

Initiation and the Rites of Freemasonry

**A talk given to the Northern California Research Lodge
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The purpose of our talks this evening have their origin in the frustration that many of us feel regarding the state of Masonic education in the state of California not to mention the somewhat pathetic situation of current American Freemasonry. On top of this unhappy state of affairs, there is the fact that the trend of Grand Lodge actions is to continue on this hell-bound train which seeks to position Masonry as just a fraternal and social club in the same vein as the animal house clubs such as the Elks, Moose, and Lions. In the quest for increased membership, however dire our financial situation may or may not be, our strategies must never lose sight of the high destiny of our Fraternity lest we cut ourselves off from the very roots of our life-blood. And our roots are dug deep in the Mystery Schools of Antiquity whose purpose was to initiate candidates. What is initiation and how is it, in all sincerity, the business in which we are engaged? It is my task tonight to at least provide some background and thought provoking information so that you can by your own researches continue the process.

Our first question is: what exactly do we mean by initiation? The word comes from the Latin *initium* meaning "a new beginning". The Greek word used is *telein* which means "to accomplish" or "to make perfect". There are many senses for which we may use the term. We sometimes say such things as "I am being initiated into the intricacies of the tax code". But here I will give the proper definition extracted from the *Encyclopedia of Religions*: "The term *initiation* in the most general sense denotes a body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a radical modification of the religious and social status of the person to be *initiated*. In philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to an ontological mutation of the existential condition. The novice emerges from his ordeal a totally different being: he has become "another"." Religious scholars and historians have basically discerned three basic categories of initiation. The first being such social rituals as puberty rites which mark the transition of childhood to adulthood. The second category includes those rites which admit one into a secret society. The major characteristics of these societies are that they are usually limited to one sex and purport to impart secrets usually of a spiritual nature. The third category of initiatory rites

encompasses what we could call mystical vocations such as shamans, medicine men, or witchdoctors. These rites are very common to the second category but are more intensely personal in the sense that they culminate in ecstasies and visions. These experiences seal the vocation of the shaman and provide him with further instructions to help him in his craft.

Although these categories are helpful in the discussion of initiation, it is important to keep in mind that they are only convenient. For example, the Mystery Schools could be said to bridge the latter two categories in some ways. Many of them were definitely secret fraternities but their rites were reported to impart such profound spiritual insights that sometimes the initiates would be impelled into unitive mystical states and come away shaken and awestruck. The most common reports included first hand knowledge of the reality of the Spirit and the certitude of the immortality of the soul; which are, of course, the two distinguishing marks of our Fraternity.

I have found it helpful in dealing with the subject of initiation to look at it in two ways: first, the phenomenon of initiation itself; and second, the rites and practices that cause or at least encourage its internal action.

We can look at human nature in a static sense and speak of our "being-ness" but we can also look upon it in a dynamic way and speak of our "becoming". Being and becoming. Our observation of nature shows us the many growth patterns present in nature. Sometimes we see very marked changes from one stage to another. For example, the changes some insects go through are astounding. The worm transforming into the butterfly is incredible but a definite power of nature. The snake shedding its skin periodically, as well as certain spiders, is another eye opening event. The powers of transformation displayed within nature are present all around us. It is the contention of initiatory schools that there is a similar power within human nature. The intent of initiatory rites and symbols is to somehow stimulate or activate these energies. This trigger mechanism would cause a passage from one state of being into another. In another sense, one escapes from one nature and achieves another "higher" nature. Or using traditional language, this arrival at a new level is equivalent to dying to the old and being reborn. Death therefore is the metaphorical door and thus many of the initiatory myths concern themselves with a death scenario.

