

INITIATION: PROFANE, HOLY AND SUBLIME¹

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I. Introduction: Initiation, “The Mysteries”, and their Inspiration of the Great

At its most basic level, initiation is the process by which an individual becomes socialized into a particular society by means of a prescribed set of tests and/or rituals, and thereby gains admission. From this sociological perspective, initiation is taking place at all times and at all levels of society, profane or spiritual—and is engaged in by everyone. At its most sublime, however, initiation is the provenance of mystics, is experienced by the few, and has been thought to have ramifications even beyond mortal life.

As many in this room are aware, the “Mysteries” of the ancient world were a series of initiatic dramas that have inspired men and women for millennia and are a synonym in and of themselves for “initiation” in the abstract and at its most sublime. About these initiatic mysteries, Plato, the father of philosophy, wrote in his *Phaedo*: “I conceive that the founders . . . had a real meaning and were not mere triflers when they intimated in a figure long ago that he who passes unsanctified and uninitiated into the world below will live in [the mud], but that he who arrives there after initiation and purification will dwell with the gods. For ‘many,’ as they say in the mysteries, ‘are the [wand] bearers, but few are the [wizards].’”² Initiation has even been seen to be the civilizing impulse itself, bringing man from a depraved to an elevated state of being. Even 300 years after Plato’s time, the great Cicero wrote in *De Legibus*: “Much that is excellent and divine does Athens seem to me to have produced and added to our life, but nothing better than those Mysteries by which we are formed

¹ What follows is the transcription of a paper delivered at the September 2005 Lodge of Instruction held by Academia Lodge No. 847. The paper was prepared as part of the author’s requirements as an Entered Apprentice to respond both to questions put to all Entered Apprentices under the California Grand Lodge, as well as to fulfill further requirements put to such candidates by Academia Lodge, the first Traditional Observance lodge in the State. Specifically, among other things, the Grand Lodge asks: “What is initiation? Please describe in your answer some historical and symbolic aspects of initiation, what role it has played in human society, and what role you view it playing in your life?” The paper thus departs from the traditional, narrow focus of an academic paper to allow for a response to each of the questions put to the candidate by Grand Lodge. For the convenience of the reader, section headings and full annotations (to include internet and paper sources where available) are included here (but were not included in the oral presentation). Far shorter responses to the other two sets of questions presented to the candidate by Grand Lodge (and which were answered in the same presentation) are omitted from this transcription.

² Plato. PHAEDO 69, in FIVE GREAT DIALOGUES 99. Louise Ropes Loomis, ed. (1942). Many translations leave the original “thyrsus” for “wand”. Also, the word “wizard” here is substituted for the more accurate “mystic”. I have taken poetic license here. In our culture, mystics do not have symbolic wands. Thus “wizard” strengthens the metaphor, and is more provocative. Please note that all references to the classical works contain a reference to the commonly accepted stanza or line number. Herein, therefore, all references to stanza or line number will immediately follow the name of the original work, to wit: *Phaedo* 69 refers to stanza 69 of Plato’s work). Further, for ease of reference on the internet to classical works containing their original stanza markings (but not necessary with the translations given here), refer generally to <<http://www.bartleby.com/>>.

and moulded from a rude and savage state of humanity; and, indeed, in the Mysteries we perceive the real principles of life, and learn not only to live happily, but to die with a fairer hope.”³

This essay will first discuss some of the common attributes of initiations in a variety of traditions and after discuss the role of initiation in both the profane and mystical spheres and propose the following two hypotheses. First, that initiation is a basic and pervasive human instinct, one that we cannot escape, and that is helpful both to the happiness of the individual by giving him a stronger sense of identity, and to society as a whole, by giving it greater stability. The second hypothesis is that initiation is also a process by which relatively few individuals experience a transcendent spiritual regeneration and which also in turn benefits society by a concomitant commitment to teaching and works of charity.

