THE TRANSCENDENCE OF ETERNITY

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One of the remarkable things about our Order is that one can witness or participate in its ceremonies year after year and hear a particular phrase time and time again. Then, perhaps, on one occasion and usually out of the blue, that phrase suddenly says something profound to one. Readers of Holy Writ, of whichever faith they follow, attest to similar experiences. There is a Buddhist saying that 'Whenever the pupil is ready, a teacher will appear'; and perhaps the teacher can just as well be a phrase in a book or a ritual as a living person.

A phrase that recently struck me in this manner is 'estimate the wonderful works of the Almighty'. This comes in the Second Degree when the newly entrusted Fellow Craft is invested with his distinguishing badge and informed that he is expected to make the Liberal Arts and Sciences his future study, that he may the better be enabled to discharge his duties as a Mason and 'estimate the wonderful works of the Almighty'. It is a strange word – estimate. Today, we usually use it as a noun to mean a rather rough or approximate measure, a mere guess even, as for example, 'I've just reversed my Nissan Micra into the Pro Grand Master's Bentley, may I have an estimate for the repair work?'

In fact, the word estimate is derived from the Latin *aestimare* from which our word esteem is also derived and, in this sense, it means 'to have a great respect or regard for'. I would therefore suggest that it is the intention that the Fellow Craft should, with the aid of both the arts and sciences, strive to measure and comprehend the wonderful works of the Almighty while at the same time holding them in reverential awe. One of my earliest childhood memories was of an evening when we were returning home to the village where we lived in North Norfolk and my father stopped the car so that we could get out and look at the clear starry sky. It may well have been the first time as a child that I had been consciously aware of the stars and I recall, even at that early age, being swept up in a *Mysterium Tremendum* . At that age I had no idea what stars were but to this day I still vividly recall that sense of transcendental awe and wonder at the sheer beauty and grandeur of that sight.

Perhaps for that reason I developed a keen interest in astronomy and spent many a cold winter's night peering through the telescope that a kindly benefactor had presented to my school, but alas a catastrophic inability to come to grips with mathematics forced me down the path of the biosciences. Notwithstanding, what astronomers and cosmologists have revealed through their probing of their heavenly science has really enhanced my sense of awe and wonder. One particularly inspiring part of our teaching is, sadly, not in a degree ceremony as regularly worked, but in the infrequently heard 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'.

Wisdom, Strength and Beauty are also referred to in the fourth part of the Second Lecture which extemporises on the seven liberal arts and sciences and 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.'

Thus it is by the science of astronomy that we may truly estimate the wonderful works of the Almighty, particularly at the present time as recent advances in the science have revealed to us a universe far vaster, far grander and far more awesome than our forebears could ever even have dreamed of. We now know that, apart from a few planets, those bright shimmering points of light that we see in the sky on a clear night are suns, many of them far grander than ours which is actually classified as a 'yellow dwarf'. In its early days, the universe consisted of swirling masses of hydrogen and helium which, over millions of years, were drawn by gravity into globules of gas that were the precursors of stars. As these precursors contracted under the force of gravity, the pressures in their centres became so enormous that fusion of the atoms of hydrogen to form helium and, in turn, helium to form other lighter elements occurred, with the radiation of vast quantities of heat and light. The stars are, in fact, gigantic hydrogen bombs but held in shape, form and stability by immense forces of gravity.

In the early days of the universe, there were fewer stars but they were generally much larger than those today. The larger the star, the greater the internal pressure and the more intense the nuclear fusion, so giant stars are much hotter and, paradoxically, much shorter lived then small ones like the sun. When enough mass is lost as radiant

energy, and the gravitational forces become weaker than the internal nuclear energy, a giant star will explode with unimaginable violence – a so-called supernova. A fairly ordinary star like our sun can forge elements down to the heaviness of carbon and iron, but the heavier elements require the vast energy of a supernova for their creation. Those of you are wearing gold rings might reflect that the gold of that ring was forged in the mighty and cataclysmic death throes of a gigantic star, billions of years ago and with a 100 million times the energy that our sun will ever radiate – truly a hammer of God! The vast cloud of matter, the so-called nebula, released by that huge explosion then began to coalesce under the force of gravity to form new, smaller, stars while debris consisting of the heavier elements slowly gathered themselves into the planets, on one at least of which life finally appeared.

