

# **The Seven Liberal Arts as the Spiritual Path to the Mystical Temple of Solomon**

by

**Thomas D. Worrel  
Fall 2011**

From the night when the Fellowcraft degree was conferred upon me I became fascinated with the Winding Staircase symbol, particularly the Seven Liberal Arts. Even though I had been familiar with symbols depicting elevation or ascension long before that night, it struck me as being something more important to the Masonic candidate than what was at that time offered to me. I waited and hoped for further light to be shed upon it. Even after receiving the sublime degree, and the later Scottish Rite and Royal Arch I realized that I never really received the teachings I had hoped for and expected. The clouds parted occasionally, specifically in the Knight Kadosh degree of the Scottish Rite, but the detail never came through. Still I remained intrigued.

I have always been fascinated with the idea (or maybe illusion) that the spiritual path is something capable of being defined, delineated and basically spelled out from beginning to end – basically that there is a blueprint or map of the spiritual quest. I was already somewhat knowledgeable of several such spiritual guides: those like the Kabbalistic *Tree of Life* and the Yoga system of the *Seven Chakras*. I was also familiar with the Christian teachings of Bonaventure's *Soul's Journey into God*, Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, St. Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*, and, remaining fascinated, later did my thesis on St. John of the Cross's description given in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. I quickly discovered these spiritual paths can be highly delineated and exact on one extreme to being completely open and individualized on the other end of the spectrum. For example, in the current seminary approach to spiritual direction the director's task is basically to enhance the devotee's

relationship with the Divine and encourage attention to the inner prompting of the Spirit in their life. This approach is obviously more art than science and based strongly upon faith. On the other end of the spectrum, there are spiritual systems developed such as we find in the curriculum of the Order of the A.:A.: (or *Astron Argon* – Silver Star). This mystical system of Initiation is extremely exact and precise. One begins “here” and goes “there” on a specific map based upon a version of the Tree of Life glyph. The progression from one sphere to the next is determined upon the successful accomplishment of specific sequential tasks. The success is tested and failure of any test stops the official recognition of any higher grade. This then is a system we can call more science than art and faith plays no role whatsoever.

Returning to the Winding Staircase, not only was I being presented with an almost universal symbol of upward spiritual movement, it was also clear from the lecture that I was there and then given the Masonic means of gaining more spiritual Light – the actual Masonic blueprint for the spiritual quest. Being that further instructions were not forthcoming I became convinced that while Freemasonry is still a system of ritual Initiation it had obviously lost sight of the extremely valuable component of personal responsibility in those initiations. That is, somehow and somewhere down the line, the personal practices have been lost or at the very least, ignored: practices that illustrate and bring to fuller realization those very lessons and truths that the rites are communicating. Of course I am speaking of the lesson given to most of us in the Fellowcraft degree regarding the Seven Liberal Arts that encompass those disciplines known as: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. These seven branches of knowledge were divided into two categories in the Middle Ages: the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. “The *trivium* includes those aspects of the liberal arts that pertain to mind, and the *quadrivium*, those aspects of the liberal arts that pertain to matter.” (Sister Miriam Joseph, *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*, p. 3) These arts have been lost in the sense that the deeper meanings of the Staircase have simply vanished in the Masonic community. They have been ignored in the sense that their study has been plainly encouraged upon the

candidate but little or no instruction given to him; the common notion being that it simply refers to getting an education.

It is time we resurrect this wisdom; it is also imperative that we do so. The profound study of the Seven Arts should be the thrust of our Fraternity's teachings. They provide the keys to every ritual. They develop the mind and expand the soul to receive increasingly greater Light – the explicit charge given to every Freemason. Surely their study transcends cultures and religions thus keeping our Fraternity true to its principles and open to all that seek to participate. Finally, the study and practice of the Seven Liberal Arts can become, for some, the spiritual path that leads the humble mason into the mystical Temple of Solomon, the House of God.

