



Creativity in freemasonry

What is creativity?

Creativity is the systematic use of the imagination, either by an individual or by a group, for the purpose of producing something new, or even simply for the pleasure of inventing.

When we brainstorm, we freely associate ideas. Velcro, for example, was invented by analogy with bardana flowers that stick to clothes. At first sight, such wild associations of ideas (or, to quote Arthur Rimbaud, such a “lengthy and unruly use of all our senses”) may seem far remote from what we do in freemasonry. Indeed, creativity can become a highly refined and controlled process. since it is difficult within a group to criticize a new-born idea, it is quite common to spend some time with group structuring and trust drills before the sessions. For instance, a department supervisor, when asked if he is able to delegate his authority, will inevitably answer “Yes”. If he is invited to climb and stand on a table, close his eyes and let himself fall backwards into the arms of the other members of the group, the link with his function appears clearly : he stands above the others as an observing subject or an observed object, he has a short-sighted vision of the situation, he works almost blindly, he trusts his team and relies on them.

In this case again, we are far removed from the rigid and hieratic position we take in the temple; the principle of creativity lies on the multiplication of stimuli aiming at easing behaviours, improving communication and facilitating the connection of ideas.

Archimedes measured the volume of a chiselled crown of gold. In those days, geometry couldn't help measure so many different volumes put together. While taking his bath, he noticed that his body moved a certain quantity of water, and besides, he was quite motivated to solve the problem : if the goldsmith had dared to mix silver with gold, he would be sentenced to death; if it was pure gold, everything would be fine. If Archimedes couldn't spot a fraud or its absence, then *he* would be the victim of the tyrant. By linking the idea of the bath with that of the crown he thought of measuring the volume of an object by measuring the amount of water displaced when the object was submerged.

Obstacles to creativity

Daydreaming, a technique for associating ideas, is not a specifically masonic experience. There are many obstacles to the production of new ideas, to stimulating enthusiasm and to efficient communication, and these obstacles also exist in our lodges.

Our upbringing is a major hindrance. However universal we might think we are, we don't speak out of the blue. A child who has always been treated with smiles in his family, who has always been acknowledged for what he is more than for what he does may be surprised when,

at school, he gets his first punch in the face. He will learn that the others can be dangerous, that he'd better be careful. The aim of many of our Masonic rituals is to exorcise such potential relational violence.

The worship of reason can also be a hindrance to creation. Philosophy often becomes a gratifying theoretical horizon that we place high on the scale. In a so-called Cartesian manner, we build our arguments following a thought-through process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, and questions from our brothers are not expected to go beyond reason.

Individualism is a third obstacle to creativity. During our work in the temple, the rigorous process of requesting permission to speak avoids disorderly and unbridled multiple interventions. Creativity may also be discouraged by the fear to make a mistake or to be considered as an eccentric, by fear of mispronouncing "Most Illustrious brethren who sit in the East,..." one might end up saying, "Most lugubrious brothers who shit in the East, ...". The desire to do well and to improve ourselves must not make us forget that the point is not to become better than what we are but to be ourselves at best.

As a lodge is a haven of peace and safety, the wish to maintain comfortable habits and to conform to an existing order sometimes prevents the discovery of strange or novel ideas. Since we strive to give our meetings a certain standard of solemnity, we may think it is neither the place nor time to let the child within us express itself freely. A child jumps, stamps his feet and dances, it speaks loudly, freely, energetically, a child uses interjections, exclamations, jokes. On the other hand, a free-mason is quiet, sensible and circumspect. He is "reasonable".

Our ritual also imposes a repetitive and, at first sight, a boringly useless pattern of actions. When it involves an exchange or a series of exchanges between two or several people, it may indeed seem to be entirely predictable. When two people casually exchange greetings ("Hello," "Hello", "Alright ?" "alright ?"), this simple ritual requires no real personal engagement between them. The psychological and affective risk involved is essentially absent and adding some small talk about the weather does not take them very much further. Our masonic ritual involves a more complex system of statements, gestures and postures that, nonetheless, once inspired a brother to say : " What a whole lot of time we waste before going to eat !"

The opening and closing ritual of a masonic meeting may eventually become the same old tune : we remember the music but forget the words. Could some of us totally deny that there is a link between Masonic rituals, repetitive gestures and the preludes of sleep? There is no denying that masonic ritual has the potential to induce somnolence and act as a hindrance to creativity. It can dampen our creative power by forcing us into collective rhythms. When this happens, the ritual is not only fastidious, repetitive, devoid of meaning and intensity, sleep-inducing but also a factor of loss of identity and of affective, intellectual and behavioural sclerosis.