II. The Peculiar Anatomy of Initiation

In both the profane and mystical realms, initiation serves the purpose of socializing the initiate into a particular group. To accomplish this socialization, any one of a great number of components to a particular initiatic system may be involved, most of which are common to the majority of systems, and can include the following: tests of mental or physical stamina; memory or cognitive tests; drama; exhortations or encouragement by leaders in the group; dance, travel or journey through a ritual space (or "footwork"); symbolic gestures (or "handwork"); oaths of obedience; ritual marking of the body or the infliction of wounds or scaring; secrecy; surprise and terror; the interplay of dark and light; ritual or symbolic death; teaching of important beliefs or representational stories; vows of brotherhood or loyalty to the group; invocation or blessing of the group's deity or deities; impartation of secret forms of communication; and/or investment with sacred or secret tokens or clothing.

A. Common Themes

Initiation can consist of a one-time experience, or may involve several levels of ritual taking place over a number of years. The ancient Greek Mysteries consisted of a number of different rituals and were not confined to any one spiritual tradition. In the most highly regarded of these, those originally celebrated at Eleusis, initiation was generally divided into three categories: the lesser mysteries, the greater mysteries (or 'telete' meaning to 'make perfect') and the highest degree, the 'epopteia' meaning 'revelation' or 'moment of prophetic illumination'). The telete were themselves comprised of drómena (things acted), legómena (things said) and deiknémena (things shown).⁴ This layering or spreading out of the group's teachings and insights can serve the dual purposes of shielding the group from the unworthy and also of giving the individual time between stages to more fully grasp the things shown.

Testing of the candidate is a typical feature of initiation and often the precursor to ritual. Feats of endurance are common. In martial societies particularly, there is an emphasis on physical endurance. In the ancient Mysteries, testing often took the form of subjecting the candidate to

³ Marcus Tullius Cicero. DE LEGIBUS 12, in CICERO; ON THE REPUBLIC; ON THE LAWS 415. Clinton Walker Keyes, trans. (Loeb Classical Library) (1928).

⁴ Sanderson Beck. THE MYSTERIES OF ELEUSIS at <<http://www.san.beck.org/eleusis-4.html>>.

terrifying noises or visions. Themisteos, an early common era interpreter of Plato, related that “entering the secret dome; [the candidate] is filled with horror and astonishment. He is seized with loneliness and total perplexity; he is unable to move a step forward, and at a loss to find the entrance to the way that leads to where he aspires to.”⁵ Stobaeus relates that initiation is begun with “a rude and fearful march through night and darkness.”⁶ Plato also relates that a candidate may be subject to “thronósis” or “enthronement”, whereby the initiate is seated on a chair, perhaps blindfolded, while the initiators dance around him wildly and confusingly.⁷ More extreme were the frenzied Bacchic rituals related by Synesius, the popular 5th century neo-Platonist and Bishop, that consisted of ecstatic dancing and song thought to assist the candidate in reaching higher levels of consciousness.⁸ Testing also takes the form of riddles. The ancient Druids were fond of riddles or “dark sayings”⁹. Hopefuls also had to pass poetry exams!¹⁰ Beyond testing the wit or capability of the candidate, his response to riddles may reveal the disposition of the candidate, and may determine, without the candidate’s knowledge, how high the candidate may proceed in further initiations, or whether he proceeds at all. Memorization of doctrinal or other information important to the group may also have to be recited before allowing the candidate to advance. Generally speaking, danger and hardship--and the potential for failure--are important parts of initiation. Malidoma Patrice Somé, a renowned West-African tribal leader who was also educated in the West, relates that among other things, “there will have to be some exercises involving hardship--things that are demanding to the body so the body can be made light enough for the spirit to crack through [its] rigidity.”¹¹

A second important theme in many initiations is employment of the interplay of darkness and light. Many rituals are conducted only at night, and not always because the night may have greater potential for terrorizing the candidate. An excerpt in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius tells of the power of the night as a positive force in and of itself. There, the hero, Lucius, is eventually initiated into the rites of Isis. Lucius relates: “about the first watch of the night, I awoke in sudden terror, the full moon had risen and was shining with unusual splendour as it emerged from the waves. All about me lay the mysterious silence of the night. I knew that this was the hour when the goddess exercised her greatest power and governed all things by her providence--not only animals, wild and tame, but even inanimate things were renewed by her divine illumination and might; even the heavenly bodies, the whole earth, and the vast sea waxed or waned in accordance with her will.”¹² The interplay of dark and light was assumed by Plutarch when he wrote on the similarity of initiation to life and death: “At first one wearily hurries to and fro, and journeys with suspicion dark as one

⁵ Themistius (or Themisteos). ORAT. IN PATEM. 50 at <<http://www.san.beck.org/Eleusis-4.html>>

⁶ Jack Nicholas Casavis. THE GREEK ORIGIN OF FREEMASONRY 111 (1956).

