

Self Knowledge

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Presented to the Manitoba Masonic Study Group QCCC Wednesday March 30th, 2004

Readings:

1. The First Duty, Verses 1 –14

The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises, Nikos Kazantzakis, Simon & Schuster

2. "If you take a dear look at yourself, you will find that your mind is more like a swarm of bees than like an arrow shooting straight at the goal. A swarm of bees can travel from Point A to Point B, just like an arrow, but it does so in a vague, swirling, fuzzy way. Thus we hold in our minds all kinds of shifting attitudes, many of which contradict each other. Our love is bound up with hatred, our trust with suspicion, our altruism with selfishness. Because this is so, the only dear path to God is a path of constant self-awareness. You must see through your own mask if you want to take it off."

How to Know God, Deepak Chopra, Three Rivers Press

As a Grand Lodge officer for the last four years and now your Grand Master, I have delivered many speeches on matters of interest to the Craft, on critical initiatives or an underlying philosophy of optimism and recovering the power of a few good men. I have spoken about leadership in several ways at the Leadership and the Wardens seminars. Originally I was going to talk about three kinds of Masons, again a relevant but practical topic. But this is the Quatuor Coronati, a unique and different opportunity, a group of men looking for a deeper level of knowledge and understanding of the principles of our Craft. So instead I want to take this opportunity to talk about something much more basic, something that sits at the root of everything I have done, and everything I believe.

Let me share with you an anonymous but profound quote – "Very few of us know how much we have to know in order to know how little we know."

In the Master Mason's degree we are taught that the most important knowledge a man can strive for or achieve is the knowledge of himself. Most of the great mystical traditions also preach a similar belief.

So what is this self you are supposed to come to know? And don't most mystics actually teach that ultimate knowledge is the knowledge of God? The answer to both questions is the same, and like all great spiritual truths, is a Yes and No. How do we acquire knowledge of self and/or God?

The Eastern religions teach that the way to knowledge of self and God, or alternatively to Nirvana, is through a combination of altruistic action or service to others, self-denial, and meditation and prayer. Different doctrines place varying emphasis, but they all contain these elements, as do all of the great religions to some degree.

But I want to talk first about one of the most effective and practical programs for spiritual awakening and personal positive change - the twelve step program, as originally articulated by Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Today that program has been co-opted by so many groups and so watered down it has lost much of its power. But when done properly it leads one through a life-changing process. For the record, I am qualified to speak about this program.

There are several keys to this process. Two are in Steps 4 and 5. In step 4, you do a fearless moral inventory of yourself. The Big Book explains how to do this in a manner that requires analysis of fundamental elements of your make up, to discover why you act the way you do, to discover the hidden fears and underlying resentments and sources of anger that motivate so much of your behaviour, especially the destructive or egotistical behaviour.

The fifth step is - Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. This requires that you share this inventory with a clergyman, counselor, spiritual advisor or experienced member of AA, who can give you objective feedback and help you sort out and better understand what you have discovered about yourself. Many people confuse this step with Confessional. It is not about confession. It is about self-knowledge.

Then comes step six- "Were entirely ready to have God remove all our defects of character." As one of the early saints of AA said, this is the step that separates the men from the boys. Now that I have faced myself squarely in the mirror, this is the decision to change.

The remainder of the program is direction on how to engage in altruistic service to others and to maintain regular reflection on our successes and failures, and what they reveal about our changing selves. This occurs in tandem with a program of regular meditation and prayer. With the skills learned in the earlier steps, the result is a pattern of growth and change, based upon an ever increasing knowledge of oneself.

This process parallels the Spiritual Exercise of St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, and many other spiritual programs.

But what is the point. We can all agree that if this program leads to recovery from alcoholism or other addictions, and changing people into productive citizens, it is to the benefit of the individual and society. But what about the rest of the world, if you aren't an addict what do you need self knowledge for.

For me one of the most helpful insights from Bill Wilson is the concept of instincts gone awry. We all have instinctive needs for nutrition and shelter, for security, for intimacy, sexual and otherwise, for community, for power and prestige, for acceptance and praise. And we all instinctively fear anything or anyone that will take those things away from us, that threaten our safety and security, our material well being, our loved ones, but also our sense of self worth, our social status and power. When these instincts become controlling or dominating of our behaviour or when the fears take over, we become obsessive and dysfunctional. We do not have to go to the extremes of addiction to see this. Even the healthy pursuit of these needs can become an obstacle to spiritual growth.

It is very common to see these very things creating disharmony within our Craft, as one brother's actions are seen to threaten what others hold dear, their status or influence, or just their understanding of what Freemasonry is supposed to be.

So self-knowledge is the key to understanding and improving our relationships with others and our effectiveness in the Craft, at work, in our families, and the rest of our lives. But that is only the beginning.