The higher rank one reaches, the higher the risk of sterilisation of creativity appears. The objective of philosophical workshops is clearly : REASON. The philosophical project asserts itself through being defined as a will to be autonomous and to master things : creativity becomes suspicious in so far as it is associated with irresponsibility and irrationalism. Within the learned assemblies, long chains of reason aim at the most rigorous demonstrations against creative fancies and over-brimming poetical enthusiasm. Enthusiasm thus becomes a danger. The word enthusiasm includes the Greek "theos". God and the Greeks already used to

beware of such a blend : excess, pride and immoderation at the same time. The apology of mastery, reason and philosophy leads to the twilight of creative enthusiasm.

The concern for conceptualisation leads to insularity and a will for asepsis. Creativity thus appears as a dangerous and banned object to be eradicated, it has to face defensive ostracism. Witches used to be burnt, the possessed ones used to be gotten rid of, the eccentricities of creators will be stigmatised. Philosophical discipline and conceptual rigour seem lethal for inspiration, poetry and creativity.

Free-masons search light, the great light; when we start our work at midday, the sun has reached its zenith, there is no more shadow, everything is clear. It is the dream of the Age of Enlightenment, the triumph of Reason. Imagine a perfectly lucid being, capable of mastering his creative impulses with humour and derision and without excessive passion. To this sublimely reasonable being, everything would be Pascal-like entertainment, nothing would be serious. No value would exist, only contempt would be left. He would be immune to fanaticism, as no dictator, however charismatic, could inspire in him anything but boredom and disenchantment. No wonder, no mystery. Life and the universe become sad and mournful.

The five phases of creativity

Fortunately, this realisation of what is really at stake must serve as a prelude to a future rebirth. The Phoenix is reborn from its ashes and we are invited to turn towards the East in order to change our perception on the world and on ourselves.

Perception

The notion of creativity consists of five phases : creativity of perception, creativity of analysis, creativity of invention, creativity of decision and creativity of production. Creativity of perception comes first, chronologically. Our masonic meetings are like schools of perception. When we enter the temple, like in an abstract painting or dimly lit room, familiar objects become odd again. Creativity turns the familiar into the odd and the odd into the familiar. Our perception is perturbed and, in contrast to the profane world, this incites us to create a new reality. We modify our feelings and our attitude towards the world in complete safety, precisely because the ritual is repetitive, predictable and reassuring. This increases our receptiveness, our availability and our openness.

Our ability to apprehend a person who is different from us is thereby facilitated. Paradoxically, creativity requires us to first accept the time necessary for collecting ourselves and meditating. By adopting the same postures, simultaneously performing the same gestures all together as a group, we are effectively saying : I share your perception of the world, I share your values, I am in harmony with you, we are building the same temple, the same reality. Synchronicity and harmonisation are other words for a new born brotherhood. At this stage, we are not conceptualizing but only “making space”. By creating a distance with the outside world, we make space for intuition and become receptive to thinking in terms of images and metaphors.

Intuition

Children and women are said to have intuition. One child had forgotten to have his school report signed. He comes downstairs from his room, mum and dad are eating, dad has just said "Pass me the salt !", Mum answered "Take it yourself !" The kid knows this is probably not the right time to show his report now. It is better to wait for when Mum and Dad are comfortable on the sofa. Intuition means sensitivity to all that is non-verbal in communication.

In a masonic context, perception of postures, of faces, appearances, movements or breathing can be all the more revealing, due to the distance we put between us and the profane world. Perhaps the essential language we use in our meetings doesn't involve the articulation of concepts or analysis, which rely the intellectual verbal content of communication. Rather, our meetings use the language of initiation, the language of analogy that is non-verbal, synthetic, metaphorical and intuitive, a language that uses directly the right-hand side of our brains. Whereas the left-hand side assembles elements rigorously in the style of Sherlock Holmes, the right-hand side functions more like Hercule Poirot, using images, atmosphere, music, myths, analogy and creativity.

Being a freemason means not being pleased, getting indignant, suffering from the discrepancy between our conception of the world and the way we perceive it. Since Epictetus, we've known that what disturbs us are not things themselves but the opinion we have of them. The reasonable man adapts to the world, the unreasonable man tries to change it.