⁷ Plato. EUTHYDEMUS 277d-e in II PLATO IN TWELVE VOLUMES; LACHES, PROTAGORS, MENO, EUTHYDEMUS 397, 99. W. R. M. Lamb, trans. (Loeb Classical Library) (1924).

⁸ Synesius. DIO 1133 in Sanderson Beck. THE MYSTERIES OF ELEUSIS at <<http://www.san.beck.org/eleusis-4.html>>.

⁹ Stuart Piggot. “Riddles and Dark Sayings” in THE DRUIDS 117 (1975) (a comment by Diogenes Laertius, third century historian, on how Druids taught their tribesmen).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Michael Bertrand. “Talking with the Ancestors: Initiation and the Purpose of Life; an interview with Malidoma Patrice Somé”, at <<http://www.banyer.com/interfocus/madlioma.htm>>.

¹² Apuleius. *Metamorphoses* XI, 1-26 in Frederick C. Grant, HELLENISTIC RELIGIONS 136-44 (1953).

uninitiated; then come all the terrors of initiation, shuddering, trembling, sweating, amazement; then one is struck with a marvelous light, one is received into pure regions and meadows, with voices and dances and the majesty of holy sounds and shapes.”¹³

Plutarch’s allusion to death and initiation was not an unusual one. Many features of initiation are seen as ritual death--a separation from the old, prior (uninitiated) life, into a new, different life of membership into the group. Plato himself is said to have stayed three days and nights in the Great Pyramid at Giza in a symbolic death to the uninitiated life. Similarly, ritual bathing or immersion in water serves the purpose of ritual purification and also of ritual death to the profane life. In a culture permeated with Christian symbols, baptism in water to us seems commonplace. But, ritual use of water is also used by Muslims in their temple worship, and by Zoroastrians by use of sacred baths (called “nahan”) in ceremonial waters.¹⁴

B. Typical Initiatic “Tools”

The contents of the central rituals themselves are various, but often employ the use of sacred vessels, implements or arts. Christians make use of consecrated oil, wine and bread, the blessing of water and holy objects. In Esoteric Buddhism, mystical teachings are sometimes communicated only by means of art itself. One form, the Buddhist Mandala, can consist in a drawing of complex design comprising a circular border and one or more concentric circles enclosing a square divided into four triangles; in the center of each triangle, and in the center of the mandala itself, are other circles containing images of divinities or their emblems. During initiation, the guru would blindfold the disciple and put a flower in his hand. The disciple throws the flower into the mandala, and the section into which it falls reveals the divinity who will be especially favorable to him.¹⁵

The rituals themselves tend to employ evocative symbols--such as that of a "sharp instrument" that causes or feigns a physical injury. The physical injury itself is often emblematic of a second birth, a psychic birth into manhood, maturity or membership into the group. Sacred “hand work” (already described) includes hand or stationary body movements that are used to symbolically enact significant events from the past important in the mythology of the group.

Also important, and conceptually next in the process of initiation, involves, commonly, the presence of an altar. The altar was, in most ancient times, the place upon which some living thing was offered in sacrifice to the deity. Later, the initiate may have been placed on the altar to receive a ritual death. Consider the rather linear descent from the sacrifice of the sacred priest, to the sacrifice of a substitute (human, animal or vegetable), to the symbolic injury of the initiate. In whatever form, the sacrifice is a uniting of the human to the divine in some way. Thus, the place in which or on which the sacrifice occurs is considered holy or set apart. Because the altar is such a holy place, other holy events may also take place there. For example, the initiate may be asked to take oaths or be

¹³ Plutarch. ON THE SOUL, in George E. Mylonas, ELEUSIS AND THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES 246-65 (1961).

¹⁴ Jivanji Jamshedji Modi. THE NARIJOTE CEREMONY OF THE PARSIS (1914), 2d ed. at <<http://www.averta.org/ritual/navjote.htm>>.