But our sun is just one of a vast number in the universe. What we call the Milky Way is a gigantic spinning mass, or galaxy, of around 200 billion stars, many of which are likely to have associated planets, some of which, perhaps, support life. But that is not all there is. We now know that our galaxy is just one among at least 200 billion others in our observable universe. That adds up to a vast number of stars and it has been estimated that if all the stars in the universe were each to be reduced to the size of grains of sand they would require a container five miles long, five miles wide and five miles high to hold them all.

But how did it all begin? There is now almost unanimous agreement that the universe commenced with the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago, after which it evolved or developed into its present day form. As light travels at a finite speed, some of the images seen through really powerful telescopes such as the Hubble telescope pointed at the far side of the universe left their source billions of years ago and reveal to us a universe in a much more primitive state.

But can we look back to the very instant of Creation itself? The answer, alas, is no. By extrapolating from the nature of matter and energy of the universe as we now see it, cosmologists feel they can predict fairly accurately what happened back to within a trillionth of a second of the Big Bang, but all admit that they then come up against a 'cloud of unknowing'.

One of the great problems in contemplating the creation of the universe, one that has troubled philosophers and theologians as well as scientists over the ages, is that of infinite regression. This concept is nicely illustrated by a story told by Bertrand Russell, who was asked to give a talk to some local women's organization on the solar system. He was explaining how the spherical earth rotated on its axis in its orbit round the sun when an old woman leapt up and said, 'Oh no, you've got it all wrong, young man. The earth is a flat disk supported on the back of a gigantic turtle.' 'Really?' replied Russell, 'and what is the turtle standing on?' 'Oh you think you are so clever, don't you,' retorted the old woman, 'well, its turtles all the way down!'

Whether a vast pile of turtles or aeons of time, the notion of infinite regression has indeed proved to be a stumbling block. In the Royal Arch ritual, we speak of God as 'without beginning of days or end of years' but the word 'without' is used here in its older sense of 'outside', and the symbol of the circle which has no beginning or end leads us to understand that God is in a state beyond our concept of linear time. If God had always existed in time as we understand it, why did he wait an infinite amount of time before creating the universe? If, on the other hand, the created universe has already existed over an infinite period of time then, unless it was totally static until the present epoch of its history, every conceivable event that could happen must have already happened.

Fortunately, Einstein came to the rescue. The Theory of Relativity reveals that time is but a property and dimension of our created universe, and that it is affected by mass, speed and gravity. In fact, one of the most remarkable things to emerge from the Theory of Relativity is that eternity pervades the entire created universe. Einstein's famous equation $E=mc^2$ links everything – mass and energy – to the speed of light. Time has been defined as 'the measure of change' but the faster we travel the slower time moves until, at the speed of light itself, there is no movement of time and no change, just an eternal changeless now. Throughout the ages, light has been symbolic of the love, wisdom and beauty of the eternal Divine and those dwelling in the celestial realms are said to shine like the stars or to have bodies of light. Now, thanks to Einstein, we can really be assured that light is not just symbolic of that eternity but that its very nature and essence is eternal.

'*Fiat lux*'! We are here, with light and life all around us, but have you ever tried to imagine a state of absolute nothingness? Have you ever asked yourselves, why is there not just utter nothingness? Why should there ever have been anything? I do not think any of you can picture absolute nothingness and, if I am not very much mistaken, these questions are ones that you find remarkably spine-chilling and discomforting.

