

POLISHING THE ROUGH ASHLAR
THE INTERMINABLE ASSIGNMENT OF THE APPRENTICE
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A reflection over the symbolical significance of the Rough Ashlar (Brute Stone), suggests a closer relation with the Moral System that Free-Masonry teaches us in relation to the perfection of man, to the search of spiritual development, and to the social conducts based upon values, respect, fraternity, humility, tolerance and individual rights and liberties.

This moral system is represented by the rudimentary stone which, since early on in our Masonic journey, at the level of an Apprentice, stimulates us to an unceasing labor encompassing Masonic doctrines and practices, amidst our vehement desire for finding the Truth. Hence the close relation of perception between the Brute Stone and the Chamber of Reflection, obscure in appearance, where the only image that stands out is the ancient hermetic and alchemical formula V:I:T:R:I:O:L: “Visita Interior Terrae, Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem” (Visit the Interior of the Earth, Rectifying you shall Discover the Occult Stone).

The search for the Truth, however, and the discovery of a superior sense of life as a response to our own existence, can only be possible by means of a profound inquest of our feelings and a better disposition toward a true internal work. Thus is how, symbolically, the Masonic labor consists of perfecting human existence through a permanent and successive process of transformation. The Rough Ashlar constitutes the symbol of the Apprentice, the Cubical Stone that of the Fellow-Craft, and the Pointed Cubical Stone that of the Master Mason, all of which in conjunction symbolize the central motive of permanent and constant excelling in the search for Independent Thought and Perfection.

This attribution of Masonic sense to the shaping of the stone as the unit of all construction, is based upon the works realized by ancient operative Masons, true bricklayers. The medieval builders, who erected great edifices and gothic cathedrals, adorned Europe beautifully – their labors can be appreciated even in our days. Organized within an Order with initiatic traditions, based upon the study of symbolism, with a conceptual system of man, life and the universe, they chose the stone as the most simple and common element to legate the most significant and transcendental teaching: Human Beings are Perfectible.

The construction of each cathedral was materially commenced when the stone, in its most natural state, recently cut from its dyke was removed from the quarry to be submitted to the work of polishing, which the stone-cutter had to undertake, in order to make it suitable for the blue-print to follow, giving it its due dimensions and shape aside from its necessary furbishing. This, required a particular ability, knowledge, and way of life.

Expressive of this perception of human existence, the distinguished Medieval Alchemist and Poet Clovis Hestau de Nuycement, in his “Philosophical Poem of Truth and Mineral Physics” wrote the following hermetic message:

“Go through this road, not another, for I warn you.
Observe only the traces of my wheels
And to give everything an equal warmth,
Do not ascend nor descent to heaven and earth
If you ascend excessively, you shall burn the sky;
If you descend excessively, you shall destroy the earth.
Instead, if you remain in the middle of your course
the advance is continued and the route more safe”

Apprentices seek and find the stones which are prepared for the construction of the Temple and begin to mold them and give them shape with every stroke of the chisel. This process will have to be continued and calmed, with intelligence and discipline, with patience and dedication, with such a precise strength that, by one stroke of the chisel after the other, the particles of every stone will be gradually molded until they are finally hewn. Depending on the hardness of the stone, the application of human strength will have to be in equilibrium with the weight and solidity of the working tools, the gavel and the chisel.

It is this allegory, the one which precisely contains the central motive of human existence, whose sculptor is the very Internal Self of every individual working toward attaining perfection, toward fortifying the spirit, toward learning to discipline in a constructive manner all his/her faculties, toward the knowledge of him/herself and the circumstances which surround him/her. The achievement of perfection, symbolized in the polishing of the stone, consist of riding ourselves of error, prejudice, hatred, disharmonies and intransigencies which abound in our internal and external lives, just like those social vices which characterize the state of the people of the world (including those living in “developed societies”), vices such as: the “profane disorder”, the darkness of fanaticism and the barbarism of intolerance.

To achieve transcendence to a more elevated plane, is to comply with the elemental human commitment of improving every day in all aspects of our existence, molding the character and development of our personalities in accordance with values and goals such as: constant progress, passion for wisdom, acquisition of knowledge, repudiation of ignorance, practice of virtue, search for beauty (external and internal) and love to ourselves and our fellow beings.