¹⁵ “Kukasi’s Initiation in the Esoteric Buddhism” in SOURCES OF JAPANESE TRADITION, William Theodore de Bary, trans., 144-46 (1958) at <<http://alexm.hera.ru/mirrors/www.enteract.com/jwalz/eliade/1567.htm>>.

examined there. Further, in our own ritual, the Worshipful Master may make certain signs of consecration over or on the initiate.

Regardless of the particular symbol and what meaning it may have to the group in question, the symbolic aspects of initiation exist to serve both the initiate and the group. The initiate is benefited by being impressed with the grandeur, ancientness (read legitimacy), power and efficacy of the group or of the group's ritual magic (that may comprise teachings, cosmological or epistemological power). Therefore, now admitted into the group's sacred space and having undergone oaths and seen sacred signs, and thus impressed or reminded of the power of the group to transform the individual, the initiate undergoes ritual movement and liturgy (ritual or magic words) in order to be transformed himself.

This transformation can take many forms. For one, the initiate can be purified. The symbol of circumambulation can be seen as a form of ritual purification. The divestment of the initiate of his profane clothing and his investment with clothing in ritual or holy garb, or perhaps nakedness or ritual bathing, can perform the same purpose.

Whatever the contents of a particular ritual, secrecy is often employed to ensure that teachings are not communicated to those who are either unworthy or incapable of understanding them. Impressing the seriousness of the secrecy itself often takes elaborate forms and is often effective. Pausanias, the great Greek chronicler of the 2d century of the common era, described his own experience when tempted to reveal initiatic secrets: "I purposed to pursue the subject, and describe all the objects that admit of description in the sanctuary at Athens called Eleusinion, but I was prevented from so doing by a vision in a dream. I will, therefore, turn to what may be lawfully told to everybody."¹⁶ Further, although confronted with death in a trial for witchcraft, Apuleius stated in his defense in the *Apología*: "To others I would announce in the clearest voice: if any of you who happen to be present have been partakers with me in these same solemn rites, give the sign and you shall hear what it is that I am preserving. For no consideration of personal safety will compel me to declare to the uninitiated (*ad profanos*) what things I have accepted to be kept in secret."¹⁷ To encourage the constancy of the initiate, threats of violence are often employed. Australian tribal initiators tell of the impending doom of the earth and their entire people if the uninitiated are given their secrets. Initiates are told: "You must never tell this. You must not tell your mother, nor your sister, nor any one who is not [initiated]."¹⁸ A spear was held pointed at the novices to emphasize the threats made.¹⁹

Secret words and secret language are often employed to allow initiates to discuss protected topics without fear of revealing them to the uninitiated. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, a pass-phrase was used: "I fasted; I drank the kykeon; I took out of the chest; having done my task, I put again into

¹⁶ Pausanias. I, 14,3 in Frazer, trans. at <<http://alexm.here.ru/mirrors/www.enteract.com/jwalz/Eliade/148.html>>.

¹⁷ Apuleius. APOLOGIA 55-56 in Sanderson Beck. THE MYSTERIES OF ELEUSIS at <<http://www.san.beck.org/eleusis-4.html>>.

¹⁸ A.W. Hoit. "Patterns of Initiation--an Australian Tribal Initiation" in THE NATIVE TRIBES OF SOUTH-EAST AUSTRALIA 628-31 (1904) at <<http://alexm.here.ru/mirrors/www.enteract.com/jwalz/Eliade/142.htm>>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the basket, and from the basket again into the chest.”²⁰ Some say that the Druids used one Celtic language “Q-Celtic” as a sort of secret language to communicate among each other, and certainly used allegorical riddles and poems to communicate and yet shield their teachings.²¹

Thus, purified, blessed, tested, bound by oath, and brought to life, the candidate is invested with the tools he will need in the group. He may be given ritual tokens (in the Roman Mysteries “signa et monumenta”)²², secret communication, special clothing (often white or never before worn, such as the Zoroastrian “sudre”)²³ or other encouragement and reminders of his new life, his new membership.

Now having considered a number of the elements and symbols of initiatic experiences, this essay will discuss the role of initiation in society, both in the profane and mystical realms.