So how could this vast universe have arisen from nothing? May I ask you, as speculative Masons to join me in speculating? If something sprung from nothing then we may reasonably assume that initially it had absolutely no size at all; that is, it was infinitesimally small. For this 'nothing' to be at the same time 'something', it must, from our logical standpoint, have been infinitely dense. In physics, an infinitesimally small point of infinite density is termed a singularity. Once formed, the enormous forces of gravity in such a dense body would have raised its temperature to trillions of degrees, causing a mighty explosion. But having burst forth, why did it form a universe of the type we are living in? There is no intrinsic reason why the laws of matter and energy should be as they are; they could have been very different indeed. If there really was no nature before the universe began, there would have been no laws of nature. Where did the laws come from? Why indeed are there laws at all? Why is there, as we say in the Royal Arch,

regular form and peaceful existence rather than a gloomy, horrific and unshapen chaos? We observe three dimensions, or four if we include time, but why are there not just two dimensions, or even as many as ten, as certain properties of gravity suggest there could be?

Of all the possible universes, only an extremely limited number of types could support life as we know it. In fact, there are so many possible universes that it has been calculated that the chance of one capable of supporting human life arising is equal to that of a rocket launched at random from earth hitting a penny piece placed on the far side of the cosmos! Then, within a suitable universe, a planet capable of supporting life had to form and that itself is a very remote probability. Next, living creatures had to arise and evolve and even the simplest self-replicating single-celled creature is of unimaginable complexity. The chance of such a creature emerging from a primordial molecular soup has been likened to that of a tornado sweeping through a junk yard and randomly assembling a jumbo jet!

All this raises a very fundamental question. Despite the odds being so enormously stacked against it, did the 'right' universe, and life within it, indeed arise by pure chance? Or was it 'set up' on purpose and for a purpose by a purposeful Being? Was it truly a case of 'Heaven and Earth Thy Vast Design'? Many cosmologists are quite happy to accept this concept but others go to extraordinary lengths to get away from the notion of a Creator God. Some have postulated the existence of vast numbers of universes, so many that there would inevitably be at least one of our type but, as we cannot prove their existence, they remain no more than speculation.

So, rather than straying into the bizarre field of multiple universes, let us return to the very beginning of everything. Although the concept of the singularity helps us to understand how nothing became something, there is still a problem. If the initial something was infinitesimally small, then as zero multiplied by any number is still zero, even if it expanded for a vast period of time, it would still be zero in size. There are, however, properties of the universe that suggest that it began with a bizarre period of hyper-inflation that lasted until the universe was about the size of a grapefruit, by which time the mathematical laws of nature were established. After that it was more or less plain sailing to a universe that we can fully comprehend! ….. Or was it?

The problem is that whenever we feel we understand the nature and properties of the universe well enough to develop a grand unifying theory that explains all, new discoveries cast us back to square one. The famous scientist J.B.S. Haldane remarked that 'The universe is not only queerer than we suppose. It is queerer than we can suppose.' Recent findings show how right he was.

When we look with the Hubble telescope into the depths of the universe, we might think we can see all there is to be seen. We have, however, known for some time that galaxies behave as if they are much heavier than suggested by their visible mass of stars. Indeed, it is now evident that much of the universe must be composed of so-called cold dark matter and that this greatly exceeds the amount of visible matter. But that is not all. Until recently it was assumed that, although all the galaxies are hurtling away from each other as a result of the original Big Bang, gravitational forces between them would in time slow the expansion rate down and even perhaps cause them to fall together in a final 'Big Crunch'. Recent very sensitive measurements of the relative speed of many galaxies have, however, shown that, far from slowing down, they are actually accelerating away from each other at an ever increasing speed. Something must be pushing them apart and the energy required for this, termed dark energy or vacuum energy, accounts for a staggering 73 per cent of the total mass-energy continuum of the universe. Cold dark matter makes up a further 23 percent of the universe, which means that what we can actually see, those billions of awe inspiring galaxies and stars, makes up a trifling four per cent! As one writer has expressed it, 'In a nutshell, the universe is 4 per cent visible, 23 per cent undetectable and 73 per cent unimaginable!' Thus, when it comes to explaining some 96 percent of the universe, all we can say is, 'we do not know'. If only more 'religious' people could say 'we do not know', we would take a great stride towards world harmony and peace.