According to this attribution of symbolic sense of the “rough ashlar”, there exists in every person, in his/her role as primary protagonist of human history and of his/her own life, a potential state of inherent perfection latent in all its forms of expression, which is necessary to recognize, to educate and make explicit by means of labor, study, and the task which is masonically symbolized in the hewing of the shapeless stone.

Now, then, from our perspective of Apprentice Mason, it is in the “rough ashlar” (brute stone) where fortitude and the moral of the 1st Degree are represented – in the attitude to learn, in the effort and dedication put into it. This, is the principle and fundament upon which rests all progress, whenever is done by recognizing, assimilating and dominating what has been learned, in spite of the circumstances of life and the society in which we find ourselves, along with the respective experiences which derive from such relationship.

All throughout the history of humanity there have existed distinct forms of conceiving the idea of perfectionism and the pursuit of happiness, expressed in the qualitative change of the individual’s relation with his/her fellow beings, and from his/her perspective of personal spiritual growth. Thus, Hellenism, Buddhism, Islamism, Christianity, Renaissance and what we call Modernity (just to list a few) have brought forth different levels and forms of interpreting social reality, the relations among people, and their conception of what is transcendental.

In the societies of today, characterized by different structural, economical, political, ideological and human crises, directly or indirectly, the loss of one of mankind’s greatest aspirations is manifested: the attainment of happiness.

These unstoppably-seeming crises in modern society have stimulated pessimism, the decadence of values, the attraction toward the ephemeral, consumism and materialism, individualism, radical hedonism, and the absence of fraternal and solidary sentiments. Present society shows us that the interest of the individual is aimed at immediate enjoyment, at the usufruct of materiality as a path to spiritual satisfaction, and at the social relations based on vanity, arrogance and the prepotency of power and abundance, thus precipitating modern men and women toward a constant dehumanization.

In this context, the internal transformation of the Apprentice Mason, through the symbolic refurbishing of the rough ashlar, should create in his conscience the necessity to surpass the conditions of dragging his past and present materialism, product of his profane life. The task of transforming the rough ashlar, signifies simultaneously to the apprentice, the transformation of himself into his new condition of Free-Mason. He dies, symbolically, to be born into a New Life. There lies his moral strength, in the discovery of his unit and essence, in the conscience of his own self and the stimulation of noble sentiments, which imply a double psychic process in permanent equilibrium: On one hand, the intellectual capacity to reason, to learn from experience, to reflect about said experience and interpret it - aiming at establishing forms of interaction between his conscience and its exterior. And on the other, the intuitive and emotional knowledge, in other words, the hasty return toward the interior of his conscience. This, is the spiritual facet of the human thought, which facilitates acceding to a superior knowledge. Said acceding, according to Rudolph Steiner, is achieved through three stages: Preparation, which develops the inner sense; Illumination, which sprouts the spiritual light; and Initiation, which establishes the contact with the high realities of the spirit.

However, to accede to a spiritual or superior knowledge, the Apprentice Mason will have to assimilate and experience in his conscience the sentiment of the symbolic teaching behind the polishing of the rough ashlar, namely, the devotion, the interior life, and the inner calm. Only in this way will come to flourish in the conscience of the Apprentice, the values and virtues of Fraternity, Charity and Tolerance which will make us all more worthy of our conditions of Free-Masons.

To conclude, for the time being, I consider imperative to remind our Brethren, that, regardless of our individual Masonic Trajectory/Curriculum, official standing in Organized Masonry, and/or longevity within the Order, we are still on our interminable assignment. We are still polishing the rough ashlar of our human-imperfect lives! As long as we get closer, day by day, to our ideal of perfection, paradoxically, we will become more human and, gradually, enlightening ourselves with the light of our Brethren assisting us to hew with sharp strokes our own brute stone, one day we shall become “Cubical Stones”, transcending to superior planes for the satisfaction of our own challenges, for the benefit of humanity, and to the glory of our August Masonic Institution, as Sculptors and Architects of our own Temples and Destinies.