisible authority.

However, most lodge organisations adopt a system that assigns responsibility to its members. There are three principles that govern this process.

1. First of all responsibility within the Lodge is divided into distinct tasks – Secretary, Treasurer, Director of Ceremonies etc.
2. Secondly, that responsibility is defined. That way there is never any doubt as to who is to do what.
3. Thirdly, responsibility in a Lodge is rotating and, in some Lodge systems, the sequence of office is arranged in a fixed order and each lodge member moves through them in turn.

Some of the advantages of such a system is that there will always be several Lodge members who have experience of any given task and no one ends up with a stranglehold over any part of the lodge's activities. But a more subtle and equally important effect is that the basic lodge ideal of equality amongst its members is powerfully reinforced.

RITUAL

Secondly, ritual is another important element in creating a spiritual Lodge it is through the delivery of the ritual that the spiritual story is told and, more importantly, experienced. There are a large number of 'tricks' that enable us to do this. If you want to know more about these 'tricks' read Robert Lomas' "Turning the Hiram key" in which he describes at great length his experience when he was initiated into freemasonry. However, whilst Lomas talks about the standard techniques for raising awareness such as putting the candidate into an ante room, blind folding them to disorientate them, the element of surprise when the blind fold is removed, blood curling threats etc etc, he fails to fully understand what the key purpose and deeper meaning of the ritual is.

By presenting specific patterns of symbolism to the senses the initiation process leads the candidate to look at the world and himself in a different way. It also provides a set of symbolic triggers that allows the new initiate to return to their different way of seeing whenever the Lodge is opened in the same degree. And it also has a purpose which is expressed in the central myth – in our case let's take the example of Hiram Abiff for example. The ritual should define the symbolic identity given to the initiate as well as the symbols and experiences through which he should pass. So in the case of Hiram Abiff, the candidate should emulate, and therefore co-identify himself with, Hiram Abiff through the ritual.

The ritual also has the effect of awakening the spirituality within the Lodge. It is common to human experience that groups of every kind develop personalities of their own. These personalities have their roots in the individual personalities of the Lodge member but it grows and evolves into something much more than the sum of its parts. A good example of this would be the current unrest we see in France. Under the sway of a single strong emotion, the crowd gives birth to a rudimentary form of group personality and that collective personality is made up of emotional energy and very little else, has little intelligence but a great deal of strength and that strength increases by a simple feedback loop.

In a Lodge these collective personalities play a crucial role at nearly every point. The collective or group personalities of the oldest lodges **should** have the effect of being a huge store of energy.

However, the aspects of a Lodge that are most misunderstood are the ones I would now like to spend some time on – symbolism and secrecy.

SYMBOLISM

First of all we need to be aware of what we really mean by symbolism and to understand it we need to go back to the Middle Ages. To the thinkers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance a symbol was an object of perception that was naturally linked to an innate meaning – a meaning that was not simply a product of individual or collective thought but a presence and power in a realm of its own. The sun, the moon, numbers, trees, dreams all meant certain things not because people had agreed to impose meaning on them but because the object of experience, the perception of that object and the inner meaning of that object were all linked at the deepest levels. They saw the world as a unity whereas we see it as a duality.

Central to this concept was the idea that everything was connected to everything else by subtle connections of meaning that were part of the world of experience itself not merely the products of human thinking. These patterns formed a framework of meaning by which any experience whatsoever could be interpreted and understood. Thus the whole world became a book, the book of Nature, which could be read by those who had learned the language in which it was written. That language was the language of symbolism, which is why the position of the planets and other symbolic schemes were so important in the Middle Ages.

However, to the scientists and philosophers later in western society the meaning of symbols was completely arbitrary and existed solely in the human mind. They were not meanings in the medieval sense but simply thoughts and perceptions that had been arbitrarily assigned to the symbols by human beings. In other words they argued that the symbols that had structure in the medieval world were not symbols at all but signs.

The difference between the 2 is critical. A symbol, in the medieval sense, is an object of perception innately linked to a pattern of meaning. A sign on the other hand is an object of perception that has an arbitrary set of concepts assigned to it. Therefore, the sun as a sign can mean clear and sunny weather on a weather map but as a symbol the sun means something else, something else that can be experienced but not defined. This difference can be seen in Zen Buddhism where they take an object and focus on it as a sign, thinking about its traditional interpretations and linking it to symbols or images until a higher state of consciousness is achieved and the meaning comes through.

