The Middle Chamber and the Ethic of Self Improvement

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This paper consists of two things: a report on an experiment in Masonic education undertaken in January 1996 at Widow's Sons' Lodge in Charlottesville, and a rationale for an ethic of self-improvement as revealed in the experience of our second degree. Most of the ideas presented here grew out of that study group and its various meetings. We called our group "The Winding Staircase," after what is perhaps the central element of the ceremony of Passing to the second degree. I have always viewed that group as an expression of the type of essential Masonic behavior prescribed to—and expected of—Fellow Crafts. When we sit in a research lodge setting, or when we come together to discuss ideas in a rational manner—even though we may be opened as a Master Mason lodge—we are acting as Fellow Crafts.

It seems erroneous to regard the three degrees of the blue lodge as if they were grades or steps, which once passed need not be reconsidered. They may instead function as modes of expression, aspects of personality, indeed as potential areas for personal growth—all of which are present within us and which find expression depending on circumstances. Many authors have written upon this aspect of the Lodge within man and the purposes of lodge ritual. I will consequently present here only a skeleton outline of the Entered Apprentice and Master Mason's degrees in terms of man's interior state, and then pass on to the Fellow Craft.

The Entered Apprentice as a mode of behavior concerns itself with a sense of newness or birth, with the physical nature of existence, survival, money and business, physical and moral cleanliness, and the need for secrecy. It is the first floor of a metaphorical inner

temple. For the Entered Apprentice mode of thinking, the emphasis lies with self. Here is the initial awakening to the presence of a three-tiered structure: the sketching out of a means of thinking about man in terms of foundation, middle, and top floor . . . or body, soul and spirit.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the Master Mason's degree. If you examine the ritual and especially the allegory it contains—being that of Hiram Abiff—you see that as a degree it is concerned with the preparation for ending: for death, with establishing and strengthening the connection to the Supreme Architect, with an abiding sense of charity or love, and with a kind of rebirth and redefinition of ourselves in brand new terms. Symbolically, it is the top floor of an inner temple. As a mode of thinking, the emphasis is on transcending personal limitations, on seeking to know one's Creator. Master Mason thinking sublimates the needs of self to the needs of others.

In between these two lies the mode of the Fellow Craft. If you examine Fellow Craft ritual—if you listen to the Senior Deacon's lecture—you will recognize that it is the degree of growth, mental development, learning and progress. It is our Middle Chamber—a chamber which, more than anything else, directs the relationship *between* self and other. W. Kirk MacNulty aptly describes the process that the Fellow Craft undertakes, and which all humans experience to some degree in developing our relationship to the world:

> "The psychological processes of labour in the Second Degree are difficult and painful. Nonetheless, if the individual perseveres, he finds himself in the state of the mature Fellowcraft, in possession of himself, conscious of his standards of morality, and able to exercise his will freely. The ability to do this is the most fundamental objective of the Second Degree, for until a person is truly in possession of his will he cannot surrender it; and advancement to the Third Degree require exactly that."

Self-possession, consciousness of personal moral standards, and the exercise of free will: these are the hallmarks of a Fellow Craft, as MacNulty has aptly put it. The Fellow Craft degree aims at fostering and strengthening a personal stance—a feeling of personal integrity that is neither closed-off and naive, nor angry and cynical. It is well informed and capable of standing up to the rigors of examination. Consequently, learning and knowledge become paramount so that the acts of a Fellow Craft become temperate and well considered.

Some prefer to say that while the Entered Apprentice degree correspond to the body, and the Master Mason degree corresponds to the Spirit, the Fellow Craft degree represents the soul or mind. This three-part analogy comprises the depiction of the lodge within each man. And herein lies the principle reason we chose the staircase symbol as the name of a discussion group. The staircase symbolizes ascent and development, and a cyclical mode of travel through the world of knowledge and experience. The study group, "The Winding Staircase", was intended to emphasize the learning and progress associated with the Middle Chamber and the development of a personal stance to life which was well-considered and virtuous.

