

The Lessons of Our Masonic Ritual

The Point within a Circle

By Bro. Bruce E. Nevin

Editor: The spring 2008 Trowel included a column on Life within the Circle from the perspective of a clergyman. This article pursues this Masonic lesson from a scientific and philosophic study of geometry and astronomy.

One of the emblems in every regular and well furnished lodge is a point at the center of a circle, embordered by two perpendicular parallel lines. The point, we are told, represents an individual brother, and the circle the boundary line of his duty.

On its face, this emblem alludes to the injunction to circumscribe our desires and keep our passions within due bounds. On first consideration, it seems that the circle represents a boundary for externally imposed constraints, defined by the precepts of the Holy Saints John of Jerusalem together with those articulated in the Book of Holy Scriptures. In this centripetal interpretation, external forces press in toward the center so as to constrain the free expression of the individual within due bounds. This is consistent with the, alas, common misconception that human nature is fundamentally depraved, and must be constrained if social life is to be made possible.

A Measure of Times, Seasons, Years and Cycles

The emblematic image of the point within a circle has far more to tell us, however. To begin, consider that the Feast of Saint John the Evangelist is (or was originally) at the winter solstice, and that of Saint John the Baptist at the summer solstice. From the timing of these celebrations, we directly deduce that the perpendicular line on the south side of the circle represents Saint John the Evangelist, the sun being at its farthest southerly declination at the winter solstice, and the line on the north correspondingly represents Saint John the Baptist, the sun at that time shining its rays upon us from an angle as far to the north as it ever attains during the year. This suggests a perspective in which the circle represents the annual circuit of seasons. At the top of the circle is the Vernal

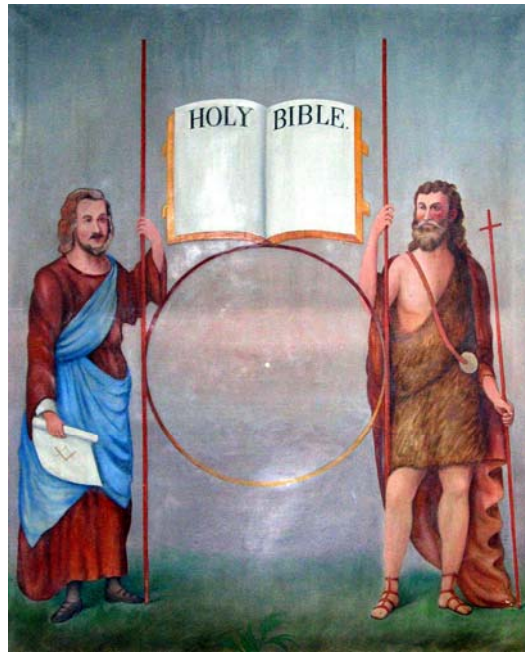
Equinox, associated with Easter, Passover, and the Light in the East, represented by the Book of Holy Scriptures. At the bottom of the circle in the west is the Autumnal Equinox, when the work of the Masonic year begins.

Thinking of the solstices from that larger astronomical perspective so familiar to Preston and other learned 18th century brethren, the circle represents the orbit of the earth about the sun. At the summer solstice, the north pole points directly toward the sun, which consequently appears highest overhead at noonday, and the north part of the Temple is darkest. At the winter solstice, the south pole leans directly toward the sun, and the north pole away from it, so that the sun at its meridian height is able to “dart its ray” through a window or under a lintel into the northerly recesses of a building as far as ever it can during the year.

At Jerusalem, the sun is not sufficiently low in the southern sky even at midwinter to have been able to illuminate the north part of King Solomon’s Temple, but as we travel northward around the curvature of the earth, the midwinter sun appears progressively lower in the sky until, at the arctic circle, the winter sun is actually below the horizon at midday. At the equinoxes, the polar axis of the earth tilts at right angles to the sun. In the spring, the north pole is turning progressively toward the sun; at the fall equinox, it is turning progressively away. The solstices and equinoxes together divide the circle into four equal parts.

Bringing Light and Life to Man

The sun at the center of our solar system is the source of energy that drives all living processes on our planet. Its unstinting expression of light and life is obviously not circumscribed by the orbit of the earth. It is the earth, rather, which in its orbit maintains just that distance from the sun at which there is sufficient irradiation, neither too much nor too little. Closer, and earth would be a barren desert; much farther, and ice ages would prevail without possibility of warming. This suggests a symbolism, not of constraint within a confining boundary, but rather of a median



path, neither too much restraint nor too strong a projection away from the center.

