

I was unable to attend the official visit for Mount Zion Lodge on Nov. 1st due to the death of my mother. Since then on January 3, 2012 I attended a regular meeting of Mount Zion Lodge and delivered the following paper on Masonic Education.

Symbolism of Directions

Mount Zion Lodge – January 3, 2012

In my youth I often heard the expression “go west young man.” I interpreted this to mean that there were many opportunities for those who travelled west in Canada. If you travel west then obviously you are coming from the East. The expression “go west young man” may have had its roots in Masonry or even in primitive men who circumambulated from East to West via South.

Since the beginning of time the directions of the compass have had a symbolic meaning to humans. Some of the symbols used in Freemasonry date back as far as 70,000 years to the first carvings known to have been made by man. We realize that symbols speak to us at a level far deeper than writing. Consequently it is not surprising that our ancient brethren adopted certain practices in their Masonic travels within the lodge room. Currently we as Masons adhere to those practices and enjoy the meaning given to circumambulating the lodge and to the symbolic directions found in the compass.

The North is a “place of darkness” and symbolic of ignorance. North-east is the place midway between darkness of the North and the light of the East. The East is where the sun “rises to open and adorn the day” and is a symbol of light and therefore of knowledge. South, where the sun is at its meridian is symbolic of rest and refreshment. West, where the sun sets, is symbolic of the control with the Master of the lodge and the Senior Warden. There is also the symbolism in that the East, represents Wisdom; the West, Strength; and the South, Beauty.

We move about the lodge room in a pattern referred to as circumambulating. “Walking around; encircling; Latin *circum*, around, *ambulare*, to walk, to go. Hence to walk completely around a central point.” We commonly refer to this as perambulating which actually refers to walking through and not necessarily circling. It was common for primitive men to walk in circular patterns going from East to West via the South and returning to the East by the North. It has been suggested that this keeps the right hand closest to the altar. Going clockwise or turning to the right may also be a symbol of building up. In a Masonic memorial service the direction of circumambulation is counter clockwise or turning to the left. I’m told that going in an anticlockwise pattern that this symbolizes the unwinding of life and the end of the journey of life.

In a Masonic Lodge the expectation is that all perambulations will be circular and clockwise. Rarely do Masons turn left. Masons at work and candidates should always move about the lodge room in a clockwise fashion. When Master Masons return to the lodge room following the

Installation of the Worshipful Master they greet him by circumambulating around the lodge room in a clockwise pattern. It is the same when the Fellow Craft and the Entered Apprentice Masons return to the lodge room following the Installation ceremony they also circumambulate to the right. Similarly Grand Lodge officers will circumambulate to the right at the time of consecration of a lodge.

Masons as individuals and in groups such as at the time of Installation and Investiture, move about the lodge room from East to West via the South and return to the East by way of the North which is in a clockwise or turning to the right pattern.

Tresner indicates that circumambulating is a very ancient symbol, which can be traced to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Going in a clockwise fashion represents a journey undertaken for spiritual purposes. The Israelites used it as a blessing of the Temple of Solomon as well as the site of the Tabernacle during the wandering in the wilderness. For the Entered Apprentice it symbolises the journey of his life as a day of his life. Tresner goes on to indicate that spirituality of circumambulating to the right may have come from birds flying clockwise as they ascend into the sky. Similarly when humans are lost in a forest they usually circle to the right.

Coil indicates that the Hindus of the East, the Druids of the West and the Christians all have circumambulated as the sun is seen traveling through the sky. He suggests that a Mason moving in a clockwise, circulatory route is by default. He explains it by saying that you have a choice of standing still or moving. If you move or walk and go in a straight line you will soon be out of the room. If you go around in the room you have two choices and Masons like primitive men have chosen the clockwise pattern of circumambulating.

