

Parallels of Native American Spirituality and Masonic Ideas

“That the North American Indians were in possession of Craft Masonry to a great extent has been, to a degree, established.” This was the conclusion of Bro. James Fairbarin Smith, 33rd Degree, in his book titled, “Dateline 1764 Michigan Masonry Vol. 2” published by Michigan’s Grand Lodge in 1979. Bro. Smith’s conclusion was based partly on the historical fact that early European explorers to this region imparted the degrees to Native American chiefs and leaders, and partly on the discovery of two elaborate Worshipful Master jewels. These silver medallions had been handed down through several generations of an Upper Peninsula family of Native Americans. Ancestors of this family included great chiefs and leaders in the Lake Superior region.

Corroborating this hard evidence is a body of anecdotal evidence which suggests the same conclusion: That Native Americans, at some point, began to practice Masonry. Let us consider the Native American “Sun Dance” as described in Charles Eastman’s book “The Soul of the Indian”. Mr. Eastman details a ritual in which the initiate is raised from symbolic death, endures a cut to the chest upon entering the ritual area, and is nearly naked except for a breech-cloth and moccasins. If the symbolism seems even remotely familiar to a Master Mason, then Mr. Eastman’s description of the “Grand Medicine Lodge” should be even more recognizable. The Grand Medicine Lodge was the Native American institution which held back the influence of white missionaries until 1862. Mr. Eastman described it thus:

“The order was a secret one, and in some respects not unlike the Free Masons, being a union or affiliation of a number of lodges...Leadership was in order of seniority in degrees...No member might become a member unless his moral standing was excellent, all candidates remained on probation for one or two years...[The Grand Medicine Lodge] exerted a distinct moral influence, in addition to its ostensible object, which was instruction in the secrets of legitimate medicine.”

Mr. Eastman, speaking of contemporary Native American spirituality in general, pointed out that, “There are to be found here and there superficial accounts of strange customs and ceremonies, of which the symbolism or inner meaning was largely hidden from the observer.” This was none more true than in the rituals which took place under the auspices of the Grand Medicine Lodge. Consider Eastman’s following observations of Lodge ritual:

“...younger members [were] trained to fill the places of those who passed away.”

“A medicine or “Mystery Feast” was not a public affair, as members only were eligible.”

And, consider the Lodge’s highest degree. Called the “Grand Medicine Dance”, it was given on the occasion of initiating candidates who had finished their probation. In this degree (paraphrasing Mr. Eastman’s description) Tylers were appointed, each

member donned their respective regalia, symbolic items were arranged in a particular array about the lodge. The “Great Chief”, who was master of the lodge, stood in the East of the East-West oriented lodge. He gave a sign with his right arm which all present then gave, addressing the Great Mystery as part of the opening ritual. When it came time for the initiation, the candidates partook in silent prayer and received charges to observe all rules of the order. Instructions were given on their duty to fellow men and to God. All were struck by “medicine bags”, symbolically dying from the impact, and then symbolically resurrected.

Certainly, a Master Mason can see the parallels and, indeed, the white man’s influence at work in some of these Native American practices. For both the “Sun Dance” and “Grand Medicine Lodge” were developed after and certainly in response to European settlement in North America. Mr. Eastman pointed out that, before the “Grand Medicine Lodge”, native practices of the ancients were primarily the “sweat lodge” and the ceremonial pipe.

However, let us not be so arrogant as to assume that the institution of Craft Masonry was a gift of refinement and light to the “savage” Native who dwelled in spiritual ignorance. In the other extreme, let us not be so self-flagellating as to believe that the tenants of our Royal Institution were forced upon the Natives as another attempt to “civilize” and subdue them for the white man’s gain. Contrary to both of these sentiments, the very heart and soul of Freemasonry, if not the institution, existed in Native American culture well before 1492. Indeed, it probably existed for hundreds or thousands of years before European exploration of these lands.

