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Alchemy and Freemasonry – The Missing Link

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Member and Guests.

It is indeed an honour to be asked to speak to such a distinguished group of fellow Masons and I thank Illustrious Brother Cam Goodman and Illustrious Brother Doug Crawford for fording me the opportunity.

Talk about preaching to the choir. I am humbled by the wealth of Masonic knowledge and experience here this evening. I feel more like the choir boy trying to preach to the minister.

Looking around the room I recognize that we have Rosicrucians amongst us, York rite masons, Blue lodge masons, and who knows, perhaps even an alchemist or two in our midst. What we have in common is that we all share the unforgettable experience of becoming 32 degree Scottish Rite Masons. Some of you I'm sure also share my fascination with the history and deeper meanings of the rite, and ask yourself as I do, is there something more we can learn?

I spent five years at a boarding school in Newmarket which some of you may have heard of called Pickering College. Pickering was founded in 1842 by the Quakers, a well known if perhaps not well understood group who came to North America to be free of religious prosecution. At our school there was a Sunday evening chapel service which required everyone's attendance regardless of the fact that our student body was composed of Jewish, Islamics, and Christians. The service was interdenominational to say the least and the focal point of the evening was always the reading of some profound words written by a great thinker or philosopher. Then the entire room went completely silent for a period of 5 minutes or more and we were asked, in the Quaker tradition, to think on those things. I suppose that tradition learned at Pickering College so many years ago actually prepared me for this mysterious journey of Masonry. As I explore the profound lessons taught in this fellowship of religious toleration, I continue to think on these things.

My talk tonight is titled “Alchemy and Freemasonry – the missing link”. When trying to explain our origins, we as masons are usually in one of two main camps, those who believe Freemasonry has its roots in the medieval masons’ guilds of Europe or those of more pragmatic bent who point to only its more obvious written history in the early 1700s. Some historians like to take the masons’ guilds even further back to the famous Knights Templar, despite the lapses in history between the persecution and abolition of the Templars in 1307 and the latter day lodges of our order. That missing period of time, that missing link, seems to become a little clearer when we study the esoteric field of alchemy. Indeed the story of alchemy is actually not about a few hundred years during the middle ages. It spans at least four thousands of years up to and including the practice of alchemy today. Throughout these ages a continuous message has been passed on from adept to adept, through civilizations and societies, and it is a message that has survived beyond the religious beliefs of every era. So in a way, the missing link is actually a complete chain that holds together the fabric of history, albeit a chain forged for the most part in esoteric secrecy for the understanding of a select few.

Unlike the message we are taught that we are speculative Masons, true alchemy is both operative and speculative. Founded in the belief that everything in the cosmos is formed from a quintessence, much like minute seed like particles, operatively alchemists believed that it was possible to transmute baser elements to more advanced substances. Gold and silver were considered the most noble and perfect of all, while all other metals were thought to be in a state of progress towards this perfection. Speculatively, alchemists also believed that by studying the truths of these universal relationships it was possible to enable longevity, then immortality, and finally redemption. The operative part of alchemy was the study of the combinations of the three basic chemicals which were mercury, sulphur and salt. The esoteric, speculatively alchemist knew these also represented spirit, soul and body respectively. The three basic ingredients were subject to the four elements of earth, air, fire and water.

The ultimate quest or great work of alchemy was known as magnum opus and the final goal was the production of the Philosopher's Stone for transmuting base metals, and the Elixir of Life for immortality and spiritual fulfillment. Over and over again the great alchemists of every age taught that it was impossible to perform the lesser alchemy in the test tube and retort until one had undergone the transmutation of his soul.

This transmutation of the soul is a universal mystery that has been perpetuated in every major religion since the origin of alchemy. Osiris died in the coffin prepared by Typhon, Christina died on the banks of the Ganges, Orpheus died on the banks of the river Hebros, Hiram died at the west gate, Jesus died on the cross. We are all familiar with the biblical teaching: "unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God". In alchemy it is taught that "without putrefaction, the word used for death or burning, the great work cannot be accomplished". The message is always the same that it is necessary to die in order to be reborn into the knowledge of the oneness with our creator. Canadian born manly p. Hall, one of the most prolific writers and knowledgeable authorities on esoteric studies, said in his "origins of masonry" that all religions stem from a universal truth, retold to suit the time and place by great teachers such as Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha and others." Hall, had a strong conviction that that truth was alchemical in origin.