III. “Profane” Initiation

First, the profane. By this I do not mean “antireligious”, but instead “secular”, or per the American Heritage Dictionary “not admitted into a body of secret knowledge or ritual; uninitiated.”²⁴ Interestingly, the word comes from Latin via French meaning “before [or outside] the temple”.²⁵ In this broad sense, initiation is a process, as already stated, of socialization.

In profane initiation, identities within a group are conferred. Such conferring of identity is a very large and very important social function. This is because human beings are hard-wired to have particular ‘identities’ that are understood by society. In a sense, there is very little ‘self-referential’ activity. Rather, nearly all humans, if not all, constantly act, think, believe, and feel in order to perpetuate what they believe or hope their identity in society to be. Even the eremitic (hermit) life can be seen as a counterpoint to the society from which the hermit has escaped. Therefore, the stability (or perhaps static-ness) of a particular society may be dictated to the extent that identities are clearly delineated.

For example, before the age of the Enlightenment, nearly every vocation was accompanied by membership into a group that had rituals through which an initiate was required to pass. Kings, nobles and priests certainly underwent initiatic ritual. Similarly, all levels of skilled workers and professionals had their own initiatic rituals, for example, the rituals of stone masons which some believe were the genesis of our own. These initiatic experiences served to solidify in the members their identity, enabling them to move with confidence in their role and to provide that sense of stability and continuity that all societies need to thrive. As a counterpoint--in this “rationalistic” (if not entirely rational) society of the early 21st century of the common era--it is easy to discount the

²⁰ Clement of Alexandria. PROTREPTIKOS II, 21 at <<http://alexm.here.ru/mirrors/www.enteract.com/jwalz/Eliade/148.html>>; Clement of Alexandria. EXHORTATION TO THE GREEKS II, 18.

²¹ Ann Ross and Don Robins. LIFE AND DEATH OF A DRUID PRINCE 148 (1990).

²² Apuleius. APOLOGIA 55-56 in ANCIENT ROMAN RELIGION 226-28, Frederick C. Grant, trans. (1957).

²³ See note 14.

²⁴ THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, 4th ed. (2000).

²⁵ II THE COMPACT EDITION OF THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 2316 (1971).

necessity of such stability to society--but one need only look today at our reliance on certain economic indicators and their intersection with perceived political and social stability to see the need of societies for a sense of stability in which to flourish.

We should therefore absolutely not believe that initiation, even in this profane and general sense, is only a thing of the past, or perhaps only a reactionary desire to relive the perceived glories of the past. Rather, our society today experiences initiation at all levels. This may be demonstrated by looking at some important aspects of life and trying to imagine them without ritual.

Look at our present-day kings (presidents), nobles (professionals) and priests. They all undergo ritual initiation. The President of the United States does not just show up on the first day of work at the White House and begin appointing his staff. On the contrary, he takes a ritualistic walk or ride from one part of the capital of the nation to another. He thereafter recites a solemn oath upon a volume of the sacred law (often a Masonic Bible), listens to an invocation and blessing from one or more leaders of the most important religious factions of the nation, and then he speaks to an assembled group of dignitaries and lucky plebians. This is ritualistic initiation, just as much as a regal coronation or a priestly investiture.

Similarly, birth is often marked by baptism (which, it should be observed, is a ritual immersion in water consecrated with sacred words uttered by a priest). Later, important academic milestones are greeted by ritual perambulations and marriages begin with the exchange of tokens, the taking of vows and ritual exhortations. Further, even courts are brought into session by ritual rising of the assembled congregation and legal papers are concluded with "prayers" for relief. In turn, professionals take exams rather noted for their grueling nature and as tests of endurance more than as tests of proficiency. And contracts are made by the affixing of the mystical power of the writing of a name.

As initiation is already a fact in our lives, consciously acknowledging the existence of initiatic ritual and further valuing those experiences as such, may only serve to strengthen the bounds of identity and stability that these rituals can bring to individuals and society.

While initiation serves societies by providing them with cohesive membership and serves individuals by conferring identity, initiation has been thought to have yet a further aim--and that is no less than to achieve a complete, mystical union with the Divine. In less exalted, and more psychological language, initiation can be seen as a process by which the individual escapes the bounds of the ego personality.