Many of the excellent papers presented each year at Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777 deal with historical figures, with untangling misconceptions about ritual, or with uncovering some fascinating lore that renders an ancient tradition such as ours ever more interesting and colorful. As Masons who are interested in research, we often seem more comfortable with historical facts, with hard evidence and in recreating the life of some famous Masonic figure. Certainly we cannot understate the importance of history and of keeping accurate Masonic records. Indeed, maintaining a strong link with the past helps us to preserve who we are; there is a great strength in the sense of continuity. Yet, this historical aspect cannot be the whole coin of our intellectual effort. Otherwise, we operate under a contradiction, for the greatest lessons of Masonry are not historical in nature at all. They are moral and spiritual in scope. Here is the other side of that coin.

Although historical scholarship is essential in documenting our Masonic legacy, discovering the essence of Freemasonry depends upon labor in a different quarry. It is useful, from time to time, to just sit down and ask again the obvious questions—the ones we asked our coaches the day after our initiations when, like wide-eyed children we wanted to know everything there was to know about Masonry. We faced our coaches as thirsty sponges eager for a new well-spring of knowledge. If they have done their jobs, our coaches will have better acquainted us with the jewels of Masonic labor and will have encouraged us to dig for ourselves. Such thirst for information and knowledge may become short-circuited over time, however, out of fear and out of a concern for the outward appearance of the Fraternity.

There is a certain cynicism at work in the world—a suspicion of any group that attempts to provide a code of moral behavior, especially if that group falls outside the boundaries of organized religion. Freemasonry has been stung with accusations by certain fundamental religious movements, which charge that our agenda lies contrary to that of organized religion. As a result, many Masons have become wary of appearing overly interested in topics that might be labeled as either egg-headed or mystical in nature. Hence in our lodges, in our dealings together and in our discussions, we slowly condition ourselves to gloss over what is central to Freemasonry, and what is behind every lesson that we have been exposed to in our passage from darkness to light as Masonic brethren. Instead, we take up the nevertheless laudable topics of public charity, of lodge finance, and the life and times of famous Masons. These are not only easier to think about, but they are also safer.

We must remember the core of our tradition in order to preserve a sense of heart in our Masonic goals. The path of the Freemason is based upon the acknowledgment of a Supreme Architect—this is, after all, the foundational requirement for membership—and the series of solemn oaths we thereafter take essentially promise that our actions will reflect our awareness of an over-riding presence, and that we will be about the business of our own transformation. That transformation comprises an ongoing evolution from

rough to perfect ashlar while here in the world. This is not accomplished when we receive a degree. A degree should function rather as if it were a Commission to begin the important next phase of Masonic and personal growth. Our own children are not afraid to ask the tough questions—the ones that go right to the heart of their perplexity. And so should we never stop asking questions of our ritual. It is so customary to see those who have given up on understanding, and who prefer to go sleep-walking through life. At every degree of our Masonic progress we asked for Light, and did so quite specifically. But fulfilling this request has always implied more than token efforts on our part. The few moments of experience which ritual provides us can never fully convey it. The granting of Light is only symbolic at those points. It is up to us and our individual efforts to transform that symbolic light to real light.

The experiment in Masonic education mentioned at the beginning of this talk was initiated with the formation of "The Winding Staircase." It was formed in January 1996 from interested brethren of Widow's Sons' Lodge No. 60. For the first three years of its existence, we gathered together on one Sunday night out of each month to share our personal ideas about the Fraternity. There would be an announced topic for the evening and someone would be appointed as moderator to keep things on track. This simple format worked well. We operated under the premise that together, we might gain a greater understanding of what the ritual was trying to convey to us. In other words, brethren, the group we called "The Winding Staircase" agreed to get together primarily to ask one question, and this one question we asked over and over, *what does it mean?*

During its first year, "The Winding Staircase" worked very hard at examining the three degrees of the blue lodge, and it looked at each one separately, spending approximately three months on each degree. As the year went by, the membership began to discover the magnitude of that task. Discussions ranged well into the evening, yet each meeting was judged to have ended prematurely. We discovered that one year was not sufficient to comprehend the ideas encoded into even a single degree, much less all of them.

We pored over the ritual, the catechisms, the lectures; and the ideas we brought up ranged from Greek and Roman mystery religions such as Eleusinian and Mithraic practices, to the scientific method and the Big Bang. Meetings like these, attended by men who in their eagerness for Light will leave no stone unturned, have the power to throw one's mental horizons wide-open at any moment. We began to realize that in order to educate ourselves about Masonry, it had become necessary to educate ourselves about all of human culture. And that, most definitely, is a humbling and endless process.