### **Previous Work:**

Since my Fellowcraft degree I have paid considerable attention to gaining a stronger grasp of these seemingly reticent instructions. But in the short time available this morning, we do not have the luxury to go over things I covered in previous work in any detail but I still wish to give a synopsis of it as a foundation of this paper. In past work I covered some the early development and history of the Seven Liberal Arts, how previous Masonic authors have treated them; most with very little commentary and even dismissal but some like Albert Pike and Walter Leslie Wilmshurst, while still not saying much but hinting at much deeper meanings. So I initially pursued an historical approach. I investigated how they were developed and congealed into a grouping of seven. I looked at how they were represented in art which lead me to the Gothic Cathedral of Chartres in France where personifications of the Seven Arts are carved upon it. And I studied the Christian Platonist school there associated with the cathedral where the Seven Arts were enthusiastically taught and subsequently developed into a high degree of sophistication. The Seven Arts were pursued here as a preparation and means to achieve a deep knowledge of God. It was also necessary to consider the basic symbolism of the Second Degree especially the rising winding staircase and its various components. I considered the winding staircase as a metaphorical symbol of the ascent of the soul

comparable to other traditions and symbols such as the ladder to heaven, climbing the mystic mountain, entering an interior castle composed of several rooms and so on, all as symbols of the movement into the spiritual world. For example in the Egyptian *Book of Coming Forth by Day* (commonly referred to as the *Book of the Dead*) is found the sentence: "I will set up my ladder that will lead me to the vision of the gods." It is convincing to me that the Winding Staircase symbolism serves the same purpose in Freemasonry as similar symbolism does in other systems around the world.

In a later work I looked at some of the legends surrounding the Arts. One old tale to highlight is that the ancient liberal arts were so important that they were originally inscribed upon two different antediluvian pillars in order to preserve them for future generations in the event a great catastrophe such as a great flood. Indeed the Great Flood ravaged the earth and two interesting characters subsequently found the pillars: Hermes and Pythagoras. What is important to note is that the teachings attributed to these two men are invaluable in understanding the deep philosophical teachings of the Seven Arts. Then I discussed the interplay between several historical characters and groups that took on interesting roles during the Medieval Ages pertinent to our studies. One personality was the great Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153) who came from a family of knights and joined the Cistercian Monastic order that was known for their architectural skills. He was known throughout Europe, wrote volumes of work on religion and mysticism, had major connections with the Knights Templar; his cousin was the first Grand Master and he wrote their Rule as well as writing his famous treatise: *In Praise of the New Knighthood*. Bernard's influence was so great that Dante uses him as a literary device in his majestic *Divine Comedy*. In the *Paradiso* Bernard is the third and holiest spiritual figure that leads Dante to the ultimate vision of God. Bernard was well known for his devotion to the Celestial Queen and it is She whom the icons of the Seven Arts surround on the Western front of Chartres cathedral.

Also, in this background study a different view of the Knights Templar emerged – especially different than the common romantic version that I am sure every Freemason is familiar with especially

after some recent thrillers. Sometimes history is more suggestive than fiction. Some of the main points to emphasize include: they were a major power in Europe financially, politically and militarily. They lived under both a military discipline and a monastic rule. Bernard gave them detailed contemplations to practice while in the Holy Land. They built a huge network of castles, churches, houses and farms with extensive networks throughout Europe all the way to the Holy Land. Many of the guilds were supported and utilized in their building projects. When the mass arrests came in 1307, not all Templars were taken especially in lands with shaky relations with the Pope. And many arrested were later released who subsequently entered the corporation of builders that they previously had such close relations with the Templars or went back to the monasteries. In other words, the organization was destroyed; the majority of the Templars were not. Clearly they brought with them their past experience and knowledge.

I considered the idea of mystical architecture. I became aware of the fact that the celestial queen represented not only the Virgin Mother but also the human soul in all its perfection; that the Seven Arts represented the faculties of the soul and thus bringing them each to perfection was the purpose and aim as each influenced it in different ways. As a matter of interest, the rise of Gothic architecture at the same time brought with it renovations in the building art, one of which, not seeming coincidental, was the wonderful increase of luminosity and the use of stained glass to enhance the impact of that light which was lacking in earlier architectural styles.

Finally I considered the role of the Art of Memory that was highly developed in those times. Unlike today, the memory was a faculty to be trained and constructed to various designs. The practices of developing the memory were not only used by scholars but also utilized heavily in the monasteries. These practices fell into disuse with the advent of the printing press after 1440. But they continued to be developed in certain circles, more esoterically minded circles. Another factor came into play not long after that: In 1460 the Greek manuscripts of what was later to be known as the *Corpus Hermeticum* arrived in Florence as well as other important Greek

philosophical manuscripts. These hermetic works provided a philosophical framework for the development of more sophisticated esoteric pursuits including enhancements to the Art of Memory. In Arthur Versluis article *Memory and Printing* in the journal *Alexandria 2* he writes:

