

BEAUTY AND UNITY

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It is an honour to be speaking here, but this is not the first time for me. I have spoken at a previous Cornerstone Conference, but at that time I was not a Freemason at all, but now I am properly entitled to attend a Cornerstone Society function. I was introduced to Freemasonry by my son Andrew, who also initiated and raised me, a situation known as a reverse Lewis, which it is not relevant to explain now. He fancied to claim that it was the first time since Mozart that a son had initiated a father, but this was authoritatively rejected at the festive board after my initiation.

I have been recently been participating in a Lodge of Instruction, which I have found very friendly and very instructive. My attention was caught by the words "to contemplate the intellectual faculty and to trace it from its development, through the paths of heavenly science, even to the throne of God himself." It struck me because, working on this subject, that was exactly where my mental exploration was leading, as I hope you will appreciate. What is said is "veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols". We would do well to look upon every circumstance in that light. In the words of the Emerald Tablet of the Hermetic tradition –

*True, without falsehood, certain and most true,
that which is above is as that which is below,
and that which is below is as that which is above,
for the performance of the miracles of the One.*

This talk was suggested arising from comments I made in during an email exchange, and a title of "Beauty and Unity in Freemasonry" was proposed, to which I replied that I was uneasy about the appendage "in Freemasonry" because I was too new a Freemason to be confident that I could correctly assess the subject from that point of view, so the title was curtailed.

Inviting a novice or newcomer to contribute has an ancient precedent. Fifteen hundred years ago Benedict of Nursia, St Benedict, composed a set of principles for life in a religious house, which became known as "The Rule of St Benedict", which has been the basis of monastic life ever since. In his Rule, he enjoined the Abbot or Prior always to ascertain, and to heed, the views of novices, while their ideas were fresh, before they became conditioned by the prevalent ways of the place. I have previously met this when I was architect to St Christopher's Hospice, where the views of quite junior staff were heard attentively by the authoritative leaders of this very influential hospice.

I will introduce my subject with a precis I submitted when I was invited to contribute. It is composed almost entirely of questions:

What is Beauty? Does it lie in the world, or does it lie in the eye of the beholder? Is beauty a condition in itself, or is it a sign of something beyond? Is it a quality, or is it an experience? There are two well known triads which embrace Beauty - Truth, Goodness and Beauty, and Strength, Wisdom and Beauty, and there are other profound triads: do they all represent the same Unity? In "Parmenides", Plato wrote of Socrates debating "Is the All One, or is the All many?" In other words, "Is there a Unity?"

I must begin with a threefold apology. First, I shall be speaking about God. Second, I shall be mentioning religion. Third, I shall be telling stories. It seemed coincidental that there were three issues, but it might have been guidance, since they carry an uncanny echo of the great triads I shall mention later.

Mention of God should not be a problem here. Everyone here has assented to belief in a Supreme Being. Everyone, that is, except me. The question to me resulted in a five minute discussion with the Lodge committee, which afterwards formed the subject of an item in "Freemasonry Today", which

concluded with the words "Eventually a form of words was developed which was acceptable to both the candidate and the committee."

I have difficulty with "a Supreme Being", because that "a" implies the possibility of "another". "Supreme Being" has a unity that is absolute: any "other" is inconceivable. I also have difficulty with "believe". I was going to ask "Does a fish believe in the sea?", but a better analogy came to mind: "Does a wave believe in the sea?" "Believe" is so inadequate a word. Do I "believe" I am here now? No, I am here now, and I know it. Rather than "believe it", one "lives it". It is the realisation of existence.

This has brought us near to the issue of religion. Like myth, the word "religion" has been debased into faiths and sects, division: I shall not be dealing with that. The word "religion" has its origin in the Latin "re-ligare", to re-bind something which has been separated, the reversal of division. The wave is not separate from the sea.

One allegory of creation is that the One created in order to become conscious of itself, and thus that we are made separate with the object of intentionally re-uniting with, and as, the One. God looked at creation: it was good. This was Goodness, Beauty, Bliss.

The email comments which provoked the invitation to speak here included a story. I shall be using other stories this evening, stories being a device used in many paths to convey moral, psychological, and spiritual meaning. They were used by Jesus, and they are used in Islam and Zen Buddhism, and we communicate with ourselves in the form of dreams, as I shall be saying later. Mythology is the traditional form in which stories convey deeper meaning. It is a sad fact of our time that the value of myth has been debased, so that "myth" has to some become synonymous with "untrue": the literal truth of the story is not relevant to its inner meaning. I was always envious of my great friend William Anderson in the inner value he could gain from his great knowledge of Classical mythology. Stories like these tell us inner truth, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols. This is communication, a name for one of the great pillars of existence. But to my first story.

