

IN THE LIGHT OF TRUTH

Njördur P. Njardvík ©

The Cornerstone Society Conference for Master Masons, Manchester, 11th November 2006.

In the Masonic world there are many different obediences and rituals. The initiation ceremony may vary in details, but it is always concentrated on one concept: Light. In some countries it is a custom for masons not to say “when I was initiated” – but – “when I was given light”. The question is, what kind of light. What is the genuine meaning of the Masonic concept of light? To deal with this question, I have no special authority, only my own understanding and personal view and experience.

Jesus Christ is quoted as having said: “Walk while you have light, so darkness won’t overpower you. Those who walk in the dark don’t know where they’re going.” Was he simply referring to daylight and the ordinary darkness of the night? Hardly. I think his meaning is reflected in the famous quotation of the American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald: “In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning.” Thus we are waiting for the spiritual dawning of a new perception of our existence.

We all come to our initiation Lodge meeting with open eyes, seeing with ordinary eyesight – in ordinary light. Then we are hoodwinked and led through a special ceremony of a special ritual and light is restored to us. Or is it? We go from ordinary daylight through darkness to new light – to a new kind of light. So – what has changed? What really does happen during our state of darkness, going from one light to another?

A Masonic Lodge is indeed a peculiar phenomenon. It really has two different forms of existence. Like life itself it has both exterior and interior reality. It is formally founded and consecrated with elected officers, but the real Masonic Lodge itself does not exist in a formal, visible, tangible way. It is only called into existence each time it is opened in a correct ritual way. Called into existence from where?

In some rituals it is stated that the Lodge extends from east to west, from south to north, from the middle of the earth to the zenith of the sky. Its life can be compared to the nature of light, which is invisible until it touches something. Drawn into a prism it appears in all its colourful splendour. Similarly the Lodge is brought to life at its opening. We feel it by the aid of symbols and symbolism, we are in it and it is in us. What really happens, if we are capable of perceiving it, is that the barrier between outer and inner reality has suddenly vanished, and that our existence as a whole is now open to us to explore, to experience and – perhaps even – to understand. In another way it could be said that the opening of the Lodge also opens a gateway from our outer existence to our inner reality. From outer darkness to inner light, the Light of Truth. In a symbolic way it might be said that we draw the Lodge together from the vastness of the universe into the very core of our existence, and there it remains even after the Lodge has been closed. Perpetually – then – we create and recreate the Lodge from outside ourselves and at the same time from within ourselves. Thus we become one with all – and all is in us. The inner and outer reality is one, and it is open to us.

As always, however, everything depends on our ability to see and to understand. Two individuals can look at the same phenomenon in a totally different way. Watching the night sky, one might say: I see a star. No, says the other, I don’t see a star, I see light coming from a star. It has taken millions of years to reach me, and it does not stop here. It will travel on, how far, how long, where will it go, will it ever have a final destination?

It is this latter open, inquisitive mind, which is capable of a new experience in a new way. It has been said that at the age of ten, most children stop asking why, and the mind closes around acceptance of apparent reality. A true mason, however, never stops asking why, - and least of all at the moment of revelation in his initiation when light is restored to him – or rather, when he is given the possibility to view everything in a new light – not least himself – and thereby to be ready to reconsider everything in this new light of new experience, new realization, new understanding. This moment is therefore the moment of enlightenment.

At this moment of our initiation, after the symbolic voyages, after being directed to the centre point, from which no mason can err, - symbol of the very core of our inner reality – finally the Light of Truth is revealed to us. In some French rituals this is demonstrated in a way that might come as a shock. The candidate is asked to look around and it is explained that the Brethren with drawn swords are his protectors, and not his enemies. Then he is told to turn around. Doing so he sees himself in a mirror, and he is reminded that his worst enemies may be inside himself. For most candidates this is a very powerful moment. Not many are used to view themselves in such an uncompromising way. My understanding of this is that every man must look himself in the eyes so hard and searchingly that he is forced to avert his gaze, - and then look again without wavering. I believe this is one of the hardest things for any man to do. I also believe that this is the only way to real self betterment: to identify your flaws and shortcomings by looking them squarely in the eyes yourself and evaluate yourself in the Light of Truth. For me this is the light given to us through our initiation. The light that enables us to see true reality, and ourselves as a part of it, without illusions or preconceptions. This is indeed a great gift.