The terms 'cold dark matter' and 'vacuum energy' convey to our imagination a chilling deadness, a 'darkness visible'. But could they perhaps be the exact opposite – a 'light invisible'? Another name for dark energy is quintessence, hinting that from another, perhaps celestial, perspective it may well form a far brighter and more wonderful dimension of the universe that is denied to our minds, sensory organs and present-day scientific instruments. In one of his lesser known works, *Out of the Silent Planet* , C.S. Lewis hints at this possibility. His reluctant hero, Dr. Ransom, is kidnapped by a pair of mad scientists and taken off in a space ship to the planet Mars. Ransom had always pictured outer space as being a black, cold vacuity and an utter deadness, but he was amazed to find it a place of blazing brilliance and vitality. ''Space' seemed to him a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam', with the sun at an eternal noon perpetually darting forth its rays with meridian splendour. He quotes from Milton –

> *The happy climes that ly*
> *Where day never shuts his eye*
> *Up in the broad fields of the sky.*

But as they descend into the atmosphere of Mars and the brilliance diminishes to that of an earthly day, and despite his arrival in an unknown world, Ransom finds himself absorbed in philosophical speculation. It seemed to him that the 'planets are mere holes or gaps in the living heaven – excluded or rejected wastes of heavy matter and murky air'.

'And yet, he thought, beyond the solar system the brightness ends. Is that the real void, the real death? Unless … he groped for the idea … unless visible light is also a hole or gap, a mere diminution of something else. Something that is to bright unchanging heaven as heaven is to the dark heavy earths … .'

Could we take C.S. Lewis's concept even further and ask whether the created universe of dimension and time is encircled by, and interwoven with, an eternity that is even more radiant and wonderful? An eternity in which our universe is also a hole, a gap, a mere diminution? An eternity that mystics describe as a state of infinite love and light? An eternity free from all constraints of cause and effect? This is elegantly expressed in the Royal Arch ritual which speaks of 'an eternal, unchangeable and all-sufficient God who alone has His being in and from Himself and gives to all others their being'. This implies that God is not subject to laws of cause and effect but is, in a way that totally transcends our understanding and reason, His own cause.

But how do we fit into the Vast Design? How do we who dwell for a few brief years on one tiny planet around a yellow dwarf star in one of the many billions of galaxies relate to all that is made? At the beginning of the universe, at the point of singularity, there was total unity, but has that unity been lost during the expansion of the universe to its present vast size? One of the most extraordinary aspects of quantum physics is the ability of pairs of units, or quanta, of energy such as photons of light emitted from a source, to affect each other instantaneously at a vast distance apart. If something happens to one of the pair, such as being detected in an experimental system, the behavior of the other one of the pair is affected. Einstein termed this 'spooky action at a distance' but he did not like the idea as, according to his Theory of Relativity, nothing can travel faster than light. Yet the 'communication' between photons or protons or other particles or waves of energy appears to be instantaneous. It seems almost as if quanta of energy or mass have psychic abilities! Sir Arthur Eddington remarked that it makes as much sense as Lewis Carrol's poem 'Jabberwocky'! And yet, amazingly, many experiments since the early 1960s have verified and continue to verify these mind-boggling concepts beyond any reasonable doubt and indeed by conducting such experiments, we consciously effect a change in an environment far away. Perhaps our thoughts and meditations can accordingly have effects at a distance, as suggested by the reported positive impact of meditation groups on society. Indeed Rupert Sheldrake has suggested that our consciousness is not limited to our physical brains but extends far and wide in the universe – a concept supported by accounts of some remarkable out-of-body experiences. As Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*, 'I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space'. The 14th century English mystic Julian of Norwich recorded a vision in which her consciousness was so expanded that the entire created universe appeared to her no bigger than a hazelnut and the great 13th century Sufi poet and mystic Jelaluddin Rumi has written –