You must summon a certain courage to test yourself on a literary classic, a great book of the western world. Such a work quickly reveals the limits of your own comprehension. When, however, you sit down and begin to struggle with the likes of Francis Bacon (The New Atlantis, The Advancement of Learning) or John Locke (Second Treatise on Government, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding) or try your hand at Plato (Dialogues), or Euclid (The Elements) two interesting things begin to happen. If you have struggled honestly, the next work you pick up will have mysteriously become easier to comprehend. Secondly, you will develop a dawning realization that running throughout the Western canon are strains of thought which are undeniably Masonic in nature. As an example, you can unearth material about the four cardinal virtues and trace their evolution back into early Greek culture. They appear in the writings of the Roman orator Cicero in his work: De Inventione. About five hundred years earlier, Plato mentioned them in several of his dialogues, perhaps most specifically in his "Symposium," and did so in a way which implied that even four hundred years before Christ, the ideas of temperance, fortitude, prudence and justice were already established as moral necessities. Moving forward to the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of the scholastic philosophers and perhaps the greatest writer which Christendom has known, codified these four cardinal virtues, along with the three theological virtues which Masons know (Faith, Hope and Charity) into his massive work, the Summa Theologica. This example does not even touch upon sources from farther into the Orient, which itself provides a most fertile tradition.

The point I am making with this small example is that Masonic symbolism never materialized out of thin air—out of one man's head—but has roots in all of human culture. It was gradually codified into what we know today by men who would have been highly educated. Such men did not spend their entire lives counting pennies and trading stocks, but took their Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences very seriously. In other words, we are the rich inheritors of this tradition because our predecessors were not only merchants, or bankers, businessmen or builders who got together for a couple of ales in the tavern once a month, but because they believed that building up mental wealth was an integral part of their responsibility as torch bearers of the Fraternity.

Not everyone can run an Olympic Marathon or compete in a Decathlon. But that will not stop "Mr. Hiram Smith" from going out and jogging or walking twenty minutes every day at lunch time. He still has a vision of health, and he knows it's doing him good. Similarly, not everyone can be an Albert Einstein, a William F. Buckley or an Albert Schweitzer. But that shouldn't stop us from wrapping our minds around the important ideas to which mankind has given birth. The Fellow Craft mind is like a muscle. If you use it, it will grow.

Clifton Fadiman, author of The Lifetime Reading Plan, has compiled a list of books that the serious student of mankind might be interested in working through. As the title implies, this form of education is expected to last a lifetime. Fadiman writes in his Preface about the value of this form of education: "The aim is simple," he writes. "The Plan is designed to help us avoid mental bankruptcy. It is designed to fill our minds, slowly, gradually, under no compulsion, with what some of the greatest writers of our Western tradition have thought, felt, and imagined. Even after we have shared these thoughts, feelings and images, we still have much to learn: all of us die uneducated. But at least we will not feel quite so lost, so bewildered. We will have disenthralled ourselves from the merely contemporary. We will understand something, not much but something, of our position in space and time. We will know how we have emerged from three thousand years of history. We will know how we got the ideas by which, unconsciously, we live."

The other day, I picked up a fitness magazine, and my eye was caught by an advertisement which read: "You come into this world, frail and weak. You go out of this world frail and weak. How you look in between is up to you." The idea was that one could maximize the quality of his life experience by building a strong, healthy body. The Greeks certainly felt this way, and their philosophy was adopted by the Romans, whence comes the phrase: *mens sana in corpore sano* (a sound mind in a sound body). There is a great deal of truth in that. One can simply think more clearly and react to unexpected situations more readily if he has taken care of himself, if the body passions are under control. As Entered Apprentices, we can provide ourselves with a tremendous boost by taking this ancient adage seriously, for a well-conditioned body establishes a foundation for growth for which no amount of mental effort alone can substitute.

