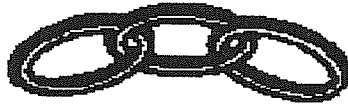


# The Three Links



"The Three Links are emblematical of the chain by which we are bound together in Friendship, Love and Truth. We are anchored by them to the steadfast purposes of our covenant, and are cautioned to keep them untarnished and free from rust, as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link."

— Theodore Ross, *Illustrated History of Odd Fellowship*

The symbol of the Three Links is the most important and distinctive of the public symbols of Odd Fellowship; it plays roughly the same role of organizational icon that the square and compasses do for Freemasonry or, say, the elephant and donkey do for those two political parties. In the days when anyone knew anything about Odd Fellowship at all, the Three Links and the order were a matter of instant association.

Once we take the symbol into its context as part of the symbolism assigned to the Initiatory Degree, though, we enter a territory awash with paradox. Very nearly the first thing that happens to the candidate when he enters the lodge room for the first time is that he is bound with chains. This is emblematic of his condition *before* he enters the lodge: "Man in darkness and in chains...the condition of millions of our race, who are void of wisdom, though they know it not." The candidate passes through the ritual in order to become freed from his fetters. That act of liberation, however, far from univocal; the chains come off when the candidate agrees to enter into another kind of limitation, that represented by the Odd Fellows obligation. The chains of "mental and moral slavery," as they are called a little later in the ritual, are replaced by the chains of fraternal obligation; and the freedom which the new initiate is urged to maintain is the gift of an order whose principal public symbol is, again, a section of chain.

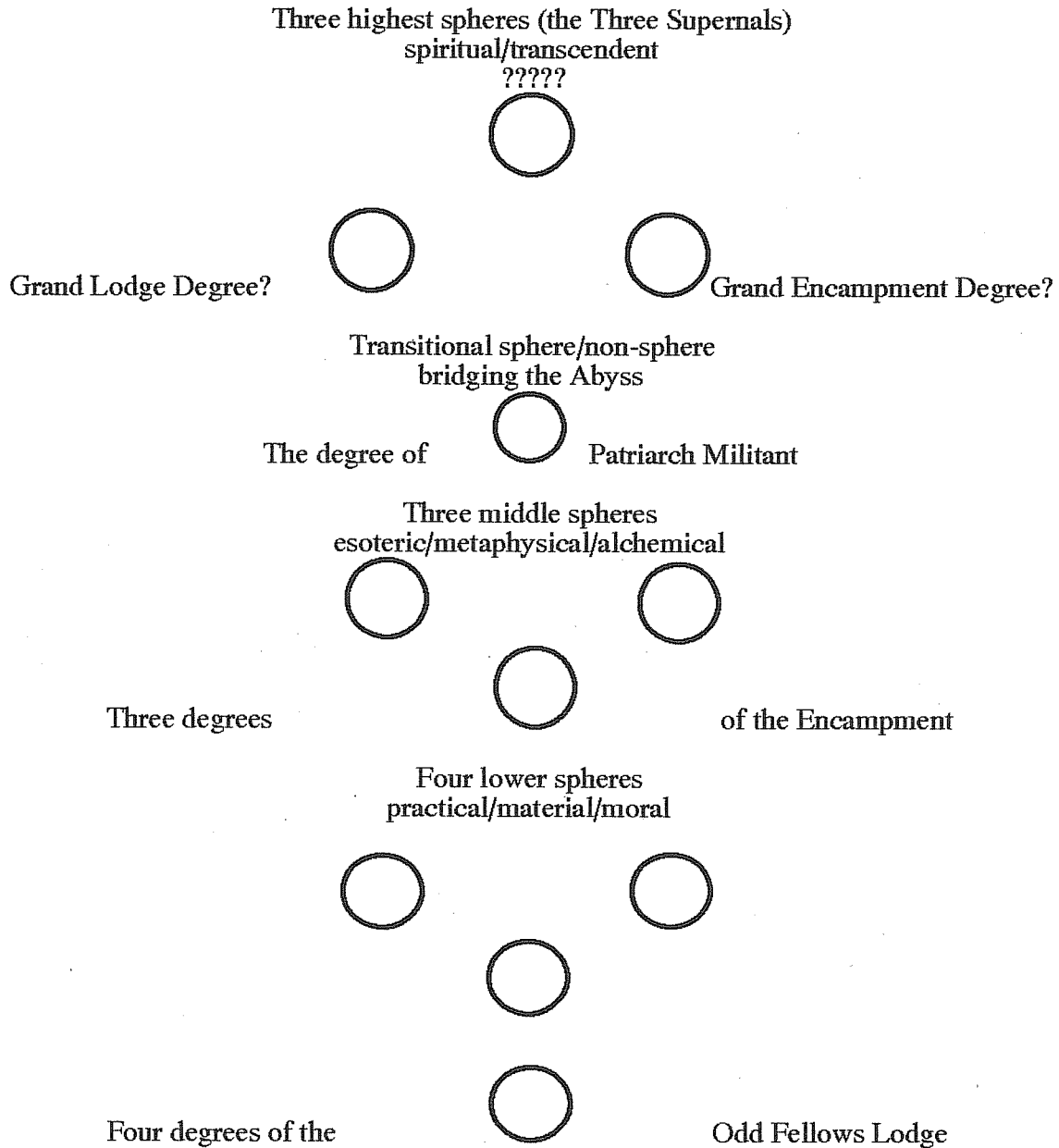
There are deeper waters here. The chain is also one of the principal symbols of cosmic order; one reads much, in older books, of the "Great Chain of Being" in which every phenomenon from matter to spirit has its natural place. An image from Homer's *Iliad* — the Golden Chain which binds earth, sea and sky together, and with which Zeus can haul the entire world plus all the other gods and goddesses up out of place, leaving it hanging in the air — was a common icon of this concept in many circles well into the nineteenth century. "He has bound Man with the stars as with a chain." At times this imagery veers close to an almost Gnostic identification of the manifest universe as a place of imprisonment, as when the Initiatory Degree candidate is shown a skeleton and told that this marks the end of the servitude of soul to the outer senses.

Perhaps the defining form of all this imagery in Western culture is Plato's metaphor of the Cave from the *Republic*. (The Initiatory Degree, in particular, seems to have been heavily influenced by this source.) In Plato's account, the prisoner who is unshackled and brought out of the Cave has to be dragged by the scruff of his neck up the rough and rocky path that leads to the outer world. His experiences on the way have little to do with freedom in the ordinary sense of the word — but they lead to freedom in the end.

It's in this sense, perhaps, that the Three Links might best be understood in their deeper senses. The Odd Fellow exchanges — in symbol, and at least occasionally in reality — the familiar burden of ignorance and selfishness for the unfamiliar one of the requirements of a brotherhood striving together to enact a set of ideals in the world. It's along the same lines that the Sanskrit word *yoga* is cognate with the English word "yoke." In this light Odd Fellowship might be seen as a discipline aimed at goals going far beyond the obvious ones.

# The Odd Fellow Degrees and the Tree of Life

The Tree of Life is one of the major diagrams of Western esoteric thought. Most of us in Ballard Encampment are familiar with it in one form or another, but we may not all have noticed that it has a certain very precise correspondence with the degree structure of Odd Fellowship.



The question that remains — was there a higher level to Odd Fellowship, with three specifically spiritual degrees (perhaps Swedenborgian in focus)? Or was there a single secret high degree? Or was the system intentionally incomplete?