A man had died, and he came around to find that he was in Heaven, in fact at a sort of reception for newcomers, where people were standing around in conversation with a drink in hand, wine, or fruit juice for Methodists, Moslems and others who do not partake. After a while an attendant tapped him on the arm and said quietly "Excuse me sir: God is ready to see you now." As the man was conducted to the room where God was waiting for him, everything about his life came flooding back into his mind, and immediately upon entering the room, he flung himself on the floor and began crying and explaining about his sins, grovelling. God had what might be described as the devil of a time shutting him up, and in the end became very firm, saying "Do be quiet! We know all about your sins, and they are all forgiven. There is something else. Do tell me: did you enjoy the beauty of my creation?"

It may be that this is one of our real duties, or perhaps even a way of describing our only duty.

Let me turn now to Beauty, and a story, or a sort of dream. Some years ago, in 1991, in fact, I was reflecting quietly on two subjects. The first was the question of the nature of Man's first appreciation of reflective self consciousness – I know that I am here – the essential difference between humanity and the animals, something which is thought to have happened perhaps seventy thousand years ago, and of which the first signs may have been the cave paintings at Lascaux, Altmira, and elsewhere. The second was to consider when Man first felt the sense of beauty. I was not asleep, and my eyes were open, but what happened was what is called a hypnogogic dream, but which felt like the recollection of a memory. It came to my mind all at once, as if remembered, in three images and a conclusion, followed by a fourth image, which can be omitted now, as not relevant. I mentioned this to the eminent Jungian psychologist Sir Anthony Stephens, who asked if he could include in his book "The Million Year Old Self", but whether he did or not I do not know, as the book was published only in the United States. Perhaps it was memory. This is what I wrote down at the time:

I was thinking about the separation between that part of us which we consider to be "I", and the rest, not directly accessible but likely to unexpectedly emergent at any moment. When did this reflective ability arise in humanity? How many millennia ago? I sat still, trying to imagine the experience of first recognising reflective ability. Was it sudden? Was it gradual? How was beauty first recognised? Suddenly it was as if I remembered.

I was everywh ere.

I was standing, strong, naked, but not vulnerable, beside low bushes or trees, looking across a low, shallow, valley covered with long grass, towards modest hills, rocky at the top, not far away. It was hot, but evening; the sky was cloudless, but the sun was absent. I was not hungry. I was not in danger. Everything was quiet. I was quiet.

I was in a forest, cool and shaded, damp, and verdant. I stood by a fallen log, with sepia tree trunks vanishing upwards towards splashes of emerald light projected from the hidden sun. I was dark and quick, alert, and although not moving, ready to move. Nothing did move. There was silence.

I was beside an ocean, standing, looking over the sea towards a sun setting in a sky with few clouds. I was bearded, confident, vigorous, but still. Below me the ground fell away towards a rocky shore, where the evening sea was searching among the pools and inlets, with little energy. Only the sea moved. The rest was motionless. It was warm.

This was beauty.

My mind sent me the message, veiled in allegory, that becoming aware of the world, at rest, simply, this is the experience of beauty. Our eyes see the Beauty of Creation, and it is Good. This was showing me Beauty as a quality of experience, not a quality of things. The image appeared to my mind as if it were a memory, but I do not say that it was a memory of past life or anything like that: my mind could just as easily have composed it from fragments of books and films. I do not analyse it. There it is.

In the world, we see beauty shining more in one place than in another, in nature, in art, in human action, and there are places where beauty seems missing. Look at it in the light of love. Dante said of love that all human love is an image of the one Divine Love, which is the omnipresent reality of existence. The Christian mystics have said that the aim is to live a life in Christ, and that it is the same life. Obvious beauty is there to call us to universal beauty, which we have to see in the whole creation.

Beauty is in the seeing, not the seen.

I have seen this in two examples I can mention. Some years ago I went to a performance of the opera "Nabucco" in the open air in Holland Park. This was not a major production, but really a semi-professional, local, performance. While listening, the thought came to mind "you are really enjoying this." Then it was amended: "No, you have really never enjoyed anything more." It did not need Maria Callas singing to evoke joy. The second is more recent, at the time of writing, in March, only a few days ago. I visited another lodge for the first time, to witness the installation of a friend from the Lodge of Instruction I attend. The Master of the lodge stood aside for another to act as Installing Master. The perfection of what I saw, the absolute attention to every instant, was again a joy, but will not lessen appreciation of less flawless ritual, because the perfection is still there. Beauty seen must awaken us to Beauty itself. Becoming conscious of this may really be our prime function, for which we might become answerable.