“ ...for the art of memory as practiced in the Renaissance became a vehicle to reestablish the symbolic, vertical dimension of existence. ... The Renaissance art of memory was based in the traditional Hermetic concept of the correspondence between man’s soul and the universe. In this vision of the world, the individual soul bears the imprint of the divine realm. Microcosm: macrocosm. The new art of memory was based upon the idea that the individual could realize within himself the divine realm – it was a means to that end.”  
(Versluis, *Alexandria 2*, pp. 208-209)

I wish to use this background as the departure point for the further explorations on this theme that follow. With these further explorations I will also move into the area of more esoteric handling of this material. Let me say that I have little doubt that the original framers of Masonic ritual were quite aware of their noble purpose of the Arts as pursued at such schools as Chartres. And it must be realized that these Arts were taken to very sophisticated levels without ever going into what we may now call the esoteric. Also, in considering the role of the Seven Liberal Arts, it needs to be remembered that there were several other crafts and arts to be learned and we can basically categorize them into two camps. There were the utilitarian arts and the liberal arts. While the utilitarian arts produced goods – something that began with the craftsman and resulted in a product, the Liberal Arts began and ended with the craftsman. Instead of making something like a smith makes a sword; the Liberal Art developed the craftsman himself into something more, it was *an agent of transformation* – it encouraged internal actions analogous to those that cause a rose to bloom or the worm to become the butterfly. And in that sense, the Liberal Arts sought to bring about a human type of perfection.

So as we enter into the more esoteric dimensions I want to emphasize that the original purpose and pursuit of the Liberal Arts must always be a part of the Masonic education. Pursuing it to its more esoteric aspects should be secondary to the original intent. So for the Freemason who wishes to tread in these mystical realms a sure foundation has been laid.

### ***Ars Memoria* and the Process of Internalizing the Cosmos**

It might be good at this point to review a little about the faculty of memory. Most of us think of memory as that mental faculty where our experiences, our thoughts, knowledge acquired, skills developed, even dreams are stored. Normally we only use our ability of recollection as we need it in our daily lives. For example, most of us do not sit down with the sole intention to remember things for 20 or so minutes just for the experience. In theater and some types of ritual work like Freemasonry, we may need to memorize extensive dialogue, lectures and movements. And in courses on the philosophy of mind we may distinguish many more aspects and nuances of memory than we usually consider but all in all, normally, we don't even think about it. But memory has been a major component in the history of philosophy and religion. Most primal cultures transmit their history through the telling of stories and memorizing long genealogies and myths. Looking back some 2400 years to Plato, he argues that the acquisition of knowledge of the Eternal is itself a process of recollection (*Anamnesis*). These timeless truths have always and are always within us. Somehow we lost it or forgot it. The etymology of the word education is a word meaning "to draw out" or "to bring forth". It will be important to keep that in mind as we consider later the tandem role of imagination and memory in the ascent of the mind to the Source of Light.

Before we continue it might be good to point out a few more influences that came from the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It was not only thought that either Hermes taught Moses or was Moses, but that he taught Orpheus (myth or not), considered to be the first of the Greek philosophers. This philosophy came down through Pythagoras

eventually to Plato. Thus, the *Corpus* was thought to represent the essence of the teachings of both worlds: the Greek philosophic tradition and the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Within the *Corpus* itself are teachings of internalizing the cosmos within the soul, of ascending the planetary spheres to reach the Ultimate and of the process of the regeneration of the soul.

## **Internalizing the Cosmos and Ascending the Spheres**

Understanding the concept of internalizing the cosmos requires a theoretical backdrop. In the Western Esoteric Traditions, there is usually thought to be an intermediate world between the worlds of sense and that of the Divine.. And just as there are the winding stairs in Masonic ritual leading up to the middle chamber, there are means to access this inner world and move through it to the Divine. We can think of this intermediary world as a *mesocosm*, a link, between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The Islamic scholar Henry Corbin refers to this inner world between the sensible and intelligible worlds as the *mundus imaginalis* as it is the kingdom of subtle bodies and forms of light – “where spirit takes on body and where the body is spiritualized.” There is much we could discuss about this world and its inner weavings and interconnections, what, according to Corbin, Islamic gnosis refers to as the ‘science of the balance’. Here is also where the interiorization process occurs and the inner links between discrete phenomena are revealed.<sup>i</sup>