The connection of the astronomical circle with the individual brother is that the sun, symbolically, has ever been associated with the heart of man, and with the central purpose of one's life, which must be felt out by trial and error in a process of refining the expression of one's heart's desire.

There is a dynamic relationship, then, between the centripetal and centrifugal aspects of this symbolism of a point within a circle, which may be illustrated by a practical consideration of our obligation. We are enjoined to help poor and distressed brethren and their families—but they must ask us for our help, we must find them worthy, and our assistance should do no injury to ourselves or our own families. We are obligated to answer all due signs and regular summonses from our lodge—if within the length of our cable-tow. Just as one may use a piece of string and a pencil to draw a circle, the cable-tow circumscribes the extent of our capacity.

The Altar: The Center Point in Every Lodge

All of the ritual of the lodge is centered on the altar, which we circumambulate clockwise, Clock hands run clockwise because that is the direction that the shadow of the gnomon moves on the face of a sundial, which mechanical clocks were made to imitate.

The shadow moves clockwise because the sun rises in the east, transits through the southern sky, and sets in the west, casting shadows first to the west, then northward, and at sunset towards the east. (As is customary, we are ignoring the adjustments that are necessary in the southern hemisphere.) Together, the brightness of the sun and the darkness of the shadow, in their daily dance of polar opposites, describe a complete circle of clockwise motion, and indeed the motion of the shadow during the day foretells the returning passage of the sun through the north during the night.

Our circumambulations of the altar are bounded on the north and south by the two parallel sidelines of the brethren duly assembled in a lodge. The Book of Holy Scriptures, however, rests upon the altar in the center, together with the two other Great Lights of the lodge. Like the sun in the solar system, these are an outward representation of that source of life-giving light that resides in the heart of each brother.

Recall the suggestive paradox of Saint Augustine that God is like a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. The life and light of the Supreme Being indwells in each living heart. Each of us is a center of expression for that

same Divine Presence of the Supreme Architect of the Universe. For each particular center of expression, there are certain restraints, on the one hand those natural limitations of expression that change and evolve through our growth in wisdom and understanding, and on the other hand those due restraints of courtesy, mutual consideration, empathy and brotherly love that bind us in a greater whole.

Defining and Understanding the Center Point

What is a center? It cannot be comprehended except in reference to that which is not the center. Often, we do not realize what and where the center is until we have gone away from it, explored the periphery to get our bearings, as it were, and returned. This is why it is necessary for the young to break out on their own, even to rebel against authority.

While we are learning, authoritative rules and commandments prescribe how we should act. In order to grow in real understanding it may seem necessary that we test these prescriptive rules experientially by trial and error. As we grow in wisdom, we recognize that these rules are not after all prescriptions of how we should be; rather, they are descriptions of how we shall be when we ripen as centers of expression of that inner light.

When we are young, we may feel uncertain of our identity and our worth in the world. This may lead us to live either in reaction against authority imposed upon us, or in conformity with a chosen authority of one sort or another, even perhaps what our elders consider to be a cult, subservience to which we paradoxically assert as the expression of our own free will. With maturity, as we outgrow this reactive need to defend our individuality, we are able to return to the center, and, recognizing it at last, we may find peace in what is truly our own unique contribution to the world.

To define a center is to single it out. Conversely, to be singled out, distinguished from all else around, is to be defined as a center. For example, in psychological terms, having a point of view defines a center to which all things in one's perceptual universe are related. We measure things in terms of our point of view on pairs of opposites. Is it large or small? Hot or cold? Soft or hard? Fast or slow? Easy or difficult? Beautiful or ugly? Harmful or beneficial? And so on. As we identify our ego with a point of view, we project our perceptions of the world from that point of view outward. We forget that they are *our* perceptions from a subjective point of view, and imagine that they are the genuine objective properties of the world. Needless to say, not everyone has the same point of view.



Sacred writings of the Orient speak of pairs of opposites in the realm of name and form (nama-rupa), as indeed do the mystery traditions in the west. What are these pairs of opposites? In truth, a polarity or contrast is a graduated scale of some perceptual property from one extreme to the other. Light and dark are but degrees of brightness of the light. Hot/cold, soft/hard, fast/slow, easy/difficult, beautiful/ugly, each of these polarities subsists in many degrees between one extreme and the other. Love and hatred are extremes of the same emotion, with degrees of liking and dislike between.

