

Thinking Symbolically: First Steps in Exploring Traditional Ritual

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Oration
Any Degree
Non-Esoteric, assumes a Masonic audience

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you tonight about a topic which is so important to the life of every Mason.

SYMBOLISM.

The language of Freemasonry: visual, cryptic, profound.

Freemasonry has fascinated the world for over three centuries, and certainly the most captivating aspect of the Craft is its iconic, colorful and complex symbolism. Symbolism is so much identified with our work in the degrees that another term for “the Blue Lodge” is “the Symbolic Lodge.”

It is the text and context of everything we do in the Craft. It certainly surrounds us here in this beautiful temple room.

Since the beginning of our Order, the greatest minds in Freemasonry have devoted themselves to studying our symbolism: James Anderson, Laurence Dermott, William Preston, George Oliver, Albert Mackey, Albert Pike, J.S.M. Ward, W.L. Wilmshurst, Harry L. Haywood, Joseph Fort Newton, Charles Clyde Hunt, and Colin Dyer, just to name a few. Today we can enjoy reading their books, and we will learn much if we do. None of their books are perfect; still, all of them have great merit, and are worthy of the most serious consideration and careful reflection.

But the main idea I hope to promote tonight is that studying what others have written or said about Masonry is only part of the journey, and in some ways, it's the least important part.

Far more critical, my brothers, is to learn the ability to *think symbolically ourselves*, the better to truly apply the positive lessons of the Craft in our lives.

First, a question.

What do we *really mean* by “symbolism?”

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 as "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 mostly 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 human 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 law—the traffic code. We do not stop the moment we catch sight of a distant stop sign. We do not stop if we can see the sign but we believe that its angle tells us that it pertains to a road other than ours.

- 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.

And when we do properly obey the stop sign, do we remain frozen forever, hoping to discover a GO sign?

No. 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 every last boring word of the traffic code, but all of the socially accepted but illegal modifications thereof, such as the “rolling stop,” and so on.

Can we go deeper than this? Unquestionably.

Because woven deep into that stop sign, beneath all of the legal rules and subjective guidelines that it implies, we find its basis: the sanctity of life. Its red color is symbolic of danger because it is the color of blood... something we have understood since the days when our ancestors slept in the caves. A great moral truth is there in the sign, right outside our Temple here: we are commanded to preserve our lives and the lives of others.

A simple shape the common stop sign may be, but it refers to an invisible library that is of great importance for our safe travel, and to some of the most essential moral values of civilized life.

Traditional symbolism, as found in the world’s great philosophical systems and within the initiatic tradition of Freemasonry, works in a similar way.

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 plainly-worded pamphlet to convey their basic ideas? As we know, 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. Here's an old story that sheds light on the matter:

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 tale 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 fine 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.

Now: *How* do we go about this? Do we have to become like those great brethren who wrote the massive books about the Craft's inner meaning?

4 *Zohar* 2:176 A–B

No. We only have to learn to think symbolically. We can't make the mistake of the mountain man in our story. We have to keep an open mind, and always be ready to *listen* when the symbolism of the ritual decides to let us see a little more of that Masonic light. We've all had that experience, haven't we? That wonderful "aha!" moment when suddenly things make a little more sense?

The more contemplative we become in Lodge, the more open we are to those "aha" experiences. And we can do more than wait... we can seek them out.

Worshipful Brother H.L. Haywood, who was the most popular Masonic author of the twentieth century, wrote about this.

We cannot learn the message of a symbol with a merely passive and receptive mind, because it is of the genius of symbolism to hide as well as to reveal. When a thing is conveyed to us in clear, simple words, or in plain pictures, such as one sees in the movies, there is no need that one make a great effort of his own mind to comprehend it all; but when a symbol is put before us, and we have a reason for securing its message to us, our own minds must act, for no symbol wears its meaning on its sleeve. Its value for us is like gold hidden away in the mountain—the miner must dig for it. And that in itself is a virtue, because many men are cursed by the refusal to use their own faculties. They go through the whole of their lives parroting other men's thoughts, and such a life is necessarily lacking in the pleasure of making mental discoveries, which is one of life's richest joys.⁵

It's a good point. We have to dig. We have to learn to use our tools. We have to learn to see the symbols of the Craft as multi-faceted and full of possibilities.

Maybe that's why the most common emblem of our Craft is the Square and Compass. Those two symbols, resting so peacefully upon the Volume of the Sacred Law, may seem very innocuous old relics of the early stonemasons. But consider this. Any blueprint, for any building, vehicle or machine, is *latent* within those tools. They can draw anything. Not only the Temple of Solomon, but the Roman Coliseum and the Parthenon are within them. And not only these, but the automobile, the speedboat, and

5 H.L. Haywood, *The Great Teachings of Masonry* (Kingsport, TN: Southern Publishers, 1921), p. 25.

the space shuttle. And still beyond these, the untold advances of the future. All quietly reposed, since time immemorial, within the square and compasses, waiting for us to figure out the right way to bring them into reality.

That kind of potential is present in all of the symbols of Masonry. Worshipful Brother George Oliver said: “We ought not to be contented with deriving *one* moral lesson from every single emblem depicted on our Tracing Board; but to consider each as a text on which to build a copious lecture.”⁶

That’s our challenge: to open our eyes to see the rich potential of meaning in all of the symbols of our ritual. It’s as much an art as a science. We can’t really pick it up from a book. Instead, we must be patient with ourselves and one another, and we must keep the fires of curiosity bright, and close to our hearts.

That’s not something our modern world has a lot of support for. But that doesn’t matter, because our lodges DO.

Thomas Carlyle said that “It is in and through Symbols that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being.”⁷ What is true of man is certainly true of Freemasonry. We are embedded in symbolism whether unconsciously or consciously, whether we merely allow the symbols to work quietly in the background of our lives, or whether we take the more conscious route of seeking Masonic light. The fact is, we’re all doing both. By learning to think symbolically, we only make it easier for those two processes to work. What was unconscious will pass from darkness to light more readily, and what has been contemplated by the light of reason will lead us onward toward more and greater light.

The ones who gave us these rituals, and this fine lodge, and all the symbols that surround us now in this beautiful place, understood. Let us join with them in the mystic tie, and take up the working tools long ago entrusted to our hands. When we do so thoughtfully and with an open mind, the still vital symbolism of the ancient and gentle Craft will come alive.

Delivered to brethren of Martinez Lodge No. 41, Martinez, California, at a Masonic Formation session held April 10, 2009 by the permission of Brother Ronald K. Hollis, Sr., Worshipful Master.

6 George Oliver, *The Symbol of Glory* (London: R. Spencer, 1850), 155.

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