For me freemasonry is a method, which teaches us a threefold way to human development: moral, intellectual and spiritual. The beauty of a symbolic ritual is that it can be understood and interpreted on different levels, and thus different individuals can all draw lessons from it according to their different abilities. The deeper your knowledge and understanding the deeper is your reward. Some say that the 1st degree is mainly moral, the 2nd intellectual and the 3rd spiritual. There may be a grain of truth in that, but I believe a true mason seeks to view everything in a moral, intellectual and spiritual aspect at the same time. No one part of these three should be neglected, as it automatically diminishes our understanding. It is a common flaw to look at only one aspect at a time, but such a limited approach is like eliminating some of our senses. As freemasonry shows us the potential of what we could become, a truly complete human being, we may become frustrated at our imperfections, but it is exactly such dissatisfaction which is necessary for progress. It is, of course, possible that some seek freemasonry for the wrong reasons, and unfortunately I have myself witnessed a few such cases, but generally, I believe, we do seek freemasonry because we feel and understand that we are imperfect human beings and because we are not satisfied with ourselves. Self satisfaction does not invite progress, and those who are quite happy with themselves as they are, will hardly find great interest in freemasonry.

The threefold aspect of morality, intellect and spirituality can lead us to the threefold aspect of the Lodge: wisdom, strength and beauty, which is based on the threefold expression of man by thought, feeling and conduct, - the aim being wisdom of thought, strength of controlled feelings and beauty of conduct. However, as we see clearly in the 3rd degree raising ceremony, where the principal officers appear in the role of villains and assassins, wisdom can be presented by intellect and cunning without morality and thereby be turned into its own opposite. The same ceremony also teaches us that the road to spiritual progress has no shortcuts, and certainly not by seeking knowledge beyond our own capacity – and thereby stresses the necessity not to neglect one of the three essential aspects. Intellect without morality is perhaps more dangerous than anything else.

The Light of Truth given to us at our initiation is then the potential to be able to see, not only ourselves, but everything, as it really is. By the term Truth I am not referring to truth as opposite to lies. Truth itself also includes lies, as Truth, real truth, is reality as a whole, the universe as a whole and everything in it, including ourselves and our inner reality. Of this Truth each human being has only small particles, like a few pieces of an enormous mosaic, - or – in Masonic terms – we are each of us only one small stone to be placed in the vast temple of humanity, - a living stone in a spiritual house, to quote St. Peter in his letters.

It goes without saying that the realization of holding only small fragments of truth can not accept dogmas, as dogmas inevitably claim to hold the keys to truth. It is not only unwise – and un-Masonic – to think you know what you don't know, it is simply stupid. It is also dangerous, because it is in essence an arrogant denial of the search for truth.

In his book *Truth – a History and a Guide for the Perplexed* , Felipe Fernandez-Armesto divides the concept of truth into four categories, the truth you feel, the truth you are told, the truth of reason or the truth you think for yourself, and the truth you perceive through your senses.

The search for truth, he says, “is a struggle: part of a war against chaos, a strenuous ritual to wrest reality from doubt by naming its parts, or a spell to save it from being engulfed in nothingness”.

And this leads me back to our Masonic rituals and their role in modern society, which is in real danger of “being engulfed in nothingness” – that is to say society deprived of idealism and compassion in its selfish greed and egotism. In one of the rituals of my Order it is stated that the mason understands that the small particles of truth he has found are sterile unless shared with humanity. The imperative for human compassion is an integral part of the quest for truth, the Masonic principle that humanity is one family, built on mutual understanding and respect for its diversity. For the only way to unite humanity is to respect its diversity. Dogmatic rigidity only feeds the false sense of superiority, which breeds disrespect and can lead to hatred. The only answer to that is human compassion, the spiritual qualities of tolerance, forgiveness and humility. Which brings me to the following quotation from the Icelandic Nobel Prize writer Halldór Laxness: “Truth is not found in books, not even in good books. Only in people with a kind heart.”

My conclusion then is that the Masonic initiation inevitably changes our lives. It can never be the same again, as we have been given the light of new insight, the realization that outer and inner reality is one. We have been offered the ability of the god Janus, to see two directions as one. This unification can help us grow into a whole human being, equally conscious of our inner core as our inseparable part of humanity. In the Light of Truth.