Our point of view, expressed as a preference or demand, defines a center on a graduated scale. That center, the preferred value from our point of view, divides one end of the scale from the other, creating an opposition or polarity where in fact there is but one single property perceived in varying degrees. Having a preference creates an opposition between the two extremities of that which is not preferred. So it is that the third Patriarch of Ch'an Buddhism in China (which later developed into Zen in Japan) said "The Great Way (mahayana) is not difficult for those who make no demands. Make the smallest distinction, however, for or against, and Heaven and Earth are set infinitely apart."

Wielding the trowel to spread the cement of brotherly love often requires skillful navigation through the sea of pairs of opposites. When brethren have different preferences or demands, the mental atmosphere becomes clouded and confusing, and the emotional waters are choppy and strewn with hidden hazards. Small differences become magnified as each advocate tries to pull the other towards what he perceives as the proper center. To pull someone toward a goal, you must lean away from the goal in the opposite direction, and perhaps even change your position to stand beyond the goal. It is even possible that "winning" may itself become the goal, with the risk of establishing a result that is no center at all for anyone.

The Center, Represented Geometrically

Masons learn a center is a single point without dimension, but this simplest of the geometrical figures cannot represent a center by itself. This is because a point without dimension cannot be discerned; it can only be defined in relative terms. Cartesian coordinates define a point in a graph, just as latitude and longitude define a point on the earth's surface. Because a center is an indivisible point, and a point is a figure without dimension, it can be recognized as a center only relative to that which is not the center: that on one side of the center must equal that on the

other side. The notion of center therefore entails symmetry and balance.

The simplest geometric representation of center vs. not-center is one line bisected by another (Fig.1). But this bisecting line must also be centered on the first, that is, each line must bisect the other. Otherwise, the point of bisection is not in the center of the whole figure. A simple archetype of the center is therefore the equal-armed cross (Fig. 2), which has from time immemorial been emblematic of the intersection of positive and negative, male and female, yang and yin, as a creative, generative center of expression. The equal-armed cross divides the space around the center into four parts. Proper symmetry around the center requires that these four parts be equal, and for this reason the bisecting line must also be perpendicular to the other. This is a reason that we are concerned with horizontals and perpendiculars, and with the fourth part of a circle or the angle of ninety degrees.

By careful inquiry into a controversy we can identify its terms. In any conflict, there is some perception that is preferred or demanded in one state, and simultaneously preferred or demanded in a different state. It can't be in both states at once. The room can be warmer or it can be cooler, but it can't be both warmer and cooler at the same time. The ritual can be correct or the ritualist can be lenient, but not both at the same time.

A conflict cannot really be resolved head-on by taking sides, or by demanding an artificial compromise that neither party wants. Remember that the two preferences are separate points along a line of variation. Each party wants their preferred value to be the center. The path to resolution is at right angles to the conflict, as it were, by enquiring with each party why they have that preference. What is behind it? What purpose does it serve?

When we step away from the particular demands that got polarized in conflict, and go up a level to ask for the motivation, the larger or higher purpose for that preference, we begin talking about matters that are not in themselves in conflict, values on which we, in fact, are very likely to agree. The means that the antagonists have chosen for accomplishing those higher ends may be in conflict, but when we turn our attention to those higher purposes for which this bone of contention would be the means, the heat is off, and magical things can happen. Alternative means may become apparent. (Offer the chilly brother a jacket. Or perhaps the warm brother realizes he doesn't need that vest under his jacket. Or one may change his seat away from, or toward, a drafty spot.) More subtly, one preference may surprisingly dwindle in importance. More subtly yet, a point of view is not limited to a single preference, and we often find that some

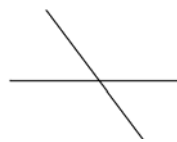


Fig. 1

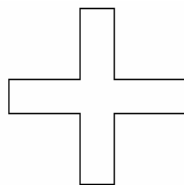


Fig. 2

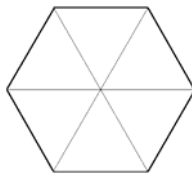


Fig. 3

other intersecting preference is really much more important. Sometimes, at a higher level of motivations, the conflict simply dissolves, and no one quite knows how or why, or needs to know. This is the use of consciousness to dissolve the bone of contention.

In an equal-armed cross, there are but two polarities. In a hexagon (Fig. 3), there are three polarities crossing the center. In a circle, the number of pairs of opposites is infinite. For a point to be in the center, it must be equidistant from the extremities of the space in all directions around the center. These considerations naturally lead us again to the image of a circle with a central point. In three dimensions, it leads us to a sphere.

