

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

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The first *question* put to the newly initiated Entered Apprentice when he is called before the lodge to prove his proficiency in the First Degree, “*Where were you first prepared to be made a Mason?*” in my opinion, holds the key to the entire philosophy of Freemasonry. When the candidate is passed to the Second Degree, there are several references made to “*the winding stair.*” Again, this holds to key to an understanding of the underlying philosophy of the Craft. “*Where does the winding stair really lead?*” “*Where is the Middle Chamber?*” When he is raised to the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason, once again he learns that “*the genuine secrets*” are to be found at “*the centre.*”

So, let's get back to basics – the timeless, yet timely core values at the heart of Freemasonry and the reason it has survived and flourished, “*through all its vicissitudes*” for centuries..

To fully comprehend and appreciate what Freemasonry is really all about, we must ever be mindful that it is, first and foremost, an **Initiatory Order** in the business of assisting men, through precept and example, to transform their lives by realizing their own inner potential. It presents a graduated system of self-improvement based upon self-discipline. This is symbolized by the *ashlars* – two blocks of stone that are placed in every lodge – one rough-hewn, the other shaped and polished. It has been said that the whole of Freemasonry lies between those two stone symbols “*that lie open in the lodge for the brethren to moralize on.*” We can never hope to reach ‘*perfection*’ in this mortal state. If we are honest with ourselves, being human, most of us must confess that “*we have done those things that we ought not to have done and left undone those things that we ought to have done.*” We can ‘*press toward the mark of our high calling*’ as men and as Masons.

To shape stone, the working mason or the sculptor first chooses an unflawed piece of granite or marble from the quarry, and then with mallet and chisel skilfully removes the rough outer surface to reveal its inner beauty, producing either a building block or an artistic masterpiece. Thus did the great Michelangelo produce the perfect male figure of David out of a block of marble. The magnificent cathedrals, abbeys, and castles that are the architectural glory of Europe attest to their consummate skill and artistry.

To continue the analogy, we admit men of good character after a careful and thorough prescribed process of investigation, balloting, and acceptance. Once admitted, our rites

and ceremonies provide a learning opportunity in the company of like-minded trustworthy men. The oft quoted slogan, "*We take good men and make them better men*" is an oversimplification. Freemasonry may set the standard, but the individual is the only one that can improve himself. The process of self-improvement is a lifelong journey of discovery, the goal of which is to achieve the ideal – "*a just and upright man.*" That surely is our *raison d'être*. The object of meeting together in the lodge, as the General Charge reminds us, is "*the cultivation and improvement of the human mind.*" When we enter the lodge, we enter the temple of the mind.

Over the centuries the fraternity has acquired many customs, usages, traditions, and protocols: the form of the lodge, ritual, formal dress, regalia, rank and title, banquet protocol, modes of recognition peculiar to the Craft. Some of these we inherited from the ancient stonemasons' guilds when we adopted and adapted their tools and terms to illustrate our moral principles. It must be admitted that many of these observances have been retained and perpetuated for historical reasons. Others have been adopted from a more formal age in which the Craft developed. In themselves, they have little to do with 'the heart of the matter.' But the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Since the emergence of modern Freemasonry in the Age of Enlightenment, we have been defined as 'a gentleman's philosophical society' posing the fundamental questions every thinking man must ask himself, "*Whence come you?*" and "*Whither are you directing your course?*" If I understand it correctly, the object of Freemasonry is to guide and assist the serious seeker to find satisfying and rewarding answers to those essential questions which define the purpose of life. Then, and only then will we be "*happy ourselves*" and in a position to "*communicate that happiness to others.*"