Having said that, however, I would paraphrase the ad for the purposes of this paper to something along another line: "You come into this world a single stone. You go out of this world a single stone. How you shape yourself in between is up to you." When we are ready to pass beyond this life, our friends may gather around our bedside, they may make our last hours as comfortable as possible, they may see us to the door of the next world. But the final step, the portal to the "temple and city of our Lord," is a step which is taken alone. While we have the world, we may point to the organizations and groups of which we are part and say, "Look who I am. Look what I am part of . . . isn't this great?" We like to define ourselves in terms of to whom or what we belong. In this sense, the mind of modern man is often not much more than an ideological fashion statement—because he has not thought deeply about the words he is mouthing. At death, however, we leave our associations behind. We can no longer point to anything outside of ourselves. We are back to being a single stone, one lone ashlar, which is about to be reevaluated for a new use by the Master Builder. What, then, can we do to polish that stone so that when the external decorations are removed, the excellence of our internal state is revealed? This returns to the primary emphasis of this paper: a promising and useful kind of Masonic education. It is true that we may lock ourselves in our study with our books and our web browsers and go it alone. To be sure, a certain amount of that is

necessary. But if the fraternity is to live up to its axiom of taking good men and making them better, group based programs which stimulate a man's mental hunger are needed. When a new mason comes to lodge, he comes hungry for knowledge. We must be prepared to give him true nourishment—a type of nourishment more lasting than mashed potatoes and country-fried steak.

In the Fellow Craft degree, we are given the green flag to start personal growth. We are given a list—nowadays largely symbolic—of subjects for our serious attention: the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences. Grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy are each recommended to the attention of the serious scholar and Mason. Consider the limited number of words in these lectures. The space each topic takes up is thereby quite precious. Why, then, should the ritual afford valuable space telling us to learn the liberal arts and sciences, if there wasn't some very good reason for doing so? It must surely be because the liberal arts and sciences (or today's counterpart to the scholastic curriculum) are like nutritional supplements. They are essential vitamins, digestive enzymes to balance out the meat and potatoes which the ritual has given us. Skip them at your own risk. You may not finish smoothing your ashlar. For a man to consider himself a well-rounded mason, he must be knowledgeable in as many aspects of culture as possible. How can a person be responsible and free of enslaving prejudices, if he has never bothered to learn the historical and cultural atmosphere within which his cherished beliefs have germinated and flourished? Each generation stands on the shoulders of the previous one. If we forget where we came from, we may fall from our perch and have no idea how to climb back.

In that fitness magazine mentioned earlier, there appeared another interesting advertisement. It was a different call to self-improvement. The copy alluded to the idea that the year 1999 could be regarded as a kind of training camp for the new millennium. Whether it begins with 2000 or 2001 the new millennium is upon us, although perhaps we do have one more year to prepare. To be sure, the preparation is ongoing no matter

what the year. Regardless, if you think things were changing fast yesterday . . . you had better not blink.

In an era of change, the key to survival is adaptability. Perhaps you agree with the Darwin theory of natural selection, which essentially states that those species which are on earth today are here because they have adapted successfully to changes in the environment. Perhaps we would not be too far off base to extend scientific theory slightly and to make an analogy to Masonry as one "species" of human institutions. Can the Masonic "species" survive the changes of the next millennium or will it be driven to extinction? Already, many voices have begun to ask this question. What, then, is the key to adaptability? If all we have is a dogmatic insistence on doing things the same way, without understanding something of the 'why,' then whatever future vision we can muster will not be grounded in the timeless ideas. We will surely be caught off guard. The idea that the health of the fraternity can be accurately measured by looking at the size of its membership makes less and less sense. Masonry needs to become once again an organization which does not focus on sheer mass, but rather on the caliber of each of its members. One way to do that is though small core groups such as I have been describing. Masonry can and should become a force which summons each man to break through his limitations and develop himself to his utmost potential.

I cannot pretend to anticipate the kind of world in which Masonry will exist one hundred, or even fifty, years from now. We shall hope that it will still be around as a viable force in human culture. Meanwhile, the best way to see to the future continues to be a path of heart and integrity. We must, in other words, focus very clearly on the present membership. The road freemasonry takes to reach the future will likely resemble the path of the Fellow Craft on the winding stair. Like all things in life, the many roads we take to follow our dreams are winding, crooked, at times rough, other times smooth, always spiraling upward, but never the same. It will take thinking, well-educated men to insure that the Masonic path leads into the future.

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