IV. Initiation: Holy and Sublime

Plato presupposed the immortality of the soul and multiple incarnations. He also believed that by contemplating the nature of reality, letting go of petty, carnal desires, and thereby becoming a "true philosopher", he could learn, or better yet, "remember" things he had learned in past lives. He states in his *Meno*: "Since, then, the soul is immortal and has been born many times, since it has seen all things both in this world and in the other, there is nothing it has not learnt. No wonder, then, that it is able to recall to mind goodness and other things, for it knew them beforehand. For, as all reality is akin and the soul has learnt all things, there is nothing to prevent a man who has recalled--or, as people say, 'learnt',--only one thing from discovering all the rest for himself, if he will pursue the search with unwearying resolution. For on this showing all inquiry or learning is nothing but

recollection.”²⁶ Plato called this “recollection” “anámnesis”--a recollection of truths beyond the reach of intellect.²⁷

As stated, Plato himself was an initiate into the Mysteries. Further, there is growing support for the proposition that Plato was not merely an arid philosopher in the narrow, modern sense. Rather, he is increasingly seen as a religious figure, but a religious figure who believed that man’s highest calling was to reunite with the divine by means of contemplating the *eidós* (“the forms”), or the true nature of things.

The problem is that the true nature of things cannot always be communicated adequately by words alone. Enter initiation. Plato was concerned about communicating the “great light of the Good”--how to awaken a sleepy, cynical world and, on the other extreme, how to temper the enthusiasm of those who believe, but who should not rush in unprepared to wisdom. He believed that initiation could communicate the “unutterable mysteries” that human speech cannot express (the “arrheta”) and that there are proscribed teachings about which it is unlawful to speak openly (the apporrheta”). To accomplish this, the initiate is exposed to sacred stories that allow him to “see things together” (“synoptikos”) as a unitary whole--in metaphysical terms, to see the One in the many, and the many in the One.²⁸

Plato hinted at a psychological (or psychical?) journey of the soul through initiation whereby a good man would ascend from the underground hollows of the physical earth, to the surface of the “true earth” or reality: “If any man . . . could take the wings of a bird and come to the top, then, like a fish who puts his head out of the water and sees this world, he would see a world beyond; and if the nature of man could sustain the sight, he would acknowledge that [that] world was the place of the true heaven and the true light and the true earth.”²⁹ By means of this process, the “true philosopher”, the initiate into the highest mystery, finally confronts the evil within himself, that “monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the [hundred headed] serpent Typhon.”³⁰ Thereby, the wild beast of the lower, carnal nature, can be tamed and mastered by the “*Nous*”, the divine self; the divine within.

Plato’s mystical union with the *Nous* and the victory of the higher nature over the passions, was precursored by the belief in many of the Mystery adherents in the efficacy of initiation to bring eternal life. In the Hymn to Demeter, we read: “Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen these mysteries; but he who is uninitiated and who has no part in them never has lot of like good

²⁶ Plato. MENO 81 in PLATO; THE SYMPOSIUM AND OTHER DIALOGUES 79 (1964).

²⁷ Raghavan Iyer. in HERMES, (Oct. 1978) at <<http://theosophy.org/tlodocs/anamnesis.htm>>.

²⁸ See generally Plato. REPUBLIC 537c, 511b, 532-3 in VI PLATO IN TWELVE VOLUMES; THE REPUBLIC 219, 113, 115 (Loeb Classical Library) (1935); Plato. PHAEDRUS 266e in I PLATO IN TWELVE VOLUMES 227a (Loeb Classical Library); Plato. PHILEBUS 16c in VIII PLATO IN TWELVE VOLUMES 11A (Loeb Classical Library); Plato. PARMENIDES in IV PLATO IN TWELVE VOLUMES 193 (Loeb Classical Library) (1926).

²⁹ Plato. PHAEDO 109c-e in PHAEDO. B. Jowett, trans. at <<http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/lit/socialcommentary/Phaedo/chap6>>.

