STOICS

September 8, 2003

My Brothers,

I thought it would be a good idea to jump-start our Masonic Education by a short discussion of Masonic philosophy. Now, I can’t do that in the one or two minutes I target for these talks, but since you’ve had the whole summer off, I’ll use a couple of extra minutes from the summer for some “august” remarks.

In past sessions I’ve opened up some of the meanings of Masonic symbols and allegorical stories. That seems to me, now, to be a bit like opening a jigsaw puzzle box and picking up individual pieces and marveling at the pretty colors and unusual shapes. It is useful and interesting, but it has to miss any larger picture.

You might recall the comments about Nature I gave last April. In that discussion I read the opening sentence of the Declaration of Independence, written in part by Mason Benjamin Franklin, which cited the laws of Nature and Nature’s God as justifying the Declaration. And, I pointed out the direct connection to Masonic ritual wherein we refer to Nature and that “Great Book of Revelation”, or in other words, as Franklin said, the laws of Nature and Nature’s God.

I wondered to myself - Where did this dual concept of Nature and God come from and why was it expressed this way in Masonry? Here was another puzzle piece to look at. It is not specifically Judeo-Christian; Judeo-Christian belief treats Nature as being subordinate to Divine law, not co-equal. So there’s no direct line there. It has a little bit of the eastern or oriental flavor to it, but the eastern religious philosophies focus on the individual, not the GAOTU or Nature. So, it doesn’t seem to be current religious philosophy.

I fell into the ‘maybes’. Maybe it was something that ‘just’ evolved in Masonic ritual. But that doesn’t ‘just’ happen in Masonry - we have Landmarks of the Craft that forbid that kind of arbitrary change. We might forget what something means but we don’t make major changes to ritual, and this kind of thing is major. So, it must have been intentional, but why?, and from where? And the last ‘maybe’ I came up with was that maybe it was a philosophy rooted more deeply in time. And there I sat with a big mental, “Humph!”, until this summer.

[By the way, that was July’s time I just used. Now I’ll continue with August’s time.]

I was reading “The Nature of the Gods” by Cicero, a Roman who lived at the time of Julius Caesar (or about 2,000 years ago). This book was a dialogue, in argument form, that expressed the differences among the main ancient Greek religious philosophies - Epicureanism, Stoicism, and the Academy - especially as they addressed the Divine, Nature, and Man. Now Brothers, I want you to know I’d much rather be reading a good murder mystery or spy thriller, but sometimes you read what’s on hand. And, what do you know? When I read the Stoic arguments, some bells starting ringing.

The Stoic philosophy originated around 300 BC with a man named Zeno who came from Asia-Minor, the far eastern part of the greater Greek empire. We’ve all heard the expression, “To be stoic in the face of adversity”, or “to keep a stiff upper lip” and other sayings like that. Well, this is the source. Zeno always stood next to a particular column in the agora, or meeting place, of Athens. The Greek word for column is ‘stoa’. His followers, gathered around the column, or stoa, became known as Stoics.

The Stoic philosophy taught that man’s greatest need was to be able to cope with sorrow, disappointment, and misfortune - and the way to attain this ability was through virtuous living according to man’s rational nature. The Stoics also believed in Divine Providence, and had a dual concept of what that meant - it was understanding the laws of Nature which determine everything, and believing in a Deity’s loving care for the needs of mankind. In other words, belief in the laws of Nature and Nature’s God and virtuous, rational living to achieve peace of mind. - Sounds familiar?

[We have now used August’s time, so let’s finish with September’s.] Now it began to make sense. At the time of the Masonic revival in the early 1700s, the educated in Europe and greater England were in the throes of “The Enlightenment”. One of the key features of this ‘enlightenment’ was a re-awakening to the Greek philosophies (after about 1500 years of pretty rigid Christian theosophical dogma). The Greek philosophy popularly embraced at that time was the Stoic - and in the Stoic philosophy, the principal ‘virtues’ were the ones formulated around 500 BC. In Masonry, we call them the four Cardinal Virtues - Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice.

Remember ‘Fortitude’? It is that strength of character or mind whereby we are enabled to undergo any pain, peril, or danger when deemed prudentially expedient. Very Stoic. Very Rational. And in a flash I began to see the outline of the Masonic jigsaw puzzle and got a quick look at the picture on the box.

What do Masons most desire? - Light. Throughout the Lecture of the Entered Apprentice Degree, Masonry’s ‘light’ teaches a philosophy of personal behavior, leading to Wisdom. So, here’s the connection in Masonic philosophy: - According to Lecture, a Lodge is metaphorically said to supported by three great pillars (or columns, or stoa) denominated Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty.

Now, visualize this metaphor - As the pillar of Wisdom is to the Lodge, so is the column of Stoic philosophy to Masonry. That’s the outline of the puzzle; it is the Masonic Framework of Philosophy.

I’ll end with this thought - The next time you hear the Lecture of the Entered Apprentice Degree, listen to the voices underneath the Lecture - Stoic voices from thousands of years away echoing off one column, in one ancient city - right to you.

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