

Freemasonry and the Art of Moral Navigation

by P. D. Newman

In the ritual work and literature of Freemasonry, we encounter a lot of talk about traveling. Whether we are symbolically journeying from the West to the East in search of Light, from the East to the West in search of that which was lost, or to the center in search of the genuine secrets of a Master, as Masons we do a great deal of traveling. It is no surprise then that the ritual work and literature of Freemasonry are replete with references and allusions to the art of navigation. Intimately connected to the sciences of geography (the charting of the earth) and astronomy, navigational symbolism is so important in the Craft that it is mentioned directly in some versions of the so-called "Staircase Lecture" from the Fellowcraft degree.

"Contemplating the globes atop the brazen pillars, we are inspired with a due reverence for the Deity and His works and are induced to encourage the studies of astronomy, geography, *navigation*, and the arts dependent on them by which society has been so much benefited." [italics mine]

In fact, the very position of the pillars in relation to the Candidate's body in the degree of Fellowcraft is suggestive of the art of navigation. In most Jurisdictions, in the pertinent portion of the Fellowcraft degree, the celestial globe is found on the right-hand side of the candidate while the terrestrial globe is on his left. In nautical parlance, a ship's right side is known as its starboard side, indicative of the heavens, while the left is called the port side, indicative of where ocean and land meet.¹ Even the pillars themselves allude to navigation, as Josephus in his book, *Antiquities of the Jews*, reported, insofar as the pillars within the portico of King Solomon's Temple were intended to remind one of the pillar of cloud and the pillar of smoke or fire which guided the Israelites per the Book of Exodus.

Another allusion to the art of navigation within Freemasonry can be found on the jewel of a Past Master. As Carl W. Davis explains, "In several jurisdictions, especially in the United States, the Past Master's Symbol consists of the Compass [sic], Sun and Quadrant. ...[the latter] symbol is unique as it can also be understood to be a sextant.

A sextant is a tool of navigation used to measure latitude and to enable one to determine his location and thus plot a course to travel. This is a very appropriate symbol for a Past Master, as he has had to navigate the course of his Lodge during his Eastern tenure. It also shows that he is capable of assisting in the navigation of the Lodge if his successors may request his assistance."²

Indeed, navigation and navigational language play no small role in the literature and ritual work of Freemasonry. In the words of W. Kirk MacNulty,

"The concept of traveling is found in all three degrees... Man is pictured as a traveler; indeed, in some parts of the world, the term 'traveling man' is a guarded synonym for a Mason. ...The Masonic Lodge...is a model of the human psyche, [and t]he psyche is the Watery World."³

In further illustration of this point, we recount an excerpt from a humorous and little-known ritual which was composed for the amusement of the brethren of the Royal Naval College Lodge of Mark Master Masons in London. In the Initiation ritual of the Noble but Slightly Dishonourable Degree of the Corks, we find the following exchange:

[Q].: Matey, what is your duty?

[A].: To assist you in boxing the compass ...and to steer a straight course when homeward bound.

What, exactly, is this act of "boxing the compass" to which the above ritual refers, and what has it to do with Freemasonry? For starters, boxing the compass is a navigational term which refers to the act of learning and naming all of the degrees or points of the compass, clockwise and in order, beginning with North. What has it to do with Freemasonry? Well, the number of points on a compass just so happens to be no more and no less than thirty-two, the same number of degrees which comprise the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite!⁴ Interestingly, in addition to the "squaring of the circle" implication contained in the phrase, which is directly applicable to the Masonic symbol of the combined square and compasses insofar as the function of the latter in geometry is to construct right angles or squares, i.e., boxes, on the one hand and arcs and circles on the other, the word compass stems, according to the Online Etymological Dictionary, from the Old French word "compas," meaning "circle, radius, pair of compasses." Is the Masonic significance of the concept becoming clear? By boxing the compass, the traveler is effectively making his way around the circle, "in going round which, it is said the Master and Brethren cannot materially err."

While one in shape, it can also be said that a circle consists of two arcs, both equal and opposite, one curving to the heavens and the other bending toward the earth. In the opinion of the author, the lesson here is that in boxing the compass; that is, in making one's way fully around the circle of one's life and all of the ups and downs that living entails, after facing and assimilating all of the degrees or points which surround it, he must always arrive back at the source, back at the North, but travel he must.