Within the Western Esoteric Traditions there is the emphasis upon the idea that the macrocosm, the cosmos, is imprinted upon the microcosm, the human soul. Or, in other words, the soul has formulated itself by reflecting the macrocosm. That by itself may not mean anything but the implication is that these imprints are very much like triggers, agents or seeds which are latent and dormant but ready to awaken. Awakening them means that particular natural energies or patterns are unleashed which propel the soul to further stages of growth and expansion. Certain methods seem to produce varying degrees of results. As mentioned earlier, it seems that the study and practical application of the Seven Liberal Arts stimulates

these faculties of the soul and increases the capacity for deeper understanding of the Divine Light. Unfortunately we now get into very if not exclusively experiential realms. At the same time, it really does not matter as this is a personal quest and the aspirant will know within their soul if they are beneficial.

## **Practices that Internalize the Cosmos**

There are several esoteric techniques available for development of this inner dimension, for example: rituals, meditations, inner pathworking sessions, visualization practices, number mysticism and so on. Any detailed explanations are beyond the scope of this paper. When I specify rituals in this regard I am not just referring to the degrees of Freemasonry and the other Masonic bodies. There are initiatory rites in several esoteric orders that follow a Path of Return. Religious actions and rituals have been known to produce ascents of the soul and cultivate spiritual powers. Societies may use different symbolic schemes but in most cases they have similar intent.

Pathworkings are a type of guided meditation where a pre-determined series of images is created by the imagination. Usually someone reads a highly symbolic story that the meditator follows closely but not just listening but imagining every part of it as participant rather than observer. It is a technique of controlled active imagination. It is “a training method in which the consciousness is guided through scenes and experiences created from symbolic forms, but at the same time is brought under the influence of the spiritual realities which are traditionally clothed in those forms.” The object of pathworking is to engage the deeper levels of the mind. “The mind is led on a journey, following a route long established, and placed in contact with images that may evoke the essential content of ancient myths and the deeper levels of the collective unconscious.”<sup>iii</sup>

These practices, the aforementioned pathworkings and rites of initiation, serve to develop and interiorize the macrocosmic world. They do so to harmonize the internal realms to the external worlds

and create deeper capacity wherein the soul can expand. There are other means to achieve similar results. One of most profound and spiritual methods is the use of architectural symbolism to build a temple within the soul. This specific method may be of special interest to Freemasons.

## **The Masonic Craft: Building the Glorious Temple of Solomon**

One method of the Art of Memory that was utilized even prior to the official founding of the Fraternity was the practice of visualizing the Temple of Solomon. The work of Giulio Camillo is an example. With Camillo “The art of memory is now entering on the phase in which Renaissance occult influences come into it.” (Yates, *The Art of Memory*, p. 129) With Camillo and others like Francesco Giorgi and the related work of Simon Studion and Giordano Bruno some interesting developments have taken place. A study of their material is essential to understanding the actual mechanics of these systems. The purpose here is not to attempt to reconstruct the actual practice possibly used by Freemasons – if ever there was such a thing. That is a subject for subsequent research. So how would visualizing Solomon’s Temple, the building of the Temple in one’s imagination with the appropriate ornaments, be a spiritual practice? One of the great Islamic scholars of the last century states:

“This Temple-archetype is itself a threshold, *the* communicating Threshold between the celestial Temple and the Temple of the soul. Inasmuch as it is a material edifice, constructed in the image of the star or celestial Temple, it is the passage leading to the inner spiritual edifice. Because it *leads back to the source*, it is *par excellence* the figure and support of that mental activity ... an *exegesis* which at the same time constitutes an *exodus*, a going-out of the soul towards the Soul. ... what it effects is the transmutation of external rites into the rites of the spiritual Temple.”<sup>iii</sup>

In building up the image of the Temple, the mason builds and crafts an edifice in the quest for more Light. This technique becomes, with practice, a door to the spiritual realms. Francesco Giorgi (1466-

1540) and Simon Studion (1543 – 1605?) who lived many years before our Fraternity's emergence are other persons to study. The historian Frances Yates writes that: "The secret of Giorgi's universe was number, for it was built, so he believed, by its Architect as a perfectly proportioned Temple, in accordance with unalterable laws of cosmic geometry." (Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p. 30) She also says that:

"He (Francesco Giorgi) speaks of the Christian angelic hierarchies, emphasising their concordance with Cabalist angelic and sephirothic schemes. He speaks of the 'number, measure and weight' governing the creation and of the Temple of Solomon. Those who understand how to 'pythagorise' and 'philosophise' by mathematics, will, he says, understand the architectural allusion. He speaks of the Unity from which all things proceed by four ways, arithmetic, geometric, harmonic, and musical." (Yates, *The Occult Philosophy*, p. 32)

