

DEO Talk at District Ritual Meeting The Three Elements

[Before the DEO gives this talk, the DIW or other Brother who knows the EA lecture should deliver the last few paragraphs of the EA lecture on the three elements interpreted below.]

The short section you have just heard at the end of the Entered Apprentice Degree comes after so much more memorable discourse on virtues, Lodge structure, and history and seems to be unconnected to the rest of the Degree. Moreover, this section of the Degree is rarely the subject of thought or discussion – if only because it contains material that is neither printed nor explained further in the written part of our ritual.

So why was it so important to include this information in the Degree? Answering that question is the subject of this short program.

There are three parts of this passage, one enumerating three mineral substances, one giving their symbolic meaning, and one explaining how those symbolic meanings

derive from the minerals. Three elements; three meanings; three parts: the number three is found everywhere in Masonry.

But the passage in question does more than merely emphasize the number three. Consider, for example, the color of the elements. The first is pure white; the second is one of the blackest substances known, while the third is often gray.

The first two elements should remind us of the earlier symbol of the mosaic pavement, which depicted life as checkered with good and evil, represented by black and white tiles. But at this point in the lecture, the more profound lesson being taught is that the world we live in is neither black nor white, but gray. We are being reminded that the moral issues we confront are not always simple, and the choices we face are not always black and white. Instead, the problems are often more difficult, and the decisions we make need to be more nuanced. We will face moral dilemmas in which doing the right thing for one person may result in a bad outcome for someone else, and we will

sometimes have to select the best among several less than good options.

Moreover, the association of the first two elements with the third element – which is said to be constantly employed for our use – teaches us that these moral dilemmas and choices are constantly before us and cannot be avoided. All of this sets the stage and prepares the newly initiated Mason to receive the philosophical instruction coming in the subsequent degrees that will assist him in resolving these choices and challenges.

The third of these elements, which has been described as gray is symbolically associated with service and also with fervency and zeal.

Superficially, these two traits, fervency and zeal, may seem to be synonymous, but there is an important distinction between them. Fervency is a characteristic of belief or thought, whereas zeal is correlated more with action, or at least a willingness to take action.

The assignment of fervency to the black element is a reminder that fervently can have a bad side. Fervently held beliefs can sometimes be a sign of the closed mind and fervency sometimes dances on the edge of fanaticism. Fervency may also be associated with leading others astray or goading them to action that one is not willing to take one's self.

So while we are reminded symbolically that the smelting of the most refractory metals can relate to the constructive process of extracting them from their ores and obtaining the constructive benefits from this process, we also know that fire can be a destructive force. Indeed, it often has been the weapon of choice for the "ruthless hand of ignorance." Thus, when Babylon conquered Judah and razed the Temple of Solomon, the city gates were burnt with fire, that Jerusalem could no longer be a secure place to live.

Zeal, on the other hand, being action-oriented, is connected to the gray element, and the gray color teaches that actions have consequences, including unintended and unforeseen ones. Actions that were meant to be beneficial may not turn out that way at all. Indeed, in the work of the

York and Scottish Rites we find degrees devoted very specifically to the results of misplaced zeal, whose lessons may be traced in part to this passage in the Degree of Entered Apprentice.

So the importance of this segment in the Degree of Entered Apprentice is to link the enthusiasm of the new Entered Apprentice with service to a Master. The Master's role is to direct the zealous efforts of the apprentice so that the Entered Apprentice does not go astray.

If we have listened carefully, we also find in this passage of ritual a return to the first of the three elements, said to teach that the ancient apprentice served his Master with "freedom." These words pass by so rapidly that they may not even register with the new Entered Apprentice and probably are not focused upon even by Brethren who have listened to the lecture many times. But one needs to stop to ask what this actually means. How can one serve with freedom? Isn't this a contradiction? Isn't servitude the exact opposite of being free?

The answer is found in the realization of who the true Master is. According to the Anglican (Episcopal) Book of Common Prayer, unquestionably familiar to the authors of the Masonic ritual, and found likewise in other liturgical works, it is the service to the Creator that alone constitutes perfect freedom.

Although the three elements have, as we have seen, several symbolic lessons to teach, the most important purpose of the final passage of the Entered Apprentice lecture is to teach the newly admitted Brother one final time in the ceremony of his initiation that Freemasonry exists for the service of the Great Architect of the Universe above all, and as taught in the Masonic degrees, only in that Master's service is there no risk or danger in doing so with freedom, fervency and zeal.

Let me simply conclude by noting that we have explored only a small part of the Degree of Entered Apprentice, and have found significant meaning. We are all here at this District School to learn the words in our Degrees and ceremonies, so we can perform the ritual flawlessly. But we should not stop there. We are not just learning words,

but also moral and philosophical truths that can and should guide us in our daily lives. So the larger point of this short talk is that there is great meaning in all of our ritual. I encourage you to read and think about the words you are learning. It has real significance, and its study will repay you many times over.