If we apply this concept to Masonic initiation we can see how important the ritual is in understanding rituals. As I mentioned earlier, the method of preparation and the delivery of the ritual is a way of helping the initiate to experience the symbols in a more intense way than ordinary states of consciousness permit. These experiences and their explanations are heightened by the situation the initiate is in (blindfolded, disorientated, apprehensive and not knowing what is coming next). And it is intended to communicate to the initiate some part of the special consciousness of the Lodge. When the initiate is given the secrets of the degree this triggers a new pattern of awareness. Rather like when you come across a love letter from an old flame it triggers a whole range of complex emotions, feelings, memories and states of mind, so should the communication of the secrets of the degree if the candidate is in a heightened state.

SECRECY

Finally, I want to explore secrecy and why this is so important. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance period Lodges offered financial and social benefits to travelling stone masons so it made sense have traditional security devices to ensure someone was entitled to that assistance. Later on secrecy helped protect lodges from persecution but there is an even more important reason why secrecy is so important. The secrecy that surrounds lodge rituals can be seen as a way of helping reinforce the effect of those rituals by preserving the element of surprise. When we read a book or watch a film, the workings of the plot hold our attention because we don't know how the story is going to unfold. That is the mark of a good book or film. In a similar manner, the initiation ceremony will hold and focus the candidate's attention if he doesn't know what is coming next. Equally, the sheer uncertainty can help to create that sense of apprehensiveness and disorientation that plays such an important part of the ritual and serves to make the symbols so much more effective.

Another reason why secrecy is so important is that at a Lodge level it creates a sanctuary divorced from the outside world. A sanctuary where the reality and stresses of everyday life can be absent, with no talk of sex, politics or religion. Thus the Lodge room can be free of the noise of the world and be a focus for conscious awareness.

On an individual level, keeping a secret creates in itself a certain amount of self-knowledge and the discipline of keeping a secret is an important tool for developing the will.

However, as we all know, our rituals are on sale and easily accessible to ordinary members of the public so isn't this all too late? Well, there is a big difference between knowing about the rituals and **KNOWING** the rituals. In the Middle Ages this difference between fact and experience was much better understood. The medieval mind understood that the only way to learn something was to experience it personally and it was this perception that lay behind the medieval habit of understanding knowledge as naturally secret. So to give an example; The way one learned about being a stonemason was to first learn how to feel and form the stone, to slowly develop the skill of eye and hand that the craft demanded and to learn the rules of mathematics and geometry from the more experienced stonemasons. After an apprenticeship along these lines a stonemason will know a great deal about being a stonemason but he would also be able to communicate it to others. If he had just read the book he may be able to communicate the principles but would not be able to communicate that deep understanding so in a deep and very real sense, that knowledge was secret.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I hope that you can now understand how Freemasonry developed as into an order that concentrated on ritual, symbolism and secrecy that provided a spiritual and perhaps 'magical' experience for the initiate.

As the Pro Grand Master said at the conclusion of his paper

".....the true nature and purpose of Freemasonry is to lead us from the darkness of ignorance to the light of true knowledge, and to guide us through the veil from self-consciousness to enlightenment".

So where does this leave the future direction of Freemasonry?

Are we on the wrong track talking about making our order more open and accessible to outsiders, having travelling teams wandering around the country explaining to the public what we are about?

Do we know what we are about? Are we now just a charitable organisation? Have we forgotten our roots of spiritual development?

If we understand the true nature of Freemasonry as I have just described, is this something worth protecting? If not then perhaps we should go the way of some countries like America by conferring all three degrees in one day to attract numbers. This process is meaningless and therefore absolutely fine if you want a charitable organisation but if you want an organisation that concentrates on spiritual development you can understand what damage such an initiative can do to the organisation.

How many people here today joined Freemasonry because they wanted to find out a secret or some deeper meaning to life or themselves? Be honest.

This is actually an interesting and pertinent point. If you could analyse why people joined Freemasonry in the first place, the reasons would most probably fall into the following categories

Their family or friends were members and asked them

They wanted to join an exclusive club

They wanted to know what these secrets were that everyone went on about

If people joined Freemasonry simply because their friends were Masons or because they want to join an exclusive club, then they will leave if their friends leave or if they perceive that the exclusive club is no more exclusive than Rotary, Round Table or the local Conservative club.

If they joined however, because they wanted a mystical experience, do our rituals of today actually provide that experience? Is our organisation geared up to providing them with that spiritual experience which is the key to the inner mysteries of nature and science. I would say no. Therefore perhaps it is not surprising that so many people leave. It is because the organisation has not looked at itself and understood what its rituals and symbols are actually there for.

Does the organisation know itself? Can it accommodate people who join for a variety of reasons as I have stated above or should it have a single, clear and defined purpose and if so what should that purpose be? These are the sorts of issues we should be debating first before we talk about the times of meetings and other initiatives designed to attract young candidates.