

# With the Centre

Reflections of a Masonic Pilgrim on a Quest for the Lost Word

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*With a little help from Jelalludin Rumi, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Julian of Norwich, Rahere, Lao Tsu, St. Isaac the Syrian, Dionysius, John O'Donohue, Meister Eckhart, Joshu, C.S. Lewis, Sister Jayanti, Nansen, Origen, Mumon, Shinran, Pope John Paul II, Bilbo Baggins, Pope Benedict XVI and Richard Dawkins.*

Brethren, this year has in many ways been a milestone year in my life. It marks my 40 years as a Freemason, 40 years of marriage and arrival at that age at which our caring and benevolent government grants me a pittance as an old age pensioner. For these reasons, as well as being a supporter of the Cornerstone Society from the beginning, I hope and trust that you will permit me to step aside from the realm of high and profound philosophy, which our other speakers today will take you to, and share with you a personal account of the central place of our Masonic ritual and philosophy in my earthly pilgrimage on a Quest for the Lost Word.

Our progression through the three degrees of Craft Masonry has much in common with the spiritual pathway of the Greeks of former days. The third century philosopher Origen, a pupil of St. Clement of Alexandria, and one well versed in both Platonic and Christian thought, described the “three ways” of the spiritual life – Ethics, Physics and Theoria. The terms ethics and physics are derived from the names of two of the works of Aristotle. *Ethics* had exactly the same meaning as it has today, but *Physics* then referred to the study of the entire natural world, a discipline once termed ‘natural philosophy’, and thus had a much broader meaning than it has now. Aristotle followed up his work *Physics* with another dealing with the underlying basis of the reality of time, space, form and so on - the hidden mysteries of nature and science - and termed it *Metaphysics*, which simply means the book coming after *Physics*. *Theoria*, from which we derive the word theory, means a sighting and was the word applied by Origen to the vision of God. Thus, the Greeks of old would prepare themselves by the pursuit of the ethical or moral life, then open themselves to intellectual truth and finally, by contemplation, to seek to enter into the presence of God Himself.

This spiritual path is summed up very clearly in the Exhortation in the Third Degree, which reminds us of the moral teaching of the First Degree and the intellectual principles revealed in the Second Degree and their inseparable nature. In the words of the Exhortation “...still guiding your progress by the principles of moral truth, you were led in the Second Degree 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.” This final phrase takes us through to the third of Origen’s three ways, the *Theoria* or the sighting of The Great Architect of the Universe.

But let us retrace our steps back to the First degree, to that point when the aspirant affirms that the greatest desire of his heart is Light – and the Light revealed to him at this stage of his journey is that of ethics and morality, exemplified by the three Great though emblematical lights – the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square and the Compasses.

This enlightenment corresponds with what St. Gregory of Nyssa termed *photismos* and is not to be confused with ultimate enlightenment, which only occurs after a long pilgrimage through the paths of heavenly science, as the aspirant is urged to undertake in the second Degree. Instead, *photismos* is that initial awakening or inspiration which calls upon us to set out on our spiritual pilgrimage.

Many people experience an inner sense of the Divine or a call from something or someone beyond which wrenches them out of their day to day existence. For some, this call may manifest as an experience of profound beauty in art, literature or music; for others it is an inexplicable occurrence, such as a sense of deep peace or joy, that they may later define as a 'religious experience', and surveys reveal that this is a common experience, even in supposedly atheistic countries such as China. In the words of Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, "beneath the noise of a consumer and computer society, people still strain to hear the music".

The great Sufi mystic-poet Jelalludin Mohammed Rumi wrote, "The words that come from the Universal Mind are the scents of cypress, roses, hyacinths. Have you smelled roses where there were no roses? Have you seen foaming wine where there was none? The fragrance is your guide and companion. It bears you up to Paradise." In remarkably similar words, C.S. Lewis speaks of "the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited," but he warns that such transcendental experiences may not always be welcome as they force us into a radical upheaval of all our set and cherished views on life. Indeed, in his autobiography '*Surprised by Joy*', Lewis records that, as a one-time hardened atheist, he sought to answer that inner call with all the enthusiasm of a mouse looking for a cat!

