

The Symbolism of the Cable Tow in the Symbolic Degrees

by **Sir Knight John L. Palmer**

The symbols of Freemasonry are unique in a couple of ways. First, as the Brother begins to study the degrees, he often finds that the symbols have several meanings in addition to the obvious one explained in the ceremony of initiation, if indeed the meaning of the symbol was even explained during the ceremony. Second, he may someday be told that the symbols are interpreted by each Brother for himself and that the meaning may vary from person to person. Third, he may come to realize that the variation in the interpretation of these symbols is perfectly OK with the Fraternity. He is not forced to accept someone else's interpretation of a symbol, but rather, his opinion of the interpretation is tolerated by Brethren with different views.

This leads to a plethora of symbols and interpretations and to the discovery of new interpretations and moral lessons all the time. This encourages Masons to think. It also leads to an exchange of ideas among the Brethren, resulting in a never ending quest for more hidden truth in our mysteries. It also explains why they are called mysteries.

The topic at hand is the use of the cable tow. In most jurisdictions, the cable tow is used in each of the three degrees in different configurations and is associated with the numbers 1, 2, and 3. In most jurisdictions, an attempt is made during the Entered Apprentice degree to explain its symbolism, but this explanation would not, by its very nature apply in the degrees of Fellowcraft or Master Mason. This would lead us to the conclusion that there is symbolic significance to the cable tow which is not clearly explained in any of the degrees.

The cable tow seems to me to have significance in two distinctly different ways. It is used to "bind" the candidate or Brother, and when removed, it is used to symbolize the Brother being released or "freed" from something. To me, the progression of the number of loops, 1, 2, and 3, seem to indicate the addition of responsibilities and of the things from which the Brother is freed.

In the Entered Apprentice degree, the Brother is bound to the fraternity for the first time, but what is he bound to? Primarily, he is bound to keep the secrets of the order, although he is also told about the duties he owes to God, his neighbor, and himself. What are these secrets? Why is it important that he not reveal them? These questions are not clearly answered at the time he receives his degree.

I often have Brethren ask me if I have seen one particular TV show or another purporting to "reveal" the secrets of Freemasonry. They are often very upset that some of these shows more or less accurately portray some of our private ceremonies and reveal to the world those "secrets" which we as Masons are bound to keep confidential. They are offended that some "Brother" must have at some time violated his vows and betrayed his

trust. I tend to not get upset about such things for three reasons. First, there is nothing I can do about it, and creating a big stir only serves to validate the people who show these videos. Second, I believe that the mysteries and true secrets of Freemasonry can be found only in a thorough understanding of the symbolism of the ceremonies. I would suggest that a large percentage of our current members, perhaps even a majority, even though they have participated in the ceremony, don't have much of a clue as to its meaning. The ceremonies are designed to have a combined intellectual and emotional impact on the candidate. If you are not the candidate, viewing these ceremonies on television or even in person as in these so called "one day classes," the emotional if not the intellectual components are simply not there, and you don't have much of a chance to experience the lessons of the degree. Masonic initiation is an experiential learning process, not a spectator sport. Third, it seems to me that binding the Entered Apprentice to secrecy is really a test or trial of his character. It has been said that the foundation of good character is the ability to keep a confidence, even when everyone in town knows the secret. The entered apprentice is therefore bound symbolically by the cable tow to keep a confidence. If he fails this test, he should not be afforded advancement. The single strand cable tow and the vow to keep a confidence are both easily broken. In the event that the Fraternity comes under immediate and physical threat as it has so often done in the past, do we really want members who will betray us? Is it true that if a man will break his word about secrecy that he would also lie, cheat, and steal? The cable tow in the Entered Apprentice degree symbolizes, to me, the binding of the candidate to the Brotherhood by an agreement that he will keep our private matters private. It is amazing to me as editor of a national Masonic magazine, how many articles are submitted for publication which contain material that seems to me to be in direct violation of this vow.

