

## THE HIDDEN SINEWS OF FREEMASONRY

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I rather feel I know what it is like to be a cornerstone. Last November I was the final speaker at the Manchester meeting of the Cornerstone Society, and had to follow Bro Neville Cryer, whom many would acclaim as the doyen of English masonic authorities, and a very considerable speaker. Follow him. What a task! And now, in London, Cornerstone have set me to start their next day of masonic insight and exploration, secure in the comforting knowledge that the speaker immediately following me is no less a personage than MW the Pro Grand Master himself! Square up to that, John! Well, at least Cornerstone cannot present me with anything more difficult in the future: if, after this, I have a future!

Yet, in a sense, my acting as a cornerstone between these two meetings is quite apt. My brief for both has been to keep off history (my particular passion) and to say something relevant to the present. In Manchester my theme was to present a fresh approach to analysing and quantifying what we, as individuals, obtain from practising Freemasonry (FM); why FM is curiously compelling to a wide range of different people. I suggested that the power of its effect could be weighed in relation to its social, moral, cultural, spiritual and mystical elements, mingled as these are in different degrees and orders, varying in intensity at different social periods and in different cultural milieux.

As FM brings together, and celebrates (in differing ways), every one of these fundamental facets of human existence of a non-material kind, it can create a very powerful bond between brethren. It has a dense, but transparent, goodness. It promotes our deepest needs for meaning in life, and beautifies them with order, kindness and good works. I know of no other organisation which can do this so fulfillingly across international divides. This is our diamond treasure which we must polish and focus well. I turn the corner today to consider FM as a dynamic movement. Brethren will recognise the allusion in the title of this talk: the sinews which must be grasped to raise a brother to an appreciation of the symbolic sufferings he has undergone, and to call him to a richer and active life in that knowledge. So similarly the bones of FM lie around us. Such as this building. These pieces of furniture (in the Grand Temple). The library and museum, at our back. What these bones need are the active sinews to pull them together, the nerves and muscles necessary to inform and vitalise the frame, the determination and exercise to preserve the masonic body in its fullest corporeal energy. We in FM have had to endure a long period of being misunderstood. We have, perhaps, not even understood ourselves. But, marvellously, now, the corner has been turned. In England and Wales, we scapegoats have now swung round boldly to face the sneers and hostility of ignorance. Our leaders have led well. There are now willing forces, up and down the land, to power the future. What should that future be? How should this power be led? How do we maintain faith with the so-called landmarks yet keep attuned to the changing circumstances and emergent sensitivities of each generation? In posing such questions, and there are no bigger ones, I am only too conscious that I am tip-toeing on to the preserve of the High Rulers, who are fully equipped with their compasses, while I approach only with a square, plumb-rule and chisel. Nevertheless, perhaps I might venture a few remarks from the modest angle which, with the benefit of those essential tools, I have attained to.

First, I would draw your attention to a retrospect of those three broad epochs through which Craft FM in England and Wales has already passed. Taking the last first, we are continuing to operate in 2002 under the system of FM forged at the Union of the two former Grand Lodges in 1813. This has had the virtues of a clear and unified structure, and of the acknowledgement of a divine order in terms which can be espoused by brethren of all religions. It has solidly maintained most of the traditions, craft organisation and ritual laid down at that important era. Faithfulness to this pursuit has, however, tended to be regarded too readily, and for too long, as an all-sufficient virtue. English FM is looking to be raised from this state, and the process has, markedly, already begun.

The second stage through which English FM passed, that period before the 1813 union, began in 1717, from the formation of the premier Grand Lodge. This was an era when the rays of heaven shed their influence to enlighten the brethren in the paths of virtue and science, indeed in all such ways as might enrich the practice and effect of freemasonic art and ritual. It was during this time that ceremonial became embellished, that ritual was expanded and made mellifluous, that visual effects and music were creatively brought to bear, that esprit de corps was established and processions begun, that the Royal Arch and many other degrees took wing for brethren to explore. It was the era when the principles and ethos of FM infected Europe and the United States, when brethren knew why they existed and rejoiced in it. Variation? So much the better, provided the principles and methods could be recognised as soundly based on tradition and merit. FM, in the cast it was given (appealing to fashionable classicism, the reformation of manners, the creation and recognition of rank, the desire for social intercourse with superiors, hearty carousal, the relief of distress, the rational brotherhood of man, natural philosophy, enthusiasm, even romanticism, tempered by restraint-in England at any rate-) lived in symbiosis with, was part and parcel of, vital within, the eighteenth century enlightenment. Irreverence and reverence could combine deliciously. Birds of similar plumage flocked together in rapture on the useful twigs of FM.