For yet others it is a sense of awe and wonder in the created universe that leads them to look beyond and this has certainly been the case in my own life. Well do I remember as a small child being struck with awe by the starry sky in my native Norfolk. I am minded of the Emulation Lectures which defines astronomy as "... that Divine art by which we are taught to read the Wisdom, Strength and Beauty of the Almighty Creator in the sacred pages of the celestial hemisphere. ... While we are employed in the study of this science, we may perceive unparalleled instances of wisdom and goodness, and on every hand may trace the Glorious Author by his works."

In the opening pages of his widely acclaimed book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins affirms that he has no quarrel with what he terms the 'Einsteinian Religion' – in Einstein's own words, "To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness."

Dawkins adds – and the relevance of this will become apparent later – "In this sense I am religious, with the reservation that 'cannot grasp' does not have to mean 'forever ungraspable'". In fact, *The God Delusion* is an exceedingly important book which might better be entitled *The Religion Delusion* as it obliges its serious readers to reflect on and, hopefully, reject all that is foolish, divisive and destructive in religion and all those rather nasty and scary little gods that mankind has created in its own image, often with horrific consequences. Dawkins quotes Carl Sagan's comment on the attitude of many religious people as one of "No, no, no! My god is a little god and I want him

to stay that way.” Screwtape, the arch demon in the writings of C.S. Lewis, tells his fellow demons, “All said and done, my friends, it will be an ill day for us if what most humans mean by ‘religion’ ever vanishes from the Earth!”

What a contrast this attitude is to the words in the Explanation of the First Degree Tracing Board – ‘The Universe is the Temple of the Deity we serve; Wisdom, Strength and Beauty are about His throne as pillars of His works, for His Wisdom is infinite, His Strength omnipotent, and Beauty shines through the whole of creation as symmetry and order. The Heavens He has stretched forth as a canopy; the earth He has planted as a footstool; He crowns His Temple with Stars as with a diadem and with His hand He extends the Power and Glory’.

Perhaps the writer of such gloriously lovely and inspiring prose was aware of the words of the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching*, the principal text of the Chinese philosophy of Taoism –

When they lose their sense of awe and wonder, people turn to religion.

When they no longer trust themselves, they begin to depend on authority.

A wonderful example of photismos occurred in the life of the Lord Buddha who, as a prince, enjoyed a life of luxury but on seeing a sick man, a dying man and a funeral he realized that all life must lead to suffering and, leaving the palace, he wandered for six years until he found the way that led from suffering to peace. Another example, nearer to home, is found in the life of Prior Rahere, who gives his name to the Rahere Lodge, of which I am a member. Rahere was the founder of St Bartholomew’ Hospital and the nearby Priory Church in Smithfield but, as a young man, he reveled in the good things of life and used his personal charisma to gain a place in the court of Henry I. According to his biographer, “... he frequently attended the king’s palace .... and made it his business all day long to attend spectacles, banquets, jests and the rest of the trifles of the court.” Before long, however, he witnessed suffering and the death of several loved ones and, in the words of one historian, “Sudden death and grief challenged Rahere, perhaps for the first time. He realised that there was much more to life than a round of pleasure and merrymaking.” He forsook his indulgent life and set out on an arduous and perilous journey in the hope of finding that which he had lost. He returned to his native land a man changed forever and, being faithful to a vow made to St Bartholomew, he raised superstructures honorable to the builder – not just his fine and enduring hospital and Priory Church, but his saintly and enlightened nature which led to many acclaimed healing wonders.

Once on our way, having traveled along the path of virtue and science, we approach the Throne of God himself, and at this point we encounter that awesome and paradoxical concept of ‘darkness visible’. What does this imply? Spiritual darkness was no stranger to the Christian mystics, including a sixth-century Syrian monk who took as his pseudonym the name of St. Paul’s friend

Dionysius the Aeropagite. Dionysius stressed the utter transcendence of God, beyond all attributes and description. He wrote of the God who “surpasses all condition, movement, life, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, thought, conception, being, rest, dwelling, limit, infinity, everything that exists”, and added that we must go beyond name and form, beyond being and concept, into the divine darkness that we can only know by unknowing. This, he declared, is the key to wisdom.

We encounter the concept of Divine Darkness in other great spiritual traditions. Thus in some orders of Sufism, the mystical heart of Islam, the goal of our spiritual quest is personified as a woman, usually named Laila which means ‘night’, and who is the holiest and most secret inwardness of Allah. Also, the opening verse of the *Tao Te Ching* affirms that – “Mystery and reality emerge from the same source. This source is called darkness. Darkness born of darkness, the beginning of all wisdom.”