Our perception of the world takes place mainly through the use of analogy so that, regardless of our powers to understand, rationalise, convince or disprove, our essential behaviour and attitude may remain unchanged. In order to change them, we must learn to speak in the language of metaphors and symbols. Our ritual specifies a number of actions to be performed and words to be spoken in a certain way, which sometimes go beyond pure rational understanding. Through this relaxation of our reasoning, new experiences and perceptions are accepted more easily. We make space for novelty.

A student, paralysed by the anguish to make a mistake, inhibited by his perfectionism, unable to finish writing his thesis because he has the feeling that all around him are on the lookout for the slightest snag, will be instructed by a therapist to expose himself willingly and publicly to a ridiculous situation several times so as to break out of his comfort zone. After ordering a Chinese speciality in a Mexican restaurant and by thus, by insisting on having his way, he freed himself from the writing paralysis that had previously inhibited him, without any other work of analysis or interpretation. He had learnt the way that, at least in a profane context, a work of perfection is achieved. Is the process really very different for an entered apprentice who does his three steps as if he was climbing up a ladder carrying a heavy load or a fellowcraft mason who realizes that, after stepping aside who, he could walk straight again ?

The use of and the need for perception exercise our right-hand brain; they allow us to use our intuition. The first two steps of the mysterious ladder are climbed and, as we can see, the link between them is strong. The idea is NOT to combine perception and intuition but to notice that one is a condition for the other and that both enable our imagination to work.

Imagination

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The third aspect of Masonic creativity and the third step of the ladder (the last one I will refer to today) is the imagination. The imagination makes use of images, metaphors, fables and symbols. Charismatic orators have known for a long time that the language of sophists or theological abstractions is less appropriate when speaking to farmers than the parables of the wheat and the chaff or the stray sheep. In order to promote an idea, to arouse desire, you can use a metaphor, a comparison or a symbol which comforts or enriches the “mental map” of your listener. Einstein’s father used to tell him : “X is a little beast and you are a hunter !”, which would explain his taste for equations. Likewise, telling a mason of the twenty-first degree that he is a Noachite might lead him to reconsider his perception of what Noah’s ark really means.

The ark is DIY, creativity, a floating zoo, a chaos of mooing, of trumpeting, of bleating. In contrast, the Titanic represents mastering, abstraction, reason, order, but the one that floats is the former. One could be tempted to remember only the word “ordo” from the phrase “ordo ab chaos” but it only stops the ship from sinking when “chaos” has had enough time to settle. It must have taken quite some time for us to become, amongst various legends, “Chief and Prince of the Tabernacle” (twenty-third and twenty-fourth) “Knight of the Bronze Snake” (twenty-fifth). Scottish Trinitary (twenty-sixth) for which Abraham, Moses and Jesus are called upon. Knight of the Sun (twenty-eighth) where the members of the lodge are cherubs and sylphs and the chairman Adam. And at the thirtieth grade, Jacques de Morlay, Philippe le Bel and Pope Clement the fifth are referred to.

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Does this mean that creativity is a keyword in freemasonry? If we considered, with due attention, the system of degrees only as a flash of the imagination of the conceivers of rituals, we would turn our meetings into commemorations of a creativity by people that once were but are no more. I think this is of secondary importance in what we do. The main thing lies elsewhere.

During a recent meeting, I sat temporarily in the orator’s seat and was to hand it over ritually to the “brother-speaker” of the day. In order to gain time, I decided to hide in some discreet corner of the East, behind the Worshipful Master. At the end of the meeting, one of our beloved brethren told me, both warmly and provocatively : “ What on earth were you doing in the holy of holies ? You’ve got nothing to do behind Solomon !

By turning my move into a prosaic gesture, I had profaned the poetry and the sacred in the place, I had left aside that alertness which enables one to remain attentive and to keep at the ready our ability to perceive space and time. Creativity is in our eyes, in our will to keep alive the texts and symbols that we read.

Creativity for observation, creativity for analysis are scattered elements that we have to bring together. In addition to these are creativity for invention, decision, and implementation, which are instrumental in the process of creation and logically lead us up the next steps of the ladder: first, our reason takes us from the state of dreams and detachment to that of reality; then, art, through the language of symbols leads us from creativity to creation; science makes our work operational; and finally, philosophy gives it its meaning and direction.

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