

Symbols

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Few people realise, amid the hurry and scurry of modern existence, how large a part symbolism plays in the life of every person. To give you a topical illustration, sixty two years ago, on the 2nd of June 1953, Queen Elizabeth was crowned. The solemn crowning of England's young Queen means much, much more than the simple circling of her head with a glittering crown; it is symbolic of greater things than ordinary citizens realise. Such ceremonies date back long before recorded history, and even as each solemn act has its own special meaning, understood by few, so has symbolism in general, and Masonic symbolism in particular, a great unrealised background, and a world of meaning often lies behind each simple act or movement. Brother B.C. Portsmouth, of Victoria Park Lodge No. 48, Western Australia said "*So very many of our Masonic signs and symbols have come down to us through almost uncounted generations that it is quite understandable how sometimes the symbol has been mistaken for the original fact.*"

In the days when Egypt was great in mind-power, the people of Egypt were divided into three kinds, divided more by mental attainment and capacity than by possessions or lineage. First, there were the "common" people, and I must point out that the meaning of this word in modern understanding is somewhat different from its meaning in those far-off days. Today, when we call someone "common", we mean vulgar or rough, but in those days, the "common" people were simply the thousands of normal, uneducated labourers. The second division was the "educated" group, and, as the priests were almost the only people capable of giving instruction, education was almost wholly confined to priest-families, and noble-families, or protégés of either. The third group, very small in number, comprised those who sought inner meanings, and who cultivated their mind-senses, thus taking education a step further.

Thus, the religion of those days could be viewed from three quite different angles. The "common" man (even as today in many countries still) obeyed the orders of his superiors, and was not expected to think for himself, indeed was scarcely capable of so doing. He could neither read nor write nor figure and his knowledge was practically always confined to the "tricks" of whatever trade he was bound to, whether vine-growing, stone-masonry, household tasks, or labouring on a noble's estate. The beliefs of the "common" man, therefore, had to be inculcated entirely by spoken word or by picture - there is no alternative where there is no education! Religious instruction, also, had to be by symbol. Such a man could be taught, by the spoken word, that the Maker of All, the Great Architect who planned and made the Sun and Moon, the Stars, the Wind and the Rain, and all the other great forces of Nature, was the Great RA - but how, if he knew not the arts of reading and writing, was it possible to express "Maker of...." in picture? The sun symbol, therefore, among the "common" people, became the symbol of RA, the Lord of All - the Sacred Symbol. In generations when knowledge was not disseminated to the common people, it can readily be understood that the Sacred Symbol, the sign of RA, would become distorted in meaning - and sun-worshippers could easily be the result (instead of RA - worshippers, with the sun for their symbol).

The second section of people, those who sought, or were given, education by right of birth, were taught more than were the common people. The ordinary "Picture" language, which was all that the simple peasant could understand, was interpreted and enlarged upon to the man who sought education. He was taught to fashion the accepted symbols, and to express his thoughts in these and other symbols. His mind began to function in a more orderly fashion, as he was taught to count (in numbers far exceeding his own fingers and toes, which was the ultimate accuracy of most ordinary men, to make calculations mentally (without the aid of sticks and stones and counters), and to think originally! The people who belonged to this section knew symbols for what they were. POINTERS TO UNDERSTANDING - not the whole belief! In the unenlightened ages, the common folk would not even know the meaning of the symbols - living and procreating were almost their sole interests - while the "educated" would retain simply the "surface" knowledge, learning, in their childhood, to fashion the symbols and characters, but knowing, and caring, little of their meanings. Thus would the characters be handed down, generation after generation, with less and less understanding, if the priesthood were darkened and uncaring to teach and to know of the Light.

Then the third section consisted of the higher ranks of the Priesthood. In the time when the Light of RA burned brightly, the young men were diligently taught the meanings and the import of the symbolic language. Their work was then to instruct the common people, to bring to them a simple understanding of the God who made the Sun and the Moon - and who also made them! The older Priests were themselves learners in the School of Wisdom, which has, throughout all the ages, entailed a voluntary search, and a mental understanding. As today, in Masonic Lodges and ceremonies, some priests became expert in ritual and its meticulous observance - others sought power through high office - while the few cared nought for office or ceremonial, merely accepting it as a duty, but sought the deeper meaning and the sacred wisdom behind the Ritual and behind the Symbol.

So, in those far-off days when Egypt was mind-great, the Light shone brightly and clearly for the few (in the knowledge and sincere seeking of years). It was disseminated in a golden glow to the younger men of the priesthood and the nobility - and Egypt's thousands of peasant families knew the sign of the Sun to be His symbol - the Sun was one of His creations, not the object to be worshipped!