Likewise, we encounter utter and absolute transcendence in Buddhism. Buddhists, contrary to popular Western opinion, are not atheists. It is merely that, like Dionysius, they go beyond name and form, beyond being and concept, and thus appear to speak of the divine and the path to enlightenment in what seems to be negative terms. This is reflected well in a Zen dialogue –

Joshu asked the teacher Nansen, “What is the true Way?”

Nansen answered, “Everyday way is the true way.”

Joshu asked, “Can I study it?”

Nansen answered, “The more you study, the further from the Way.”

Joshu asked, “If I don’t study it, how can I know it?”

Nansen answered, “The Way does not belong to things seen: nor to things unseen. It does not belong to things known: nor to things unknown. Do not seek it, study it, or name it. To find yourself on it, open yourself as wide as the sky.”

The concept of divine darkness, sometimes termed the “Via Negativa”, the negative way, is, however, only one side of the coin. As I have mentioned, Richard Dawkins expressed his conviction that ‘cannot grasp’ does not have to mean ‘forever ungraspable’, and in this context many mystics have affirmed that God can be apprehended because God is Love.

This great truth is beautifully expressed by St. Isaac the Syrian who wrote “When we reach love, we have reached God; our road is ended and we have crossed to the island which is beyond the world”. In like vein, in his first encyclical, entitled *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), Pope Benedict XVI remarks that “... love promises infinity, eternity – a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence.”

This truth is also lucidly expounded on in the Volume of the Sacred Law, in the first letter of St. John: “Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is a

child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God. For God is Love". The unknown author of the 14th century mystical work, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, in writing of the transcendental mystery of God, remarked "By love we can know Him, by reason never." Thus it is by love, the First Grand Principle of our Craft, that we can pass the mysterious veil that the eye of human reason cannot penetrate.

We find wonderful affirmations that God is Love in Sufism, particularly in the words of Jelalludin Rumi who remarked that "Love is the astrolabe that sights into the mystery of God". Rumi added that all love is a bridge to the love of God, that love is the only true religion and that all other aspects of religion are like cast off bandages. He affirmed that love lifts us above the divisions of religion, "I enter the mosque, the synagogue, the church, the temple and I see but one altar." Rumi once defined himself as a Soul in the Lodge of Divine Love.

Nearer to home, Julian of Norwich, arguably the greatest of the English mystics, in her radiantly optimistic book *Revelations of Divine Love*, states that we accept that God is all might and wisdom and can do all manner of things but that he is all love and will do all manner of things, there we fail. She affirms that, through the infinite power of love, God will make all manner of things well and that "in the end all shall be love." Julian's best known saying is "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well!"

The love of the brotherhood of mankind, the First Grand Principle of Freemasonry, enables us to transcend the boundaries of religion so that our lodges are like a Sufi shrine in Delhi where one worshipper remarked, "What is nice about this place is no one is Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian. All faiths pray together. I've found a lamp of love here for all religions."

But there is a further important step that we encounter in our Masonic journey. In one of my Craft lodges, Pilgrim Lodge, which works the German Schröder Ritual, the aspirant is led, in the Second Degree, to an object covered with a cloth and told that under the cloth lies that which is the beginning and ending of all wisdom. When the cloth is removed, the aspirant sees himself reflected in a mirror, over which is written the words that are carved on the oracular temple at Delphi: 'Erkenne Dich' – 'Know Thyself'. In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* – Faith and Reason, Pope John Paul II emphasised the importance of self-knowledge as the gateway to divine enlightenment. But what does knowing ourselves really mean?

By the glimmering ray of our modern post-Enlightenment science-based reason, we might be tempted to conclude that our lives are nothing more than transitory and that our perishable frames will indeed end in the cold bosom of the grave. The Charge after Raising, surely the most profound part of our entire ritual, inspires us to consider whether our inevitable destiny is not the very opposite! Indeed, paradoxically, it invites us, by contemplation of the transitory nature of our bodily existence - *Memento Mori* - to seek and discover our true selves as eternal and spiritual beings. We

are taught in the Charge to let the emblems of mortality guide our reflections to that most interesting of all human studies – the knowledge of ourselves; and I would suggest that the word ‘interesting’ here means far more than just fascinating but means that which is in our greatest ultimate interest.