And before this? The formative, original period, when FM made its entrance on the world, half-shod perhaps, but hopeful, and above all, purposeful for good. No less discriminatory and authoritarian a body than the presbytery of Kelso in 1652 ruled that possession of the mason word represented neither sinne nor scandale...because in the purest tymes of the Kirke, maisons haveing that word have been ministers. This implies that FM already possessed a desirable reputation, from which preachers, leaders of the community, could be drawn, a couple of generations earlier. And where did this aura come from? If we are to draw inspiration from the marrow of FM should we not well consider this early era of the Craft for clues about fundamentals?

My purpose lies in the present, not in the past, so my observations will be pithy. I shall list five principal ligatures of FM which seem to me to have caused it to cohere and draw strength from time immemorial. To do so I draw substantially from the evidence available in the earliest English Old Charges, surviving from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and to no less an extent from the fuller German equivalents, the regulations of the *steinmetzen*, also surviving from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Both the German Ordinances and the English Constitutions have complementary concerns and, as far as can be discerned, similar attitudes towards governance. By delving prior to 1717 I have become convinced, despite all the scepticism expressed by others, that the essentials of FM are rooted in the Middle Ages.

1. Symbolism. FM obtains much of its power from its central use of symbolism. This is just a particular and well-developed case of the natural ability of humans to create and work with symbols. As naturally as breathing, but after some schooling, everyone uses letter-symbols (or in some cultures word-symbols) to express language, number-symbols to express calculation. Masonic visual symbolism and use of analogy is very rich in mental associations. This, I would claim, derives from medieval times, evidenced, not least, by the form and use of our basic masonic sign. Some symbols, analogies and allegories are, however, more powerful than others, dependent on changing culture and the context in which they may be used.
2. Ritual. FM could not exist without ritual. Ritual reflects the celebration of significance, and permits the participation of its members in a shared occasion. It enhances the power of symbolism and order. Ritual was an everyday part of medieval experience. The master shall knock with three blows, the warden with two consecutively, and for announcements at morning, noon and eve, as is the old usage of the land (T28)
3. Purpose. The Craft of masonry originally had a dynamic, a publicly-declared *raison d'être*. This comes across very clearly in the English Old Charges and the German Ordinances, and even exists vestigially in our current Constitution (ACNo5). It was: to see the Lord's work well served. All the Constitution, all the order, was designed to promote this end. Apprenticeship, secrecy, and tested experience existed to maintain appropriate quality and obtain a sure conclusion. Strict regulations prevented masters, as much as their craftsmen, from unwisely bringing the Craft into disrepute by, for instance, taking on more than they could deliver. Present day builders please note! Hence morality, fidelity, secrecy, obedience. Hence also the quality-standard of truth, divined by plumb-rule and level from the natural laws of the Grand Geomatrixian. And of beauty, from their harmonic, encompassing, derivatives.
4. Order and discipline. FM is notable for its orderliness. Orderliness enables co-operation to take place automatically. It produces harmony. It walks the talk of regularity. The Old Charges and Ordinances are naturally focused on duties and regulation and that ethic is still strong. But between the lines of the rules, and quite plainly in the social Regius poem, the whole is permeated by the desire for fraternal consent and open justice.
5. Communication and consent. The German Ordinances are quite explicit.

There are to be quarterly meetings at which the Master is to enquire into grievances or difficulties and to assure himself of the morale of his lodge. (T39-42) Every master shall keep his lodge free from all strife, yea, his lodge shall he keep pure as the seat of justice. (T11) No master shall judge alone of that which touches honour or good repute; but there shall be together three masters who shall judge such matters. (T40) [Should we perhaps say Three Principals, in *Kapitelsweisen*, or meetings in Chapter form?]

Annually a regional meeting of masters is to be held to review how the Craft is faring, being especially careful of its reputation. So that justice be done to all men, wardens and fellows of the lodges in the area are entitled to elect their own representatives to that meeting. (T43) As now, no one can be admitted into the Craft unless by the consent, and in the presence of, the craftsmen with whom he would work. (S64) There are thus set occasions for listening. At every level members may bring up concerns and make suggestions. It is in the hands of the masters to judge but openness and common consent is sought. That list may seem strange. Where is, for instance, relief and brotherly love, which many would say, correctly, continues to be the outstanding feature of FM? FM is indeed imbued with the principles of fraternal love and relief, but this is not a sinew, it is an attitude. It is the ideal of co-operation and mutual assistance, blessing him who gives as well as him who receives. But one cannot rely on it. It depends upon the effectiveness of the various underlying ligatures I have named: symbolism, ritual, purpose, order, consent.