The technical details of this complicated philosophy of alchemy are beyond the scope of this talk. Great scholars have dedicated their lives to understanding alchemy and I least of all can explain it in twenty minutes. What I thought would be most interesting tonight is if you allow me to explain a few of the basic building blocks of alchemy and as I do you will inevitably start to see some similarities to our fraternity. Symbols will be identified that are the foundation of alchemy and that you will recognize are also the foundations of Freemasonry and Scottish Rite.

Although we know that some forms of alchemy can be traced to China and India, the origins of the work that influences us today is attributed to

Hermes Trismegistus. This figure has variously been called Thoth by the Egyptians, Hermes by the Greeks, with other references to the god Mercury.

Whether or not Hermes Trismegistus actually was a living person or himself a symbol, the name became synonymous with writing, knowledge and magic. The famous saying “as above, so below” is attributed to Hermes not directly to the bible as some might infer. His emerald tablet writings are considered the first recorded explanations of the alchemical process. Today we still use the terminology of a “hermetic seal” to describe something airtight, and the practice of Hermeticism is a belief in one god or unity from which all religions trace. Not so very different than the tolerant approach we accept as one of the founding principles of masonry.

Another major influence in the evolution of alchemy came with the work of the great Pythagorus. His discoveries of the importance of geometry and mathematics became the foundations of not only geometry, but his belief in the sacredness of certain numbers led to the study of the Kaballa and numerology. Because alphabetic symbols preceded the numbers, Kaballa was founded in the belief that every letter of the Hebrew alphabet could also represent a number, thereby sacred words had an equivalent sacred number.

Pythagorus was especially influenced by the triangle and the importance of its various relationships. His Pythagorean Tetractys, a three sided triangle composed of ten dots with one on top, then two, three and four dots on the bottom. The four rows numbers added to ten, an important number in itself, and he used the Tetractys to represent the four elements of fire, air, water and earth – also alchemical foundation blocks. You see the ten dots in triangular Tetractys in several of our rite degrees.

The three sides to an equilateral triangle came to represent the three essential attributes of god. Pythagoras's discoveries led to a whole language of geometric symbols which philosophers used to substitute for

their religious beliefs and so limit them to those who had the gnosis or knowledge of their true meaning.

The importance of the number three was also a key to alchemy. The sun with the seven known planets symbolically represented the foundation metals of alchemy and the three symbols of the Sun, the Moon and Mercury were held in highest regard. The Sun was considered masculine, the Moon feminine, and Mercury as the water that united them. This duality is a common teaching in all the great religions of the world.

We see the number three occurring in Freemasonry over and over again. In the candidates first degree the three lesser lights of Masonry are explained in purely alchemical terms as I have just stated. They are the Sun to rule the day, the Moon to rule the night, and the Master to rule, (or alchemically speaking – unite his lodge). In the lecture to an entered apprentice we are taught that three pillars support our lodges, wisdom, strength, and beauty. There are but three who rule a lodge and three main rungs of faith, hope, and charity on Jacob's ladder. The furniture of a lodge consists of three main pieces, the volume of the sacred law, the square and the compasses. Even the compasses of our Masonic symbol are spread open to 60 degrees because that is the angle formed on each point of an equilateral triangle. I found it fascinating to note that the ancient alchemical symbol for the Sun is a circle with a point in the center. How could the ancients describe the Sun in the center and the circle like an orbit around it, when the knowledge of that relationship was supposedly not even discovered until the age of Galileo?. And of course again in Masonry we see the direct link to this symbol in the opening of our third degree when asked where we hope to find the genuine secrets of a master mason. The fact that we say the centre, being that point within a circle from which every part of the circumference is equal distance, is I think more than just a coincidental repetition of the much earlier alchemical references to the sun.

We have been taught that the Scottish Rite is an extension of the knowledge we are first exposed to on entering freemasonry. Indeed it is, but its origins

are clouded in the mists of an older organization known as the Rosicrucians and beyond. The path of the alchemical teachings seem to trace from at least early Egyptian times, through the Sufi and Druze of the middle east to the Templars during the crusades, and then from them throughout Europe . In the early 1600s Christian Rosenkreuz was said to be the source of some mysterious manifestos which promoted a brotherhood of mystic-philosopher-doctors who believed in a universal reformation of mankind. This was a more protestant view much opposed to the dogma and control of Roman Catholicism. Both operatively and speculatively, the Rosicrucians seem to share many of the beliefs and practices of that long line of alchemists. Although Rosicrucians never claimed to turn lead to gold, they ritually used chemical representations of speculative alchemy for the threefold transmutation of the soul, the threefold spirit and the threefold body of the human being in their path of initiation. Many of the earliest founders of masonry were confirmed or suspected Rosicrusians.