Julian of Norwich goes even further - “This passing life that we lead here, in our sensuality, is not aware of what our true self is, except in faith. When we come to know and see clearly what our self is, then shall we, truly and clearly, see and know our Lord God in fullness of joy.” As, throughout her book, Julian states that God is Love and that love and joy are one and the same, she is affirming that love is the path to self knowledge. Indeed, the Explanation of the First Degree Tracing Board reminds us that, “the Mason who is possessed of Charity, or Love, in its most ample sense, may justly be deemed to have attained the summit of his profession”.

It is quite remarkable how, throughout the millennia, members of the human race have subjected themselves to great and painful struggles to achieve enlightenment, often undertaking years of study and learning, isolating themselves from other humans and even indulging in self-mortification. What does Freemasonry have to say in this context? In the catechism in the opening ceremony of the Master Masons’ Lodge, the Wardens affirm that they are travelling from East to West in search of the genuine secrets. This, at first glance, may seem contrary to their journeying so far which, though with many perambulations and diversions, led inevitably from West to East, where the candidate was successively employed, instructed, improved and, finally, challenged to seek enlightenment. Now, it would seem, he is travelling in the opposite direction and we find the reason for this in a catechism contained in one of the Emulation Lectures –

Q. Did you ever travel?

A. My forefathers did?

Q. Where did they travel?

A. Due east and west.

Q. What was the object of their travels?

A. They travelled east in search of instruction, and west to propagate the knowledge they had gained.

When the lodge is opened in the Third Degree, all those present are qualified and fully fledged masters, their training is over and henceforth, though well prepared by, and ever grateful for, the guidance they have received, their further progress is in their own hands. Thus they acknowledge that it is not only by the instruction they have received from the Worshipful Master that they hope to achieve the object of their quest, to find that which is lost, but by their own industry. Indeed, in the final line of the opening catechism, the Master relinquishes his leading role and, instead, offers

his assistance and mutual cooperation – “We will ASSIST you to repair that loss and may Heaven aid our UNITED endeavours”.

But there is another sense in which we as Master Masons now travel from west to east. We are coming home! In olden days, the Fellow Craft, or Journeyman as he was also known, would travel widely in search of experience before returning to his roots to ply his trade. A recurrent theme in the world literature is of a man who dreams of a treasure in a far off land but when he has made the long and perilous journey in search of it he learns that the treasure is not to be found at his destination but within his own home. This story appears in the writings of Jelalludin Rumi, in the novel *The Alchemist* by *Paulo Coelho* and in Norfolk folklore in the tale of John Chapman, a poor tinker who lived in the town of Swaffham. This recurrent tale emphasises that what we are searching for is not to be found outside of ourselves but in the very centre of our beings. An Irish Benedictine monk, John O’Donohue, who died earlier this year, wrote that when you have found the Lost Word within, “You have come home, in from the famine fields, to enter your deepest inheritance, your secret identity that is deeper than your biography or behaviour.”

This centre is, we are taught, the point from which a Master Mason cannot err, implying that this is the place of truth and perfection. Although some religious traditions focus on our supposedly inborn imperfection, the way of the mystics affirms that our true selves are pure and unassailable, being made in the image and likeness of our Great Architect. Meister Eckhart, a German monk who lived in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries wrote, “There is a place in the soul that neither time nor flesh nor any created pain can ever touch.” In a delightful book called *Zen Reflections*, Robert Allen states that “The original nature of our mind is pure. We are enlightened, but don’t realise it!” One Zen koan is “what was your true face before you were born?” and an answer is given by a contemporary Hindu mystic, Sister Jayanti – it is the face of Love, Wisdom, Peace, Purity and Bliss. Sister Jayanti adds that we are loved by God for what we are, not for what we do; that is, as human beings, not human doings! And the very same concept is expressed by Julian of Norwich who has therefore been defined, in theological terms, as an Originist.

During my career in infectious diseases and international health, I have had the privilege of traveling, particularly in the Far East. I stayed in the homes of Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists and have learned from these encounters the meaning of the poem by the Zen master Mumon –

The True Way has no gates,  
Thousands of paths lead into it.  
He who has passed through the Gateless Gate,  
Walks freely between Earth and Heaven.

