

That Allegorical Bridge

By Gaylord Z. Thomas, 32°

Most people would not consider a bridge to be a symbol for anything, but something you use to take you from one place to another, across something in between. As a young child growing up in southern Indiana with relatives in Kentucky, my earliest thoughts of a bridge were always about the one that went over the Ohio River marking the spot where we left one state and went into another—holding our breath as we crossed it. Others may think of an old covered bridge, or something as fantastic as the Golden Gate Bridge, or something as simple as a footbridge that enabled you to walk through the wooded area near your home or in a nearby park. The very idea of a bridge being a symbol and alluding to something else is not something most people would ever stop to consider.

Yet, now that I am looking at this idea, it's even more clear in my own Masonic journey that I am trying to get somewhere and there will almost certainly be a need for someone to help bridge gaps along the way for me and assist me to reach the destination, or at least get closer to it, bearing in mind that it's much more important to be on the journey than to reach the destination (which none of us ever do—the more we know, the more we know we don't know). And I have been fortunate to have had the right bridges show up at the right times when I've needed them along my way. The idea of me becoming a bridge builder myself is consistent with all I know so far in that I am to continue to help others along their own journey as well.

There are gaps and they're different for each of us (deeper and wider for some than others in varied places along the way). How we ultimately bridge those gaps depends on the direction we're heading—which is ultimately from the earthly to the spiritual. Steps are more often considered symbolic than a bridge might be, climbing or elevating our thoughts and understanding perhaps, whereas we may consider a bridge to be essentially between two things that are more or less on the same level but without a safe connection on that same level, being separated by another medium. If we need to think of going from earthly to spiritual in terms of climbing, you must come to the realization that some broadening at the base must also continue to occur (not unlike a pyramid) or else the climb will likely feel perilous in a short order—like climbing a telephone pole with no place to move laterally. A solid foundation is important and a broad one is good for higher structures.

And with all of these kinds of thoughts, I cannot help but also come back to the Fellowcraft degree and the whole idea of suspension that is depicted in the waterfall and the sheaf of corn. Of course there are suspension bridges as a type of bridge, but when you are on a bridge, you are certainly in a state of suspension as well, just as we are suspended on our journey between where we began and where we're going. And even this idea of suspension is connected with the stairs of the Middle Chamber lecture, and yet there remains a gap as well as most people (again, most) do not recognize the idea of suspension without some help.

As a bridge builder it would stand to reason that we've found the gaps and we're smoothing the road for those who follow us in a way, assuming some will take the same road we're taking, as we've followed the road taken by those before us, advancing and also ascending.

As Masons, we're commonly associated, in terms of building, with the Temples, even Solomon's Temple. In this degree, one of the other key images is the idea of New Jerusalem, a golden city without Temples and yet, while that is not only an elevated idea (to defeat evil forever and there be no need for a Temple), the image itself is of something elevated and somehow descending to us. So, why not stairs? Why a bridge?

At this point in the Scottish Rite degrees, we're actually about to get into more philosophical discussions to include the Kaballah and Tree of Life. The very idea of starting the Council of Kadosh degrees tells us that getting into something "different" and "separating" from what we've been accustomed to, perhaps. There is a "gap" that sets us apart, the same gap we must cross to reach that intermediate destination. In "A Bridge to Light," this New Jerusalem has qualities that are brought to our attention:

"Note too, the sparkling river which runs through the city. It is straddled by the roots of a large tree laden with fruits, leaves and blossoms. This, the Tree of Life, represents truth, the source of all the virtues which grow on the tree as fruit."

So, perhaps we're allegorically to understand that we're about to cross the "sparkling river" and approach this tree and learn more of the truths its fruits have to offer. As this tree is "straddling" this river, the tree itself could be viewed as a bridge across, a bridge which is rather like a ladder and ascends. Once you get on that bridge, which is a ladder as well, there will be no turning back. You either cross and become separated as demonstrated by your actions ultimately, or you will remain suspended there.

There are numerous ways we could take the idea of a bridge (to include the "connection" between things such as all of the numbers, particularly 12, in just this degree), but bearing in mind that we are "bridge builders," that will likely have an impact on how we interpret the allegory and choose to help others make the connection they're searching for on their own journey. What are we building the bridge for? Where are we and where are we trying to go? Where are those behind us going to need a gap bridged? We are certainly trying to advance "thought" and understanding of those who will follow us. We are certainly trying to advance the quality of life for those who will follow us – our children and our culture. And just as certainly, we're trying to advance our own personal understanding of "truths" to the degree at which we can handle them.

Another "theme" in this degree is the Alpha and Omega (first and last). In a very real sense, if you're not at the beginning or at the end, you're somewhere bridged between the two, and we all are, just as we are in many other ideas that come from the idea of duality – neither all good nor all evil and so on – neither in ruins nor at New Jerusalem but somewhere in between. This bridge, which we can view also as the present, will always have to be built, toward the future but staying connected with the past, using what those who've gone before us have learned and advancing it (even if only in a relatively miniscule way compared to the previous contributions of the giants who've gone before us, individually and collectively), and we must do our part to continue to advance society, cultures, our families, and ultimately, truths. In many ways, on the path we're on, we cannot do anything but continue to build the bridge, perhaps even if we're unaware that we're doing so – in part because of the bridge builders who have led the way for us and the bridges they've built or started to build.