Candidates in all degrees enter the lodge by the symbolic North-west corner or if they should enter from some other side of the lodge they are then taken directly to the Northwest angle of the lodge. They then travel across the symbolic North, known as the place of darkness which is universally and Masonically known as the symbol of ignorance. Moore indicates that few people are buried on the North side of churches. The North was the side with the least light and was reserved in earlier times for suicides and unbaptized children. The North is also reserved for the Entered Apprentice to sit as it is the place of least light.

It is interesting to note that the sun travels in our sky north to the level of $23\frac{1}{2}$ degrees latitude at the time of the summer solstice. Jerusalem is at the 31 degrees latitude and most of the countries in Europe where Masonry developed are also North of the $23\frac{1}{2}$ degrees latitude. The travels of the sun would then appear to be East to West via the South. They never experienced the sun shining on a North wall or coming through a North facing window. This would explain why the North is considered the direction of darkness. It might have been different had Masonry been founded South of the equator.

After the Masonic candidate travels across the North he arrives at the Northeast angle of the Lodge. This is the point midway between darkness of the North and the brilliance of the East. Ancient builders chose this as the point of beginning, a spot to mark a birth and a commencement

of a new structure. It is believed that those who build have left the “darkness” in which there is no building, and have progressed far enough towards “light” to lay a foundation stone. Consequently, the Northeast corner of a building became the site for the laying of the cornerstone. The Northeast corner became known as the symbol of beginning and also of sacrifice. To-day it is common for builders to place current social information in a time capsule and place them in the cornerstone. Grand Lodges are also available to lay the cornerstone of public buildings.

The Entered Apprentice Mason who stands at the Northeast angle of the lodge is the symbolic cornerstone of the lodge of the future. From the foundation laid during his initiation it is hoped that he will “raise a superstructure perfect in its parts and honourable to the builder.”

From the Northeast angle of the lodge the Candidate now travels across the East. The rising sun in the East appears to, open and enliven the day by driving away the darkness of night. As the sun rises in the early morning giving the many dew drops a diamond like appearance, there is tremendous excitement in the air. Everything is waking up. Birds are singing and animals are on the move in search of food. Early morning gives such a feeling of renewal. It is very understandable why our ancient brethren gave so much credit to the rising of the sun each morning.

The East is the seat of the Worshipful Master of the lodge and the Grand Master of the jurisdiction. The brethren “approach the East in search of light” which is a reference to searching for knowledge, both temporal and spiritual. “Light, more light, further light” has a meaning of “knowledge, more knowledge, further knowledge.” It is believed that learning originated in the East and spread to the West. The Tabernacle in the wilderness was erected so that it faced the East and the Temple of Solomon was oriented due East and West. It was standard to have churches oriented to face the East and it is common to have human bodies buried with their feet to the East.

The candidate now travels from the Southeast angle of the lodge along the symbolic south. This is the side of the lodge that would consistently receive the most light throughout the day. As we are north of the 23 ½ degrees of latitude then the sun is in our South when it is at meridian. The sun at meridian is symbolic of rest and refreshment. The Junior Warden is stationed in the South. His duties are to call the brethren from labour to refreshment and refreshment to labour.

Now the candidate travels along the West. The West is the place where darkness begins with the setting of the sun and marks the completion of the day. The Senior Warden is situated in the West and his duty is close the lodge by command of the Worshipful Master.

The points on the compass are an important part of the symbolism in Masonry. Great quantities of information can be gleaned from one symbol and symbols have been used universally and Masonically since the beginning of time. As Saint Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – 211 A.D.) stated *“The interpretation of the symbolic kind is useful in many respects; for it leads to theology, to piety, and to show the ingenuity of the mind, the conciseness of expression, and serves to demonstrate science.”*

Masons in recognition of their ancient practices will continue to enjoy the symbolism of Masonry as they circumambulate their lodge rooms.

A Guide to Masonic Symbolism – Duncan Moore

Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia – Henry Wilson Coil

Further Light – Jim Tresner

The Lost Key – Robert Lomas

The Work – Grand Lodge

What? When? Where? Why? Who? In Freemasonry – The Masonic Service Association

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