Some years ago, I met a Roman Catholic nun and asked her what her church thought of other religions. Like all good Catholics, she expressed no interest in the official view of her church but

offered me her view. She produced a quartz locket and held it to the sun to display the facets sparkling with all the colours of the rainbow. “Think of each colour as one of the world’s religions,” she said, “but remember that each facet of the crystal reflects just one part of the complete white light from above.” Of course, we learn the very same lesson in Freemasonry, but for me the lesson was strongly reinforced by my experiences in the Orient.

But I had yet another journey to make: again from west to east and then returning from east to west having gained so much, for it was in Japan that I encountered the 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic Shinran Shonen. Shinran was a Buddhist monk who pursued his calling with great zeal and assiduity for 20 years but was in a state of great inner turmoil and anxiety because, despite all his strenuous efforts, he could not achieve enlightenment. He argued that if he, leading the austere and rigorous life of a devout monk, could not achieve his aim, there could be no hope for ordinary lay people. In despair he abandoned the monastic life, saying “hell is my only home”. Fortunately, he soon met a kindly priest called Hōnen who taught him the futility of strenuous religious practice and that the way to the ‘Pure Land’ of paradise was simply one of putting one’s trust in Amida, meaning the Limitless One – infinite Life, Light and Love. In a series of visions, Shinran came to the understanding that if the Great Architect is of infinite might and infinite love, then we are already saved unless we deliberately refuse the divine gift of salvation.

Shinran did not put too much emphasis on sin and retribution. Indeed, he stated that it is easy to be ‘good’ if one has a privileged life and that those who busy themselves with ‘good works’ often become smug, self-righteous and pompous. Conversely, ‘bad’ people are often bad because of unfortunate life circumstances and thus they are the particular concern of God’s saving grace. Paradoxically, he wrote “Even the virtuous man is born in the Pure Land, so without question is the man who is not virtuous!” Though not well known in the west, the Pure Land school of Buddhism is the largest in Japan, with some 20 million members, and it is going from strength to strength.

What I find truly amazing is that the central message of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Shinran – “Those who simply and sincerely love me are all headed for heaven.” – was echoed so closely on the other side of the world by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Julian of Norwich. Both affirm that, as God is almighty, in his foreseeing wisdom, “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well”.

Today, sadly, so many people today seek meaning outside of themselves while the wise man, by contrast, comes to know himself, his true and God-given pure nature, simply by being himself. To emphasise this point, let us look at the rough and smooth ashlar. They look quite different, do they not? But the difference is superficial. However well polished and shiny, however elaborately carved, the inner nature of the stone remains identical and unchanged – our original face before we were born. Those superfluous knobs and excrescences that we are urged to knock off are not part of our created nature but are all those superficial and transient acquisitions without which, somehow,

we feel naked, exposed, incomplete and inauthentic. These include the external ‘protective clothing’ of wealth, occupation, possessions, status and authority – even, if I may say so, Masonic rank with all its shiny gongs and frilly pinnies – often acquired at the expense of the autonomy and happiness of others and of our own true natures. We devote great effort to building impressive personas or egos with which, not entirely unknowingly, we drive wedges between themselves and others and forget that we are all brothers, partakers of the same nature and sharers in the same destiny. The long explanation of the working tools of the Second Degree reminds that “a time will come – and the wisest of us knows not how soon – when all distinctions, save those of goodness and virtue, shall cease, and death, the grand leveller of all human greatness, reduce us to the same state”.

The wise man has nothing to gain because he already has everything – the pearl of great worth as it is called in the Volume of the Sacred Law. In the words of the Address to the Worshipful Master on his Installation, he has been enabled to lay up a Crown of Joy and Rejoicing which will continue when time with him shall be no more; that is, when he has stepped from this temporal, transient and ephemeral abode into Eternity.

In conclusion, brethren, our Masonic journey or pilgrimage reveals that the Lost Word is not lost at all but that it is enshrined in our Grand Principles, Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth, which correspond to three Greek words for Love. Agape – the unconditional love of the brotherhood of mankind; Caritas, the caring kindness that relieves suffering and Philia – a deep longing, as in *Philia Sophia* from which we derive our word Philosophy – a longing for Wisdom and Truth.

But the quest is not over, and nor will it ever be on this side of Eternity. So I will end with the words of the traveling song of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* –

The road goes ever on and on  
Down from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the road has gone,  
And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with eager feet,  
Until it joins some larger way  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then? I cannot say.