The Teachings of the Holy Sts. John and Masonry

In the circle of the earth's orbit, the circle of the seasons, the summer solstice begins the descending half of the year, descending from the full expansion of light through the harvest season to the dark days of winter. Long before the church subsumed them as the feast days of the Saints John, these have been sacred days in all times and places historic and prehistoric, and some have argued that our Masonic tradition here is a heritage from Druidic or other sources.

Saint John the Baptist spoke strongly to the hearts of men, saying "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand," and enjoining them to purity of heart and uprightness of life to make themselves fit citizens thereof. We cannot but be reminded of the symbolism of the lambskin, by which "we are continually reminded of that purity of life and conduct so essentially necessary to his gaining admission into the Celestial Lodge above, where the Supreme Architect of the Universe presides." The lambskin replaced a baptism with water that is found in early rituals, which was struck because, in ignorance, it was presumed to be an imitation of the Christian sacrament. John the Baptist remained faithful to his teaching of righteousness even to his execution by Herod, reminding us of Hiram Abif.

The winter solstice begins the ascending half of the year, with the seed of reincarnated light planted in deepest darkness growing towards its fullness. Saint John the Evangelist spoke with equal fire and eloquence of the Light of the Logos, the creative Word of the Supreme Architect, coming into the world. We cannot but be reminded of the importance of the word and the light in our ritual. He was a follower of John the Baptist before he was made an Apostle. The Book of Revelation presents mysteries in symbol and allegory which we may assume were elucidated by instruction from mouth to ear, reminding us of these aspects of our ritual. His great and abiding lesson is

to love one another. John the Evangelist concluded in learning and eloquence what Saint John the Baptist had begun in zeal, completing two parallel lines.

That there are two pairs of opposites in a cross, three in a hexagon and an infinite number in a circle or sphere of influence is emblematical of human life. As we grow in maturity to occupy the boundary line of our duty fully, life becomes an inexhaustible parade of preferences, rather than an addictive demand for particular stations on the scale between a few familiar pairs of opposites. For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A person so ripened in wisdom is singularly equipped to be a peacemaker, spreading the cement of brotherly love.

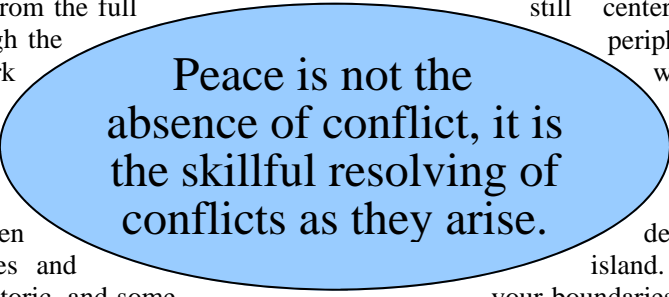
This "balancing at the midpoint" sheds light, too, on the injunction to keep our passions within due bounds. The passions of conflict are not present at the still center; they arise at the periphery, where we engage with one another. In youth, we strive to be independent. As we mature, we learn to be autonomous. Independence is a delusion. No man is an island. Autonomy is mastery of your boundaries, maintaining good interfaces with those around you.

Peace is Not the Absence of Conflict

Conflict is a natural and inevitable consequence of living in one another's company as autonomous centers of expression. Conflict is not going away. It is unavoidable that we should on occasion find ourselves relying upon the same means to accomplish our different aims. This happens all the time, and we routinely negotiate an amicable resolution. We approach the same doorway from opposite sides. "Oh, excuse me!" says one, and "Thanks!" says the other, or "No, after you." Or perhaps both turn sideways and slip through the same opening cooperatively on their respective missions. Such are the ordinary skills of living that pass without notice until and unless there is some lapse in awareness or courtesy.

So, no, peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the skillful resolving of conflicts as they arise. This is why peace will never be instituted by treaties or laws alone. It is a matter rather of more and more of us learning to be skillful peacemakers. In this we see also the truth of the saying "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall find peace," for the same skill at resolving conflicts among people resolves conflicts within ourselves, by raising our attention above the terms of conflict to the higher-level ends for which they are but means.

Disclosed is a deeper and richer understanding of the individual brother's place within the circle, comprising infinite pairs of opposites. The circle of a



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brother's duty is the extension of his influence and his responsibility to that just mean between centrifugal expression and centripetal restraint that truly articulates the utterly fulfilled peace of the divine spark in the stillness of the Holy of Holies within his heart. And as "deep calls unto deep," so does that free expression from within evoke awareness of the same divine presence within the heart of each of his brethren, from which perspective no conflict is irresolvable. This is the true cement that is the foundation and support of civil society, and the guarantor of our Craft into the future as a vital leaven in the world.