The next question is, "What does the removal of the cable tow symbolize; what are we sacrificing or freely giving up?" I believe that this symbolizes our willingness to begin the process of "divesting ourselves of the vices and superfluities of life," of freeing ourselves from the tyranny of our own uncontrolled passions. The failure to do this results in intolerance toward the views of our Brethren and self-centeredness which in turn results in the disharmony of the lodge and the misbehavior of some of our Brethren we occasionally witness. Animosity has no place in the lodge. A man who cannot learn to control his passions has no business in our fraternity. An Entered Apprentice is therefore, by his cable tow, bound to the fraternity by a promise of secrecy and symbolically freed from the tyranny of his passions.

The fellowcraft encounters a second or additional loop of the cable tow. What do the two loops symbolize? First, he is bound or obligated to a study of the arts and sciences. If he is to truly begin to understand the nature of God and his relation to God and Man, he must first have some appreciation for God's glorious creation. Our understanding of the order of the universe is a function of our understanding of the complexity of mathematics, geometry, astronomy, music, and arithmetic. Our ability to understand these things is a result of logic and our ability to learn and communicate them a function of grammar and rhetoric. In the second degree, we are therefore binding or committing ourselves to the improvement of our intellect. Second, we are bound to some very specific duties toward our fraternity and our Brethren. We are no longer simply informed

of our duties, but we are required to make some very specific commitments regarding the Lodge and the Brethren.

So what are we released from in addition to our passions? We are symbolically released from the tyranny of ignorance. A man cannot be expected to make good and wise decisions if he is ignorant. Many institutions, past and present, have attempted to keep men ignorant so that they can be controlled. By contrast, Freemasonry insists that we lay aside our ignorance and be freed to function as the intelligent creatures we were created to be. We are to make our own decisions and to be responsible for the results. Only in this fashion can man live up to the destiny intended by our Great Creator. An ignorant man is almost always someone's slave. It is true that everybody is ignorant about something, but ignorance can be cured; stupidity cannot. A Fellowcraft is therefore additionally bound to the fraternity by a commitment to intellectual improvement and specific responsibilities toward his Brethren and freed from the tyrannies of both his passions and his ignorance.

In the Master Mason degree, we are faced with three loops. The Master Mason is first bound to even more strict and specific duties toward the fraternity, his Brethren, their relatives, and even to society at large. He is also bound to instruct, mentor, and nurture his less informed Brethren and the next generation of Freemasons. Our fraternity is quite remarkable when you consider that it is always one generation away from extinction, and yet, it has survived for centuries in almost every part of the world. This is accomplished by the faithful Brother passing on to the next generation those timeless truths which contain the secret of how man can live with his fellow man in peace and harmony. Although the human race is still far from practicing these truths, the fraternity is where they are found and will be preserved. Finally, he is bound to begin the process of freeing himself from spiritual tyranny, that tyranny which allows other people or other things to come between himself and God. He learns here that he has the very real capability to know God personally and to harmonize his actions with the plan of the Supreme Architect of the Universe.

In addition to being freed from his passions and ignorance, the Master Mason is freed from his fears, particularly his fear of death. Naturally we cling to life and shrink from death; however, the fear of death can turn out to be debilitating and a terrible waste of time and resources, causing us to throw away an entire lifetime trying in vain to prevent the inevitable. By divesting himself of this fear, the Master Mason is able to focus his time and energy on leaving a positive legacy for his fraternity, his family, and civilization. He realizes that what he here says and does produces effects which live long after his death, effects for good or for evil. This freedom is a sort of freedom from spiritual tyranny, spiritual tyranny imposed by others, but especially spiritual tyranny imposed by one's own fears.

In summary, the cable tow symbolizes the individual's progress of initiation into the mysteries of Freemasonry by becoming bound to the brotherhood, bound by obligations to remain faithful to the trust reposed in him, to assist his brethren, to improve his mind, to contribute in a positive way to human civilization, to preserve the ancient truths entrusted to the fraternity, and to seek harmony with his creator. He is freed from three

tyrannies, the tyranny of his passions, the tyranny of ignorance, and the tyranny of spiritual slavery.

Few, if any, of us will ever succeed in accomplishing all that the cable tow teaches us, but we can work toward that goal and remember what our task on earth is by observing the lessons of the cable tow.

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