The excerpt from the above ritual states that the "Matey" is also charged with the duty of steering the ship in "a straight course when homeward bound." This too is notable. For an untold millennia, prior to the invention of the compass, sailors employed astronavigation as their primary means of finding the way home after

long journeys out to sea. Of particular relevance here is the North Star or Pole Star, which sits "always fixed and immovable" above the North Pole. Almost two thousand years have passed since sailors and travelers began using the North Star as their central means of navigation, and it continues to the present day to hold a central position in the almost mystical art of astronavigation.

In the degree of Master Architect in the Southern Jurisdiction of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, the candidate is taught that "[t]he North Star...represents the point in the center of the circle, or the Deity in the center of the universe. It is the special symbol of the Deity and of faith." The North Star then, both literally and symbolically, is that guiding light by which a traveling man may find his way back home, that is, back to the center. Referring once more to W. Kirk MacNulty, "Faith in the Deity is a reference (analogous to the mariner's compass) which will provide direction when other sources fail."⁵ A similar and familiar lesson appears in the nineteenth century exposé, *The Master-Key through All the Degrees of a Free-mason's Lodge*: "In all regular, well-formed Free-masons' Lodges there is a point within a circle in going round which, it is said the Master and Brethren cannot materially err." The implication here is, of course, that of orientation. In fact, the very word orientation is suggestive not only of the act of determining one's bearings but also of the Orient or East, the source of light and wisdom in Freemasonry. Returning to the Online Etymological Dictionary, we read that the word *orientation* originally meant an "arrangement of a *building*, etc., to face east or any other specified direction." [italics mine] Again, the Masonic import here is readily discernible.

No matter how disoriented or un-centered we may become, no matter how far off the path we may veer, the Great Architect of the Universe in his power, wisdom, and beneficence has seen fit to equip each and every one of us with our own internal compass which will never falter and never fail us. I speak here of course of our own consciences. If we can but muster the courage and the fortitude to allow that internal gauge to dictate and light our way, if we can but find the faith to simply trust and follow our own intrinsic guide, then there will be no reason for us to have fear of any danger. Just as is alluded to in Masonic ritual, our internal compass is ever present, "fixed and immovable," always at the ready to assist us in steering "a straight course when homeward bound."

While we may be builders, it is also true that we are travelers, journeying through life toward the great unknown, toward a realization of our pure potential. It is no wonder then that navigational language has found its way into the symbols of our gentle Craft. All men lose their way. We all, from time to time, lose ourselves amidst the circumambulations and trials of daily life, but as Freemasons, we have been provided a precious golden thread whereby we may discover the direction home, back to the North; that is, the direction back to the center.

The moral implications of navigational symbolism were perhaps best articulated by William Waterway in his poem, *Navigation*.

Floating to hither from Nether
comes a message free of tether
It guides along the water way
to navigate by eye far far away
Should the message be set aside
a life full of dull thee shall abide
But to the lines thee sails true
howling seas nothing but little ado
For upon knowing which flows unseen
one senses the now come to being
Mind to mind thought to thought
things to find beyond that taught
A moment to grasp flung far past
a second within all things last
Herewith written reflection of light
witnessed by birth blessed with sight
For those who ask how this can be
look in the glass and ponder what see
Deep deep within the center of eye
keep keep the answer till thee die
Then shall crossing to Nether sway
open waters as your sails make way

Notes:

1 Thank you to Brother Michael Jonathan Asa of Fulton Lodge No. 444 in Fulton, Mississippi for that remarkably insightful bit of information.

2 The Meaning and History of the Jewels and Symbols of a Past Master

3 The Way of the Craftsman, pp. 20, 57, & 90-1

4 The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry is a progressive system of initiation consisting of thirty-two degrees or levels of attainment, with an additional honorary degree which is only conferred in recognition of distinguished Masonic or public service. Why there are thirty-two degrees with an additional thirty-third is a mystery even unto the Fraternity itself. Manly P. Hall offered a rather romantic explanation, writing that "King David ruled for thirty-three years in Jerusalem;...there are thirty-three segments in the human spinal column; and Jesus was crucified in the thirty-third year of His life," [The Secret Teachings of All Ages] while Arturo de Hoyos has provided a more practical explanation, suggesting that the decision to settle on thirty-two plus one degrees may have resulted from the fact that Shepheard's Tavern, the birthplace of Scottish Rite Freemasonry, was situated at 32.776883° North Latitude [private communication]. It has also been postulated that the thirty-two degree system may in fact owe its origin to the Thirty-two Paths of Wisdom of the Hebrew Kabbalah, with the additional thirty-third degree alluding to Ein Soph. The navigational concept of boxing the compass provides yet another possible source for the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite's settlement upon a thirty-two degree structure⁵ The Way of the Craftsman, p. 57

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