> *The body is a device to calculate the astronomy of the spirit.*
> *Look through that astrolabe and become oceanic .*

As a result, we increasingly see the cosmos as a holistic and interconnected entity and one in which our consciousness may have very widespread effects. If this is so, and modern physics strongly suggests that it is so, and if the very matter that we are made of is thus interconnected, then is not our sense of separation illusory? The long explanation of the Working Tools of the Second Degree states that 'The Level demonstrates that we are all sprung from the same stock, partakers of the same nature and sharers in the same hope'. This inspires us to reflect deeply on what the term 'brotherhood of mankind' really means. The Emulation ritual book contains two addresses to the Charity Steward. One teaches us that charity is the bond of perfection that must link separate minds and separate interests, and the other points out that when we communicate happiness to another, and with a good heart, that happiness is directly returned back to us. The Address to the brethren in the Installation Ceremony reminds that we should have but one aim in view: to please each other and unite in that Grand Design of being happy and communicating happiness. In this context love and joy are one. Julian of Norwich, regarded by many as one of the greatest mystics of all time, introduced the word 'enjoyment' into the English language and used it no less than 75 times in her book, *Revelations of Divine Love* . The world's great religions attest that God is Love or, in the words of Canon Paul Oestreicher, God is another word for Love, and also that, in the words of an unknown Hindu song-writer, 'God is the purest form of joy – complete joy!' Julian of Norwich' inspiring, spiritually optimistic and joy-filled book of universalist appeal ends with a short but truly remarkable statement which sums up the whole meaning of life, the universe and everything: 'And in the end all shall be Love.'

But why are we here as frail and mortal beings in this material universe? Why did the Great Architect create a universe and us in it rather than directly creating us in the realm of eternity? Why does the Greater Light seem so elusive? Why, in the words of the First Degree Lecture, is the Ethereal Mansion veiled from mortal eyes? These, like the perennial questions of the cause of sin and suffering, are among the most profound questions that the wise among the human race have struggled with over the millennia. Perhaps the mystics have come close to the answer in revealing that everything is as it is because of Divine Love, as such love requires our perfect freedom of spirit to truly know it, receive it and rejoice in it. Owen Barfield, a 20th century lawyer and writer, has stated that 'We live in that abrupt gap between matter and spirit – we exist by virtue of it as autonomous, self-conscious individual spirits, as free beings'. Julian of Norwich saw our sojourn in this world of imperfection as being essential for us to be aware of and to understand Divine Love or, put another way, we need to see the dark n order to fully comprehend the light. She affirms that 'Sin does not make us less valuable in God's sight, but will enable us to gain a high and wondrous

knowledge of love in God. ….. If we fell not, we would not know how weak and how joyless we are by ourselves - nor also would we so thoroughly know the amazing love of our Creator.' Much later, and in a totally different literary style but with the same profound meaning, C.S. Lewis wrote, in his book *Perelandra* , 'Yet this … is the end and final cause for which He spreads out Time so long and Heaven so deep; lest if we never met the dark, and the road that leads no-whither, and the question to which no answer is imaginable, we should have in our minds no likeness of the Abyss of the Father, into which if a creature drop down his thoughts for ever he shall hear no echo return to him.'

So, however dark and dismal the world may seem to us at times, we may be upheld by that 'vital and immortal principle' which inspires a holy confidence that there is a purpose, a Vast Design, underpinning everything. Our embodied sojourn in this material universe is not in vain. Julian of Norwich expresses this lucidly – the love and wisdom of the Great Architect are infinite and His strength is omnipotent and so, logically, all must be going to plan and, to quote her best known expression, 'All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well'.

