

What is Freemasonry?

STUDY OUTLINE No. 5

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NOTE—Let us not attempt to define Freemasonry definitely or completely, because Freemasonry comprehends such a vast field of speculation that the best any of us can hope is a continually improving conception of Masonry. The object of this outline is to develop thought and discussion, and it is the desire of the committee to have suggestions or criticisms brought to their attention.

Freemasonry uses many symbols to express truths. Signs, tokens and words are not merely a convenient method of recognition, but are important in the real work of transforming the rough ashlar of physical nature to the perfect ashlar of spiritual development.

Historians inform us that the use of signs, grips, and tokens is both ancient and universal. In his "Collected Essays on Freemasonry", Gould cites numerous authorities showing the extent to which sign language has been used. Among some of the more primitive people sign language constituted almost all their method of communication. It is said that the Bushmen of South Africa were so limited to its use that at night they were obliged to collect around a camp-fire in order to carry on their conversation, which was almost exclusively by signs. Our American Indians developed one of the most proficient sign languages of modern times, although several ancient people had advanced to wonderful proficiency.

Chironomia, or talking by gestures, was highly cultivated by the Greeks, and the modern pantomime owes its origin to the Pantomimi of the Romans. Probably the best illustration of the efficacy of gesture and sign language is found in our present "movies".

Many writers have published tales of Masonic signs among savage tribes and the recognition of them by those people; but these are not authentic enough to warrant much serious consideration.

The use of signs, tokens and gestures from the most remote times is well established, and it is also certain that many signs had significant allusions to moral and spiritual ideas, but, it is not certain that all the signs used in Freemasonry have come down from a remote antiquity in unaltered form or with definite meaning they are now used to illustrate and impress upon the mind wise and serious truths.

The expression, "due guard", is found as early as 1757, but is said by Mackey to have then alluded to what is now the sign. It is a word that is exclusively Masonic. It is also said by one distinguished scholar to be a corruption of the French "Dieu me garde" (God protect me). We believe that a careful consideration of the symbolism of the due guards used in the various degrees will show the progression from the morality of the Entered Apprentice to the intellectual development of the Fellow Craft and the final triumph of the spiritual man as a Master Mason.

It seems unquestionable that among the operative Masons of the middle ages signs and tokens were almost if not exclusively a means of recognition among those who travelled from one place to another. It is our opinion that there was always a decided spiritual significance in the phrases of these cathedral builders and that they had also speculative element; but it seems equally probable that this speculative element had been so far lost that from 1717 to the present time there has been a continual acquirement of lost symbolism. It is also probable that much of our symbolism was conceived in comparatively recent years. Preston added much to Freemasonry, as did Oliver, Krause, Pike and Mackey. Most of our symbols are ancient. The method of teaching is ancient. However, we have not exhausted the possibilities of using the Square, the Level and Plumb to build character. Neither have we exhausted the use of any sign, token or word to help us realize Divine Truth.

As an Entered Apprentice we are entering upon the basic principles of morality and must subdue the passions of preju-

dice, greed, vanity, and others. We must practice Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. To do this it is necessary to study our own nature. We have a higher and a lower nature. Our efforts must be to make the higher nature the master of the lower, and for the purpose of symbolic teaching the lower half of the body may be considered as the lower nature, and the upper half of the body as of the higher nature. Let us consider the due guard with this thought in view.

There is a tradition that the custom of shaking hands originated in a custom of one warrior extending the sword hand to another as a token of peace and friendship. Whatever the origin, it has come to be filled with the noblest emotions of friendship and fidelity of one toward another. It is most fitting that there should be a grip of mutual recognition between those linked together by the strongest ties of pure ideals and noble purpose, and it is also fitting that it should be another symbolic teaching of an altruistic principle. The fidelity toward our fellowman which we express in the hand-clasp adds further illustration of the need of applying the Square to our every action.

May we not also imply that the grip symbolizes that faith we must have to fully benefit by the most wonderful lesson in Freemasonry. We came from God. We manifest for a few brief years in a mortal body. We return to God. Science fails to demonstrate it. Logic is futile. The strong grip of faith alone sustains, till eventually the spiritual vision awakens and all is clear. (See "The Builder", Vol. 2, page 30. The three grips.)

The old Lodges of Scotland recited a legend and conferred the "Mason word" in the only degree we have record of before the Grand Lodge era. The word has become one of the most significant symbols, which is fully demonstrated in the third degree. Words, however, have multiplied, and in each degree we find them used both as means of recognition and also with symbolic significance.

The tradition of two pillars which form a conspicuous entrance to King Solomon's Temple may be supplemented by the records of ancient Egypt. Maj. Meridith Sanderson has given us the very interesting sidelight on the ancient symbolic use of pillars.

"In mythology two tat pillars stood at the entrance to Amenta (the abode of the dead), and formed the gateway through which the sun and moon passed at setting, as well as the spirits of the dead. Hence, the Mysteries being a representation of the passage of the soul through Amenta they stood at the door of the Egyptian Lodge. The tat pillar was the symbol of Osiris and its peculiar shape is due to a conception of it in later Egypt as his backbone. This is proven by a passage in the Book of the Dead which consists of a spell to be said on a tat inlaid on the coffin. 'Here is thy back-bone, thou still heart' (i. e., the dead identified with the dead Osiris), 'here is thy spine'.

"In the myth of Osiris' death, also, a pillar was made of the acacia which grew round his coffin; the idea that the tat was originally a nilomete is now quite discredited. There is very little doubt that the pillar was a symbol of the phallus of the god which was lost after his dismemberment, and the annual ceremony of 'setting up the tat' was originally phallic in meaning."

"Now the word tat in ancient Egyptian means St—h (strength), and there is no doubt that there is the very closest connection between the symbology of Egypt and Syria; that is how it comes about that the same pillars, having the same significance, are found in the biblical account of the building of K. S. T."

References:

- Symbolical Masonry (Haywood), Chapter 18, "Words, Grips and Tokens".
 Speculative Masonry (MacBride), "Antiquity of Masonic Symbolism".
 Symbolism of the Three Degrees (Street), "The Ancient Mysteries", page 133.

Encyclopedia of Freemasonry (Mackey), articles on:

Sign	Plumb-line
Word, Mason	Level
Significant Word	Brotherly Love
Token	Relief
Grip	Truth
Recognition, Modes of	Points of Fellowship
Due Guard	Fidelity
Step	Fides
Traveling Masons	Pillar
Preston, William	Pillars of the Porch
Oliver, George	Boaz
Krause, Carl Christian Friedrich	Osiris
Pike, Albert	Osiris, Mysteries of
Square	Egyptian Mysteries
Square and Compasses	Book of the Dead
Plumb	Strength
Acacia	