Even as today, the deeper meaning was only given to the few, and every man had to learn to seek for himself. Instruction and knowledge were there on the higher levels, for those who were fitted to learn, but the way was hard! The Teachers were trained to

use their mental eyes and ears; their eyes searched for the symbols of guidance; their ears listened for the word. And if it came not, they knew that the seeker was not ready for further enlightenment. Every teacher knew the light in his soul and innermost being, through a lifetime of seeking and training, and he knew RA, the Most High, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, the Great Architect of the Universe, and Holy was His Name. In our ceremonies, a word is given to initiates, so that fellow-seekers may recognise him as a Brother. Signs and tokens and symbols are revealed to him, as he progresses along the Masonic path. Once these signs and symbols were revealed mentally, and the ability to receive them mentally, was shown, the candidate was ready for advancement. So it is, even today, in certain sects in America (not Masonic sects, but groups vowed to mental, spiritual and psychic study). Our Masonic Ritual shows no signs of such a custom; we have only the symbols left!

Symbols! - everyday life is full of symbols, and so many people never manage to get past them. They gaze at the symbols, as at the shining images in a sacred building. Even today, in many churches of Christendom, the language of imagery is largely used. Unobservant and ignorant people think that the worshippers worship these sacred images, but the statues, large or tiny, are only symbols for the person, or persons, they represent. The most ancient races of whom there are any records, made these records almost entirely in the language of symbolism. The early statuary of such lands as Egypt and Assyria, was an attempt to give shape to the imaginations of the potters. The sculptors of those, and even earlier times, were really "thinking aloud". Only a strong imagination, in these modern days, can help us to understand the symbolism which the sculpture of Ancient Egypt grew to be. The sculptors created magnificent forms to represent the gods which their more knowledgeable and racially - advanced leaders conceived as ruling the world, and in the making and setting - up of those symbols, they sought to propitiate the great god-beings. To guide them, they built up through the centuries, a definite and powerful religion comprising simply the few primary ideas: the consciousness of life; the certainty and mystery of death; the fear of the unknown; and, the inner knowledge of the existence of some great person or force. The set of rules or symbols, which became the governing code of their lives, helped them to face with courage and calmness the inevitable "death" and the unknown (or almost unknown) hereafter.

In later centuries, the statuary which is now described as "Egyptian Art" was really born. Representation of long-dead heroes and kings, and their glorified deeds, show, in their largeness of spirit, and their grandeur of symbolism, the central idea of that long-dead race. ENDURINGNESS seems to be this idea - hugeness - calmness - and enduringness! The calm, weather-worn features of the Sphinx, seem to personify this idea - colossal symbols in stone of the mysterious, all-powerful, all-pervading Architect of the Universe! The 150 ft. long, 70 ft. high, portrayal of this man-headed-lion symbol, the mighty Sphinx near the Great Pyramid at Giza, gazes out upon the "lone and level sands" with unutterable calmness, the inscrutability, and the enduringness, of the Creator-God.

Those who have studied art through the centuries, say that mind's expression seems to show a definite trend from symbolism to realism, from allegory to reality, and they say that this expression is making "full circle", in the queer "realistic" and "futuristic" art of the present day. These art-studiers, who claim to understand this modern trend in decoration and design, say that it is pure imagery. If that is so, then art must surely be at the beginning of a new cycle - the period of formless, unreal striving after expression - the symbolism of our ancient forefathers. To return to everyday thought, the average man hardly realises how much of modern life is symbolic!

The symbolism and imagery of the various Churches is simply reminding, by sight instead of word, of Christ and His mission in life on earth. We build great war memorials, whether stone monuments or hospital buildings, as a symbol that the dead are not forgotten! We say: "At the going down of the sun ... we will remember them", on Remembrance Day, and at other times. Our marble-laden cemeteries, and our shrines of remembrance, all carry on the same idea.

Does the bereaved father really imagine that the marble effigy in the churchyard is his beloved child? Of course not. Does he really imagine that the placing of that tombstone there will affect the wee babe he lost? Of course he does not - but the symbolism is there - the remembrance and the love of those who are left! We use symbolism every day of our lives -every time we look at the calendar or write the date at the head of a letter! Today's date - 7th April 2015 - as we write it, we are, in symbol, paying tribute to the memory of the Master Jesus, born, we are taught, 2,015 years ago. The dollar sign, the question mark symbols are so much second nature to most of us, that they are almost part of the language, the inverted commas denoting speech, the + and symbols of the phonetic alphabet, the written language of music. (itself a series of symbols to represent vibrational sounds). Yes, when you take time to consider, life today is full of symbols!

Similarly, the path of the Mason is full of symbols - signs, tokens, words, gestures, knocks, tools, the furniture and accoutrements of a Lodge, the clothing and adornments of a Mason - and every symbol has a meaning! As with the things of Matter, so with the things of Mind, and so also with the things of our beloved Craft - most things have a deeper meaning, but unless you dig for it, you will never find it. May I leave with you this thought - DO NOT BE CONTENT WITH LIFE'S SYMBOLS! Strive to get behind the allegory and the parable and the emblem - delve into the deeper meanings - for he who is content with the symbol, can never rise above it, and misses all the real beauty and glory of Life.