God is Love. God is a lot more than Love, but God is Love. If indeed man is made in the image of God, then it is in man that we find God. He is a part of each of us. To know God, then first requires that you know yourself. Only then can you find the channel that runs within you, the channel of God's love.

To put in a different way, the Love of God is resident within each of us. But it can't get out. We are dominated by instincts gone awry. Self-knowledge is the key to putting self aside and getting in touch with that inner Love

Is this easy? It simply requires the complete smashing of the ego. The drunk is lucky, booze smashes it for him.

Deepak Chopra, in his book How to Know God, describes a seven stage journey through the self, to the centre of the self, to discover the God within. He also describes how, in fact, all reality is

really only our perceptions of reality, and the true God is ultimately the God found at the centre of the self. But by self I mean the self that knows it is not a self but only a part of the river of consciousness called God.

The brilliant German theologian, Paul Tillich, in his famous sermon on Grace and Sin, described how, at those moments of greatest despair, Grace breaks through. He described the Grace of God as occurring at that moment when you know completely that you are accepted exactly as you are, by that which is greater than yourself, by the Ground-of-Being.

The Saint is the one who understands that God's Love is within him and it is his role, and God's will for him, to be partner, a co-creator with God in that Creation which is being eternally created. He does this by letting go of self and becoming at one with God, in the sense that his will is relinquished to the superior force of God's will. He becomes transparent to the love of God that is within him trying to get out. As an instrument of God's Grace, he not only lives out of the knowledge of his acceptance by that which is greater than himself, but also lives out of the knowledge that every child of God is accepted by that which is greater. Therefore he is not required to judge, but to also accept.

And it is in the midst of this acceptance that one no longer is concerned about status or wealth, influence or even ideology. For example, a British historian once described Ghandi as Britain's most dangerous foe, because there was nothing you could take from him or do to him that would deter him from his course.

I look upon Jesus as one who achieved this. As one who put aside his own needs and wants, his ego, his human self, so completely that he became transparent to the God, or the divine Love, within. Those who encountered him encountered God, or at least God's pure and profound love - the Grace of God. If you read the gospels, two things are shown most strikingly about Jesus. He had little concern for his own needs, and he accepted others, especially those who society and authority rejected. The Good Samaritan, "Throw the first stone", the woman at the well, the lepers, the tax collector. All of these stories reflect this profound truth of one who lives out that unconditional love of the Creator for all of his creatures. Is it just coincidence that in Freemasonry we often talk about the stone the builders rejected.

I must share an experience with you. I used to meditate regularly, but lately I don't seem to have time, or for that matter feel the need. But one time while meditating I began to wonder what would it be like to be like Jesus - to put self aside and know only the will of God. And for a brief moment I experienced the most inexplicable sense of bliss and joy I have ever known. It cannot be described, except to say it is the Peace that passes all understanding. It did not last long of course. I have felt no need to go back and find it again. The knowledge that it is there, it is accessible, seems to be for now sufficient, and I have other things to do.

Unfortunately, these things don't last. The ego is a remarkably resilient beast. The greatest enemy I have is my own worldly success. I am most vulnerable when I think I am winning. I am most destructive when I think that the work I am trying to focus on is more important than the child of God who requires my attention.

What does this mean for our Craft? What does it mean for me as a Mason? In my Masonic life I am constantly in contact with my brothers. And how do I treat them? How do I lead them? Only by constantly asking the questions - "what is happening within me, why am I doing what I am doing?" can I learn about myself, and get myself out of the way. If I feel angry or resentful towards another brother I have a choice. I can remain in judgment. Or I can turn in and ask myself, what is making me react this way. This is real maturity. Ultimately there is no easy path. Saints have scars. But through the scars there is a flow of love.

But this is only the very beginning of the journey. Through meditation and prayer and the study of the mystics I can plumb into the depths of my own consciousness. I can reach that point where the I ceases, and the river flows.

The journey to the East, when done well, is powerful exercise in self knowledge. You are asked to provide leadership in an all volunteer organization. You cannot demand or delegate as in the workplace, you can only encourage and motivate. Yet all eyes are on you and you are expected to deliver. This can be a remarkable learning experience. You can learn a lot about other people and what motivates them, but this is not the real learning. The really important learning is what you learn about yourself as you act and then observe how others react, or don't. Masonic Education can push us towards the goal of self knowledge and point the direction and provide helpful insights. But in the end, only by doing and watching what happens, to others and to yourself, do you truly learn.

I could talk for an hour on this. But I will cease now.

In my inaugural address, I said that if we do three things well - teach the great truths, enjoy fellowship and brotherly love, and provide relief to those who suffer, we will not only survive but we will prosper. Of these three, the toughest is the first.

Bibliography:

Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson, A. A. World Services Inc.

How to Know God, Deepak Chopra, Three Rivers Press