Beauty has been seen philosophically as one of three primary qualities of existence – Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, and in this perception it is part of an almost universal thread in the religions and philosophies of the world, which is to see reality set on a threefold foundation.

There are many other triads of this type – Freemasonry's triad of Strength, Wisdom and Beauty, for example. There is also the triad of the Indian tradition of the Upanishads, in Sanscrit Sat-Chit-Ananda, which has been translated as Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. The Christian Trinity is considered as three "persons", but their "personhood" seems very abstract, so I follow the Medieval mystic, Meister Eckhardt, in considering that Trinity as rather three qualities, perhaps Power, Understanding, and Communication.

This essential threeness is beautifully expressed in the verse known as "St Patrick's Breastplate", of which I can quote only a small section, but I have the whole of it here if anyone would like to see it later:

*I arise today through a mighty strength,
The invocation of the Trinity,*

*Through belief in the Threeness,
Through confession of the Oneness
Towards the Creator.*

There is a common thread running through all these expressions of an essential threeness: one strand is active and creative, one is supportive and sustaining, and the third is uniting and balancing. Beauty, or Bliss, unites us with existence, as does the Holy Spirit, which is described as coming to us. Beauty is an absolute quality of existence, and we need to understand that the occasional calls by Beauty are but signs of Beauty universal. In the end we have to see it everywhere, in everything and everyone, even in tsunamis and in cruelty.

I had a friend, Sean Crampton, a well-known sculptor. He had an experience of sublime consciousness during the war when a hand grenade landed in the middle of his group. He threw himself onto it, and before it exploded, he experienced a flash of deep understanding. He lost his leg in the incident. Sean died some years ago, and Patricia, his wife, put together a book about his life and work, which she entitled "Nothing is Profane". T.E. Lawrence had the motto "Nothing matters", to just the same effect. Nothing is profane because everything is holy; Nothing matters because *everything* matters.

In their heights, or in their depths, perhaps, the qualities in each of these triads draw together, become united, the same, and it makes little difference if one sees Beauty, Goodness, or Truth, because each becomes an absolute awareness of presence, or existence. The Three become a One.

Ultimate Oneness is, in the end, at the heart of all religions and philosophies. Thomas Aquinas, who might be said to be the founder of Christian theological philosophy, and Shankara, in the Vedantic tradition, said the same: that God has no limits, and therefore there can be nothing else; nothing outside God.

There is a Zen story. *A girl was sitting on a chest, meditating. Her father walked into the room, and exclaimed "Get up Girl! You are sitting on the Buddha." She opened her eyes and looked straight at him, saying, "Father, take me to where the Buddha is not." Her father put his hands together in front of him and bowed to her.*

Socrates faced this issue, which is set out in Plato's "Parmenides". This is in the main, a dialogue between Parmenides and the much younger Socrates, addressing the question "Is the All one, or is the All many?" In the end, logic gives them no answer, and they have to conclude "the All may be one, or the All may be many." As in other respects, proof is not given: a leap must be taken. If that leap is taken, then Aquinas and Shankara tell us, that while God cannot be described, because any description is a human reduction of the reality, and while nothing can be known about God, God can be known.

Another story: I wonder if anyone here saw the remarkable television play "Mr Harvey lights a candle" a few months ago. It was about a school party visiting Salisbury Cathedral. They were all fifteen or sixteen years old, a party straight out of Hell, it seemed! The male ringleader had already been shown to be a graffiti artist, and he took particular exception to a Moslem boy who always carried a Koran with him. When they got into the cathedral, the Moslem boy followed the other, suspecting he had graffiti in mind, which was correct. They found their way into the empty choir vestry, where the Moslem boy stopped the other starting his graffiti. The would be artist then hit the other, and they had a fight, in which much to the offender's surprise, the Moslem boy overcame him, and in fact almost killed him. The result was that he felt respect for the Moslem boy, and they got into conversation, and when he was asked why he did the graffiti, he said "Well I am always alone, and it is quiet, and it feels as if someone is with me, and watching me." The Moslem boy instantly said "That's God," which was recognised by the other. Then they heard the choir coming in, and they hid behind a curtain and watched the choirboys rehearsing, singing like angels. The choir left, and the schoolboys made their way out, but we were shown what they had left on the wall, a beautiful graffiti of an angel, with Arabic characters across it. We did not have to be told that it said "Allah al Akbar" – "God is Great."