Inspired words such as those of Julian of Norwich and C.S. Lewis, together with the beauties of nature, the grandeur of the cosmos and great works of art, music and literature, including the ever-popular *Lord of the Rings* , open windows to eternity and give us glimpses of the *Mysterium T remendum* . But our rituals are likewise full of windows to eternity, and are proper subjects for contemplative meditation. The title of our conference today is *In the Middle Chamber* – that Chamber with its ever-open door, emblematic of the heart in which we come face to face with the sacred name of God, symbolic of the very source and ground of our whole being.

A contemporary Hindu mystic, Brahma Kumari Jayanti, affirms that our true selves are made in the image and likeness of our Creator and that our original traits are Love, Wisdom, Peace, Purity and Bliss. In her book '*God's Healing Power* ' she emphasises the importance of meditation as a way of opening windows to eternity, to see what Zen Buddhists call 'our original face before we were born'; that is, to see our true eternal natures. She explains how meditation can lead to a feeling of the soul as a being of light, travelling in a state of bliss to the realms of infinite light and love and adds that, through such experiences, 'I become more of a human <u>being</u> again, not just a human doing!' Sister Jayanti's thoughts bear a remarkable similarity to those of Julian of Norwich who remarked that the Great Architect ' … has made man's soul as fair, as good, as precious a creature as He could make it and is therefore wholly pleased … in every soul there is a divine will that never consented to sin nor ever shall.' Both Julian and Sister Jayanti therefore emphasise that we are not loved by our Creator for what we do, but for what we are.

Thus, it is in the Middle Chamber, the centre of our true beings, that we receive our reward, the absolute and unconditional Love of our Great Architect, without scruple or diffidence. Without scruple well knowing we are justly entitled to such love because of what we are – made by Him in His own image and likeness as human beings rather than mere 'human doings'. Without diffidence because of the utter trust we place in Him.

At his initiation, a candidate is informed that Masonry possesses great and invaluable privileges. May I suggest that these refer to the many windows to eternity that our Order is able to open to us – windows to that quintessence of ineffability beyond the mysterious veil or 'cloud of unknowing', windows to our true eternal home. Every brother should ask himself whether it is these great and invaluable privileges that are his '*raison d'être* ' for being in the Craft, or whether he hankers after honours, status, that feeling of being in an exclusive inner ring – all those <u>trappings</u>, in the very sense of that word, that keep us in the dark. Our First Degree Tracing Board depicts a ladder between earth and Heaven. Faith enables us to ascend the first step and Hope the second but 'the third and last, being Charity, comprehends the whole, and the Mason who is possessed of this virtue in its most ample sense – that is, through living a life based on our three grand principles of brotherly love, relief of suffering and truth – may justly have been deemed to have attained the summit of his profession; figuratively speaking, an Ethereal Mansion veiled from mortal eyes by the starry firmament.'

In fine, our Masonic Art and Craft can inspire us with a sense of the transcendence of eternity and give us glimpses of the real life in the spirit, for which our sojourn on earth is a mere preparation. At the same time, it reveals to us the immanence of eternity, the sense that we are for ever enfolded by the Absolute who is only hidden from us by the brightness of Light. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer remarked, 'the Beyond is in the midst of our everyday lives.' I would like to conclude with the final words of a book entitled '*The Way of the White Clo uds*' by Lama Anagarika Govinda, which tells of fellow-pilgrims – or could they be brothers in Freemasonry? – who journey together along the river of life.

> 'A wave of warm love broke from their hearts and enveloped their fellow-pilgrims and all that lives, until they felt as open and free as the sky. Their spiritual path and the river had become one and flowed towards the setting sun, into which it seemed to merge. And the radiance of the Waters of Life mingled with the radiance of the Sun of Enlightenment; and it seemed as if the lonely mountain of individual liberation received its glory only from the reflected light that emanated from the river and the setting sun into which it flowed. And the radiance of the setting sun was filled with innumerable Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; all those who had gone before and all those who were still to come – because it is the realm where time is extinguished and past and future are one with the eternal present. Therefore the setting sun, towards which the river flows, will never set, and the radiance will never be extinguished for those who travel along the river.'