In the Mystery tradition of the Western world we have indeed found this type of mythology prevalent. But there is also a process leading up to the central theme. Most of the time this process is divided into steps, grades, halls, or degrees. The beginning degrees prepare one for the later ones by either adding on, filling in, or enhancing what came before. It seems that, in a general way, we can distinguish three main stages. There is a rite of induction, a rite of incorporation and instruction, and a rite where the central mystery of the Fraternity is communicated to the candidate. (I am indebted to the outer Order papers of the Order Aurum Solis for this aspect of the discussion. See Denning & Phillips: *The Magical Philosophy Series*, Volume 1, pp. 95 - 114) The Entered Apprentice degree of Freemasonry is obviously a rite of induction. It is the rite where the candidate is first exposed and admitted to the Fraternity.

This is the first point of initiation into the Mysteries of Masonry. This is the point where initiation begins; it is where the first swirlings are activated but like cultivating a sprout and giving it support, there are further instructions imparted later and finally the ultimate paradigm or ideal model is presented. But back to the first degree: this is where one takes his first step, given a definite orientation, and provided with enough instruction and protection to commence the journey.

For the last part of this short talk, let us take an advance my brothers and seek to look deeper into what initiation means. Some may consider our rites no more meaningful than that of a type of mild and civilized hazing, and some may consider them nice and symbolic rituals much like saluting the flag or swearing someone into citizenship or jurisprudence or a public office. These views are perfectly valid and the individual mason may content himself with this approach but the wisdom, strength and beauty of Masonry is that it responds to each candidate upon the level that each candidate wishes to receive it. While the social and fraternal aspects of Freemasonry are well known, the more esoteric and hidden levels are seldom spoken of and it is that I will briefly turn.

We can consider that there are two types of esoteric initiations: those that are transmissible and those that are non-transmissible. (Again, I am indebted to the Order Aurum Solis here.) The transmissible rites are those that "may be received by the aspirant at the hands of duly initiated persons". The non-transmissible initiations can "only be attained by individual effort and realization." In many

Mystery Schools there is a degree or grade which no rite confers but is included to recognize the personal attainment of adeptness.

To elaborate further: "It is undeniably true that no process of initiation can impart to a person any power or faculty which he or she does not, at least in potential, already possess. The purpose of the transmissible initiation is then to assist the candidate to realize by experience, in stages which reflect the natural evolution of the function and faculties of the psyche..." (p. 97) It is a given that initiatory teachings must follow the lines of development of the psyche itself (p. 97) Initiation quickens the spiritual development of the soul but can only do so in a natural way. It "...encourages the growth of the various faculties which are evolved thereby. This is an art and a high responsibility on the part of those who would confer initiation by ritual means..." (p. 98) This speaks to the officers of a lodge in no uncertain terms. To be an officer is not only a privilege but a major responsibility. The ritual, if done correctly and seriously, impacts the deeper levels of the mind. In Jungian psychological terms, it constellates the archetypes and sets in motion initiatory forces.

Let us not forget the role of the candidate. Even though the Grand Lodge has expunged the critical teaching to the candidate that the first preparation of the candidate was in his heart, nevertheless it most definitely is. And as the sun needs something to reflect its light to stimulate growth, if our heart does not reflect the Light emanating from the true Master of the Lodge then we will not grow either. As William Wilmshurst, probably the most prolific writer on esoteric Freemasonry, wrote: "Light is granted in proportion to the desire of our hearts,..." And he also wrote:

"Initiation, therefore, meant a process whereby natural man became transformed into spiritual or ultra-natural man and to effect this it was necessary to *change his consciousness*, to gear it to a new and higher principal, and so, as it were, make of him a new man in the sense of attaining a new method of life and a new outlook upon the universe." (*Meaning of Masonry*, William Wilmshurst, p. 185)

Although the Imperial decrees of 391 AD prohibited all pagan cults and subsequently the sanctuaries were destroyed causing the great Mystery Schools to disappear, the tradition, at least in part, has survived. Some feel that Freemasonry is the re-emergence of this tradition of initiation. Be that as it may, it definitely could be. Too much attention is being brought to bear on our past in looking for historical links. The proof is in the pudding. And there is every reason

to look to the future and develop Freemasonry to be an ever more efficient and effective initiatory society.

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