Joy Hancox speaks of him as:

"...basing his argument on Plato's dialogue *The Timaeus*, chose these proportions explicitly as being microcosmic. Giorgio links the thinking of Plato with ideas of Vitruvius and a belief in the divine precedent of the Temple of Solomon to show how, in architecture, 'human creation may correspond to the Universe as a whole in its proportions.'" (Hancox, *Kingdom for a Stage*, p. 118) Regarding Simon Studion, his book the *Naometria* (Measurements of the Temple): "... is an apocalyptic-prophetic work of immense length, using involved numerology based on Biblical descriptions of the measurements of the Temple of Solomon ... (Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 33)

Without access to any specific Masonic documents that explain the practice, the aspirant may review the works regarding Solomon's Temple included in surviving material on the *Ars Memoria*. Also, there are such helpful images as: the actual depiction of the Temple in the Bible, the Masonic lodge itself with its description in the traditional writings and the Tracing Boards to contemplate in beginning the practice. Further detail may include such things as the hieroglyphical emblems that have a mystique of their own. Many of the individual

images above have profound symbolic meaning in and of themselves. For example, the Masonic author W.L. Wilmshurst explains one of the emblems – the 47<sup>th</sup> Problem of Euclid – by stating: “It is a mathematical symbol representing, for those who can read it, the highest measure of human attainment in the science of reconstructing the human soul into the Divine image from which it has fallen away.”<sup>iv</sup> With just this one example, it is possible to appreciate the possibilities of working with these emblems and symbols in a structured way by meditation on and contemplation of them.

## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the question remains open regarding the use of personal spiritual practices in the past training of Freemasons. Interesting and suggestive research has come to light in recent years about Masonic practices of the past. There are several authors who have done strong research in areas that impact upon the subject of this work.<sup>v</sup> There were strong elements of visionary Kabbalistic mysticism that entered into Freemasonry. The Seven Liberal Arts, so central to Freemasonry, were developed as a preliminary to the actual study of theology – a theology that leads to spiritual experiences. The intent of this paper, and my previous work, was not to prove that these practices were historical to Freemasonry but to show that there is substantial circumstantial evidence that it is indeed likely that earlier Masonic work was more than just ritual. There is still much research to be done but much of the common “conservative” view of Freemasonry (that it is just a fraternity with antiquated rituals) is no longer tenable. Freemasonry was and is a major component of the Western Esoteric Tradition.

If Freemasonry is to continue to reach all men, and men from all religions, in other words, to be truly a universal brotherhood, it must be ever vigilant to preserve its unique spirit.. It must also stop determining its future by evoking the ghost of its past. It must know itself to be, just like its individual members, a dynamic process growing into its perfect fulfillment. And by being faithful to that it must

become more than what it is now. In my mind, there is no better guide than the avid pursuit of the Seven Liberal Arts.

## Footnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> See *Temple and Contemplation* by Henri Corbin.

<sup>ii</sup> See *Magical States of Consciousness*, Denning & Philips

<sup>iii</sup> *Temple and Contemplation*. Henri Corbin, pp. 133 – 134.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Masonic Initiation*. W.L. Wilmshurst, pp. 122-122.

<sup>v</sup> Refer to the writings of David Stevenson and Marsha Keith Schuchard cited above.

## Bibliography

Bernabe, Alberto and San Cristobal, Ana Isabel Jimenez. *Instructions for the Netherworld: The Orphic Gold Tablets*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

Carruthers, Mary. *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400 – 1200*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, (1998) 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, (1990) 1993.

Corbin, Henry. *Temple and Contemplation*. London: Islamic Publications, 1986.

Denning, Melita & Phillips, Osborne. *Planetary Magick*. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1989.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Magical States of Consciousness*. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1985.

---

Joseph, Sister Miriam, *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*

Rossi, Paolo. *Logic and the Art of Memory: The Quest for a Universal Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Schuchard, Marsha Keith. *Restoring the Temple of Vision: Cabalistic Freemasonry and Stuart Culture*. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

Stevenson, David. *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century 1590 – 1710*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, (1988) 2001.

Wilmshurst, W.L. *The Meaning of Masonry*.

Yates, Francis A. *The Art of Memory*. London: Routledge. 1966.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. London: Routledge. 1964.