That story shows how each of us acts as if we were several people, representing the several strands of our life, and they do not act in unison. How often have I thought "Why on Earth did I do, or say, that?" We need to take care which of our selves we follow, if we have any aim at re-unification, at appreciation

of Divine Reality, at perception of Beauty. There is an element in each of us that wants to maintain separation, and dealing with this has been a recurrent theme in spiritual ways. St Paul spoke of dying to self, and of rebirth. Something has, in a way, to die so that something new is born. I heard a speaker once who spoke of resurrection. Suddenly he stopped and looked at the audience, saying: "Resurrection is not in the future, you know. Resurrection is NOW. It is NOW that you are dead." An awakening is needed.

The journey to the light is through a passage of the darkness, and the darkness becomes the light. T.S.Eliot quotes Heraklitos on this at the start of his great poem "Four Quartets", for me the greatest work of art of the Twentieth Century. It contains a real taste of the darkness and the journey to the light, which is its whole subject..

Pascal set out a logical case for belief in God centuries ago. Either there is a God, or there is not. Either you can believe there is a God, or you can believe there is not. If you believe there is a God, and there is one, you should be all right, while if there is not one, you will be no worse off. If you do not believe there is a God, and there is not one, you will be no worse off, but if there is a God, you just might be in trouble. However, it is not what you say you believe, but how you live. There are certainly people who would say, and have said, that they believe in Divinity, but who live their lives to all intents and purposes as if there is not, while there are others who might assert militant, evangelical, atheism, who act entirely as living on a basis of faith. Malcolm Muggeridge, an avowed Christian, used to irritate Marghanita Laski, an avowed atheist, by calling her the best Christian he knew.

Socrates could not prove essential unity, but the logical case is much the same as they demonstrated by Pascal, but we can choose it or not, and live it or not I recall in the wonderful television interviews of Joseph Campbell some years ago, he recalled Pascal's image of the divine as a circle whose circumference was nowhere, but whose centre was everywhere, right through the heart of every individual, Campbell said. His interviewer, Bill Moyers, astonished, asked "You mean even me, a journalist!" He did. And you. The centre of the circle passes right through you.

This, you see, is the real secret. Maurice Maeterlinck wrote his book "The Great Secret" in 1932, in which he described those who are ever seeking a secret of life, which is always available, but which they half-knowingly prefer not to discover. The ego, which acts as me, prefers me not to understand my real identity, and so it uses every possible stratagem to avoid it. The real secret is already locked in the heart, and the attacks of the insidious, from which I must protect it, come from me myself. We take that which has meaning, and reduce it to a formality, avoiding the meaning. I go to church, I go to lodge meetings, and elsewhere, and I meet the thought "Can't they hear what they are saying?"

Of course here, as elsewhere, whether in poetry, drama, ritual, religion, or any other medium, anything that can be said about it is veiled in allegory, illustrated by symbols. Look carefully, or you may miss something that will enrich your life. Beauty is a call from present darkness to a new vision and experience. Eliot put it like this:

Not the intense moment, isolated, with no before and after, but a lifetime burning in every moment.

Nothing is profane. Everything is holy. There is a presence in every moment.

We need to see what is before us in a new way. It is not a matter of seeking something different, but of seeing what is in there already. A friend of mine, Jean Hardy, wrote a little book a few years ago, with a wonderful title: "There is another world, and it is this one." Beauty is one of the signs of a unifying grace put into our world, that can draw us to see in a new way, and to move from a focus on a small sense of self to a sense of a greater self that is already locked in the heart

Thomas Traherne, who lived in the Seventeenth Century, wrote lyrically about the appreciation of the world. The essays which became known as his "Meditations" were lost after his death, for over two hundred years, until the manuscript volume was discovered in a London street market just after 1900. Traherne wrote:

You never enjoy the world aright, till you so love the beauty of enjoying it, that you are covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it. The world is a mirror of infinite beauty, yet no man sees it. It is a

temple of majesty, yet no man regards it. It is a region of light and peace, yet men disquiet it. It is the Paradise of God. It is the place of angels and the Gate of Heaven. When Jacob waked out of his dream he said "God is here, and I wist it not. How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and the Gate of Heaven." Your enjoyment of the world is never right till every morning you wake in Heaven, and look upon the skies, the earth, and the air as celestial joys, having such reverend esteem of all, as if you were among the angels.

Here is a beautiful Buddhist expression of the centre:

*Astounding!
The self-creating clear light has always been!
It has never known birth and could never die!*

*Astounding!
It is obvious everywhere, but we ignore it!*

*Astounding!
It becomes lost in illusion, but it is enlightenment itself,*

*Astounding!
It exists in everyone,
Yet we go on looking for something other!*

*Astounding!
It is the only thing that is ours
Yet we look for it elsewhere!
Astounding ! Astounding!*

To conclude, a Zen saying:

A finger pointing at the Moon. Look at the Moon, not at the finger.