³⁰ Plato. PHAEDRUS 230a in I PLATO IN TWELVE VOLUMES 227a (Loeb Classical Library).

things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom.”³¹ Further, according to Sophocles: “Thrice happy are those of mortal, who having seen those rites depart for Hades; for to them alone is it granted to have true life there; to the rest all there is evil.”³² Finally, according to Pindar: “Happy is he who, having seen these rites, goes below the hollow earth; for he knows the end of life and he knows its god-sent beginning.”³³

Plato’s explanation of the state of mind of the initiated, the “true philosopher”, is exemplified by Socrates’ attitude toward death, as related by Socrates’ friend, Phaedo. Phaedo relates: “For my part, I had strange emotions when I was there [at Socrates’ deathbed]. For I was not filled with pity as I might naturally be when present at the death of a friend; since he seemed to me to be happy, both in his bearing and his words, he was meeting death so fearlessly and nobly. And so I thought that even in going to the abode of the dead he was not going without the protection of the gods, and that when he arrived there it would be well with him, if it ever was well with anyone. And for this reason I was not at all filled with pity, as might seem natural when I was present at a scene of mourning; nor on the other hand did I feel pleasure, as was our custom when we were occupied by philosophy [as we were even then] . . . but a very strange feeling came over me, and unaccustomed mixture of pleasure and of pain together, when I thought that Socrates was presently to die.”³⁴

The antithesis of this “very strange feeling” of Phaedo--the “feeling” of the initiated, of the true philosopher, is the man trapped in his conventional ego personality. William Blake put it like this in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; “For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”³⁵

V. The Entered Apprentice’s Personal Response to Initiation

Specific to my life experience, I understood that when I took the bar exam to enter into my vocation as an attorney, I was engaging not just in a series of questions to be answered, but in a ritual test, the emotional scars from which experience (to engage in some hyperbole) I knew would be identifying marks upon me and my fellow attorneys for the rest of my life. Further, I knew that when I took my marriage vows, that the significance of those vows would stay with me for eternity. Further, when I enlisted in the Army, I knew when I suffered through basic training that the physical and emotional rigors that I was being asked to surmount were put before me not just to give me skills for combat, but to learn the ethos and values of the armed services, and learn to experience the trust and respect of my fellow soldiers.

For me, experiences of initiatic ritual have been experiences of joy. Even the feat and nervousness of standing at a church altar and watching my bride walk down the aisle, and the anxiety and mental torment of memorizing volumes of information and enduring three straight days of exams in order to become a lawyer, and eight weeks of basic training to become a soldier, were all pleasurable (in

³¹ HYMN TO DEMETER 480-82 in HESIOD, THE HOMERIC HYMNS, AND HOMERICA 323 Hugh. G. Evelyn-White, trans. (Loeb Classical Library) (1920).

³² Sophocles. FRAGMENT 719 in G.E. Mylonas, trans. ELEUSIS AND THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES 284 (1961).

³³ Pindar. FRAGMENT 102 in G.E. Mylonas, trans. ELEUSIS AND THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES 285 (1961).

³⁴ Plato. PHAEDO, in FIVE GREAT DIALOGUES 86-87, Louise Ropes Loomis, ed. (1942).

³⁵ William Blake. MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL in WILLIAMS BLAKE; COLLECTED POEMS 170 (1905).

part) because I knew that I had entered into ritual space and I desired very much to collect those experiences as parts of my psychic clothing, my inner identity, and add to my strength of character.

In a similar way, every time I have the pleasure of engaging in the ritual of a tiled lodge, I am entering deeper into that initiatic process. The role this plays for me is the sense of spiritual feeding, of nurturing, that gives me emotional and mental security.

VI. Conclusion: Rejoice!

The ancient Orphic mysteries fully embraced the eternal efficacy of its initiatic rights. So much so that nearly all its sacred hymns end with a short tribute to them.³⁶ In conclusion, I believe that we as Freemasons may also safely take those words as our own:

The sacred rites benevolent attend
and grant a blameless life, a blessed end.
Propitious to thy mystics' works incline
rejoicing come, for holy rites are thine.³⁷

³⁶ Harold R. Willoughby. PAGAN REGENERATION: A STUDY OF MYSTERY INITIATIONS IN THE GRACEO-ROMAN WORLD (1929) at <http://public-domain-content.com/blooks/classic-greece_rume/pr/proo.shtml>; see also <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/pr/pr06.htm>>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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