The Seneca orator, Red Jacket, once said to a missionary, “We also have a religion which was given to our forefathers, and has been handed down to us their children. It teaches us to be thankful, to be united, and to love one another! We never quarrel about religion.” On the same subject, that of the original Native American spirituality, Charles Eastman said, “I should like to emphasize its universal quality, its personal appeal!” He went on to say, “None might exhort or confess or in any way meddle with the religious experience of another...Our faith might not be formulated in creeds, nor forced upon any who are unwilling to receive it; hence there was no preaching, proselyting, nor persecution, neither were there any scoffers or atheists.”

Mr. Eastman describes the ancient practices of Native Americans in terms that resonate with Masonic virtue. He says of the Indian that, “Every act of his life is, in a real sense, a religious act...Friendship is held to be the severest test of character. It is easy, we think, to be loyal to family and clan, whose blood is in our own veins. Love between man and woman is founded on the mating instinct and is not free from self-seeking. But to have a friend, and to be true under any and all trials, is the mark of a man!” He goes on to say, “The highest type of friendship is the relation of “brother-friend” or “life-and-death friend”. This bond is between a man and a man...It is the essence of comradeship and fraternal love...It was the rule of his life to share the fruits of his skill and success [with] his less fortunate brothers.”

On a more personal level, Mr. Eastman explains that the Native Philosopher saw that, “The spiritual subdues the physical and deals with only the sublime nature of things.” This view seems most Masonic, and, according to Eastman, pre-dates any formal introduction of the Craft to North America. Indeed, the ancient Native Americans first experience of the “Great Mystery” was a deeply personal and, some could say, Masonic experience. Called “hambeday”, which literally means “mysterious feeling” or “consciousness of the divine”, it was experienced by the young Indian after setting out into the wilderness alone. Eastman describes the experience:

“Knowing that God sets no value upon material things, he took with him no offerings or sacrifices other than symbolic objects, such as his paints and tobacco. Wishing to appear before Him in all humility, he wore no clothing save his moccasins and breech-[cloth]...At the solemn hour of sunrise or sunset took up his position, overlooking the glories of the earth and facing the “Great Mystery”. The young Native would receive a vision which would be of profound personal meaning, but “...of the vision or sign vouchsafed to him he did not speak...”

Taking all of this into account, we can see that the Native American may not have had the institution and edifice we call Freemasonry, but he certainly possessed the core themes and central ideas which any Master Mason can recognize. It is obvious that Craft Masonry, from the 16th century onward, gave to the Native certain critical knowledge which we consider essential to the operation of our great institution. But, let us be fair in saying that the universal light of Masonry was no stranger to North America before such time. Indeed, we descendants of European Masonry have much we can learn those Native practices.

I am frequently asked, “What is the purpose of secrecy in Masonry today, especially since so many ‘secrets’ are already well-known and published for anyone to read? Do the secrets really matter?” To this, I have found no satisfying answer in today’s Masonic literature. For this, I turn once again to the Native American, Charles Eastman, who wrote what I consider the finest Masonic Lecture on silence:

“[The Native American] believes profoundly in silence-- the sign of perfect equilibrium. Silence is the absolute poise or balance of body, mind, and spirit. If you ask [the Indian]: “What is silence?” he will answer: “It is the Great Mystery! The holy silence is His voice!” If you ask: “What are the fruits of silence?” he will say: “They are self-control, true courage or endurance, patience, dignity and reverence. Silence is the cornerstone of character.” The moment that man conceived a perfect body, supple, symmetrical, graceful, and enduring-- in that moment he laid the foundation of a moral life! No man can hope to maintain such a temple of the spirit beyond the period of adolescence, unless he is able to curb his indulgence in the pleasures of the senses. Upon this truth the Indian built a rigid system of physical training, a social and moral code that was the law of his life.”

John Gilbert
Paw Paw-Lawton Lodge #25
Paw Paw, Michigan
September 1, 2006
John_kst@hotmail.com