Needless to say, FM does not exist for relief and brotherly love between its members. Its objects are beyond this: the good of the building, the Lord's work; and we can, and do, in speculative mode, extend this to the perfection of oneself and the betterment of society. To achieve this ultimate (which interestingly can only be accomplished by teamwork) brotherly love and the relief of one's work-fellows is much to be recommended. Medieval masons, working in large numbers, attached to different masters, creating structures bigger, more mind-expanding, than anything hitherto seen, had reason to discover this for themselves. No wonder their collective vision was superlative and their principles well-founded. The beauty and good of the building was always before their eyes.

It is in this spirit of discernment, therefore, that I ask you to think more deeply about the grand design of being happy and of communicating happiness. As often, the true meaning lies deep. I also ask you to think about the customary definition of FM as a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. This, so far as we know, is a formulation from the start of the second era of FM. Do we nowadays pleasurably respond to the idea that FM is a peculiar system of morality (in the way that men would then)? Is that how our medieval brethren would have chosen to describe their objective? Might they have described it as:

Firstly, appreciating the skill of Nature, and a comprehension of the power that lies within it through measurement and calculation, especially as applied in buildings; secondly, using the principles derived from this to promote the skill of becoming good and perfect without reliance upon fear or hope. [Leyland-Locke MS, edited]

In our age, we would perhaps choose neither of these two formulations to explain ourselves attractively to others. But we do, of course, have a pressing need to try.

At the centre of FM in the British Isles (less clearly so under the United Grand Lodge of England) are the Sacred Writings, the written revelations of divinity, perhaps the heart, rather than the sinews, of our Order. I am glad that this is so. I trust that, above all landmarks, the Sacred Writings represent the Ararat on which we are founded as Noachidae, good high ground under our feet. In reverence and respect we seek to supplement, not to supplant, the religious observance of our members. The underlying, hidden, fundamentals I have been talking about, in rather high-flown terms, may seem a long way removed from our ordinary experiences in the practical realities of our day-to-day masonic life. However I think it is important that such fundamentals should be recognised so that they may be preserved, and strengthened where necessary. To see them in context ought also to be liberating. It should give us more confidence to make adjustments to the superstructure when necessary. The geographic boundaries of the provinces, for instance, which have been handed down to us from the era of the stage coach, may not be sensible ones in the modern commuter world. Perhaps our administrative organisation should be less reliant on amateurs, and use professional expertise more widely. Perhaps an inventory should be taken of the skills of all our members (which computerisation makes possible) so that these latent resources and contacts may be more productively harnessed, completely irrespective of rank. Perhaps we ought to signal to the world that we have stepped into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by befriending, even promoting, the separate existence of women freemasons. The dust should be swept regularly from all our masonic halls. But we should recognise, preserve and embellish those jewels which give lustre and depth to our enjoyments in the Craft.

In the first of my Cornerstone talks I tried to analyse and separate out the social, moral, cultural, spiritual and mystical elements in our masonic diet. I did so because I think that the unique impact of FM, no less than alchemy, results from the combination of these basic ingredients, at an appropriate emotional temperature, within those hermetic vessels, our ceremonies. This is 'the work'. Then follows refreshment, which is no less important to the whole effect, the fermentation, so to speak; and, hopefully, thereafter, the projection. In this second talk I have tried to establish a context to our dynamics. I conducted you through a retrospect of the three stages through which English FM has passed. I encouraged us all to think 'outside the box'. From the earliest period I distinguished five strands, or sinews, which have ever bound the members of our dedicated, invisible brotherhood together, here, and across the world. They all require exercise. Our frame is reared upon symbolism, ritual, purpose, order and consent. But we are challenged, brethren. It seems to me FM has evolved to celebrate significance. Virtues are significant. Friendship between brethren of good report is significant. Good works are significant. In our times, in our hectic, consumer and media-driven age, significances of all sorts are too easily eroded. But human minds crave significance. They wish to derive meaning, to understand, to mark; and also to receive recognition. We can, to fit persons, well supply that human need. For FM aims to celebrate significance personally, warmly, relevantly and intriguingly. At its highest, the mere lighting of a candle should be imbued with meaning and quality. At whatever level, FM opens the windows of the mind and the doors of friendship. Recognition attends each lodge meeting. Indeed, a particularly nice point in FM, traceable from times more than half a millennium ago, has been the special recognition and welcome given to visitors. The companionship of FM is extremely important, but it is special, very special, because it is bound together by sinews and linked into the deepest levels of significance. Is it too much to claim that FM, at its best, embodies the soul? My brothers, we share an astonishingly rich, unique, inheritance which it is up to us to make live, and to exalt.

References:

ACNo 5 UGLE, Constitutions. Ancient Charge No 5

T Torgau Ordinances, 1462

S Strasburg Ordinances, 1459 and 1563