I think it is important to remember the political context of any alchemical practices performed or spiritually believed up to and including the Rosicrusians and then Freemasons. As I mentioned in a recent article I wrote, most people don't realize that until the 1600s it was against the law for any lay person to own a bible, it was the sole right and property of the church. This offense could be punished by public torture, confiscation of property and even death. Whole countries and societies were persecuted and destroyed in the name of Christianity, so it is understandable that any free thinking belief in something more universal and tolerant had to be veiled in a system of allegory and symbols.

As we look further into Scottish Rite we see these alchemical symbols repeated over and over again. In the fourth degree of the secret master the apron colours of black and white signifies the duality of light and dark, good and evil. The all seeing eye depicted on the apron is in the form of a sun, again a referral to the central point of the sun in alchemy and the importance of true knowledge. The fourth degree jewel is engraved with the letter "z" which is the first letter of the password, but in the Hebrew

numerology of the Kabbala also represents the value of 7, a number well known to Masons.

In the sixth degree of Intimate Secretary we see a strikingly direct reference to alchemy. The jewel is composed of three inverted triangles inside a larger triangle which I previously mentioned is the symbol seen in the ten points of the Pythagorean Tetractys. These three inverted triangles are engraved with the three ancient alchemy symbols of the sun, the moon, and mercury. They are right there for us to view.

Another alchemical symbol called an enneagram is found on the apron of the 8th degree Intendant of the Building. An enneagram was a nine pointed star. In alchemy this symbol represented the state of completeness.

In the ninth and tenth degrees we see many more symbols. The 5 pointed star found on the 9th degree was important to alchemists because it was felt to represent the four elements of earth, air, fire and water combined with the fifth element or that quintessence I mentioned earlier that was the initial seed of creation. In both degrees the rosette appears. In alchemy the rose was a symbol of completion, attainment, and perfection and was also an emblem of regeneration, one of the steps in the transmutation process. Interestingly one of the original symbols of the Rosicrusians was a stylized rose crucified on a cross.

In our twelfth degree of master architect we are introduced to the six pointed star sometimes called the seal of Solomon. Most people nowadays recognize this symbol as part of the flag of Israel and assume that it is of Jewish origin. In fact alchemists used the upright triangle to represent "as above" and the downward pointing triangle to mean "so below". When overlaid they form the six pointed symbol. The star was not part of Jewish or Hebrew tradition at all, but it did become a popular decorative element during the building of the great cathedrals by the Knights Templar. Perhaps the Templars were trying to indicate that they understood the meaning of the alchemical expression.

Some of the most apparent symbols of alchemy appear in our 18th degree Knight Rose Croix. Here we find the jewel displays a pelican feeding its young by pecking at its own breast for meat. This selfless act is representative of philanthropy and sacrifice for the greater good, but if you are an alchemist you see it as the esoteric sacrifice of the inner soul to develop the spiritual embryo within. Also interesting to note is the fact that a pelican is also the name of a two tiered glass distilling apparatus used in all transmutations in alchemy. Here again on this side of the jewel is the Rosicrucian symbol of a rose crucified on a red cross.

On the opposite side of the jewel is found an eagle which was also the symbol of the Egyptian sun god Amun-Ra, so another reference to the sun in our Masonic ritual. Both these birds are cast in silver on the gold jewel, again considered the two most pristine metals in alchemy.

Further examples are especially apparent in the degree of the Knight of the Sun or Prince Adept, and of course the summary of all the lessons which are found in the later consistory degrees. But if we leave these examples at this point, I think by now that it can be agreed there is alchemical symbolism throughout the rituals of Scottish Rite and Masonry. The key is recognizing those symbols and choosing to interpret them in the way in which alchemists since Hermes Trismegistus had intended. The morals and principles are still there and valid, but the symbols then take on a further meaning when looked at from an alchemical point of view.

As mentioned, religions could not tolerate the affront to their divine power that alchemical teachings presented, nor could kings and monarchs, who viewed alchemists as more powerful than themselves. In many countries the practice of alchemy was banned for these reasons and so the message had to go underground to resurface in a system of symbols and veiled allegory. We must also remember that freemasonry and the Scottish Rite have evolved over the centuries because of differences of interpretation, differences in language and translation, and even attempts to make the rituals themselves more appealing and understandable to a larger number

of aspirants. Though many of the symbols before us are not completely understood any longer the symbolism is still there if we have the knowledge and above all the desire to see the light.

Thank you for your attention tonight. I hope in some small way it has been illuminating for you and empowers you more on your own Masonic paths. And perhaps, as the Quakers taught me, you will think on these things.