

THE MAGIC OF MASONRY

I have always heard that Masonry “makes good men better” but I have not heard much discussion about just how Masonry does this. I believe that it is true. I have seen it happen and I have also seen this in my own life. But just what is it that causes men to change, and often much for the better? I don’t think Masonry exerts some magic force that causes this. Nor do I believe that our rituals necessarily cause transformations in those who are a part of them, as may be expected in a ritual of ceremonial magic or some other magic rite. No, Masonry is not magic, although it does use some of those old symbols left over from early magic practice.

I do suspect that it is those symbols, and all the other ones we see in the many Masonic degrees, that are partly responsible for this strange effect on men. Often I have listened to complaints that we never come out and teach or say anything, only present a bewildering array of symbols to the young man and leave him on his own to make hide nor hair of it. What this amounts to is that we are teaching, but to the subliminal mind of man, to his inner or unconscious mind. If Carl Jung is correct, and in the main I suspect he is, our inner minds cannot speak English. This part of man is not logical, and can only “think” by using symbols rather than words. Hence, we dream in symbols, which is our inner selves trying to talk to us as best they can. And therefore, the symbols of Masonry we are presented without explanation are really speaking very clearly to our inner minds. Perhaps this inner person is saying “Great, finally a place with a language I can understand!”

As anyone who has had to quit a habit, like smoking, can tell you, our everyday minds can insist, but if the inner man refuses, guess what happens! For any real change to occur in a man, first the active help and cooperation of the inner mind must be sought and gained. In the old magic schools, this was called fascination, meaning the inner self enjoyed it. Everyone who has had a long history with Freemasonry can attest that this is the first thing we felt when we looked into our Lodges: it was fascinating.

As one who has had to do a lot of memorizing, I’m certainly not saying Masonry has no words. Let’s now turn our attention to those words, the ones we listen to over and over again in our rituals. They are of two general types. In the first, they are telling a story. It’s what I call the Masonic Legend, with more twists and turns than most novels. As a story with its characters, it is much more symbol than explanation, and tailored to speak to the inner man, as described above.

The second type of Masonic words are our charges and lectures, with an occasional history. Now, I don’t know about you, but when I came in I struggled to decide just what these meant. I wasn’t a terrible youth, but I had not given the subject of Morality more than a passing thought. Generally speaking, if it was good for me, it was Good, and vice versa. I assure you, the idea of devoting myself to the active practice of moral virtues was very far from my frame of mind. After all, I was a wood worker, not a priest. However, although they didn’t make much sense, I understood I was being presented with a large number of recommendations to the practice of very high virtues, beginning with secrecy and brotherly love. I was encouraged to think of the whole world of men as the family of man, and to look forward to a day when harmony among men would be the lot of the citizens of every nation. Rationally, I considered such ideas utopian at best, just stupid at the worse.

Memorizing those speeches, and delivering them like I meant it caused me to, well, mean them. My mind dwelt on those high moral principles, and on the meaning of being a moral and upright

person, true to God, my neighbor and myself. The second great secret of Masonic magic was at work upon me.

It is an under appreciated Truth that men are what they think. It is impossible to hide our true selves from others, because our thoughts mold our actions, gestures, appearance, health, station in life- in short, everything about us. We all know those Masons who act like they never really listened to the lectures and charges. Their obligations were just meaningless words in their mouths. In the midst of the lodge, they plot revenge on their fellows, nurse ills real or imagined against all about them, and strive to get into positions of power so they can, as they imagine, boss everyone around. To other Masons it is obvious that they have sadly missed the whole point of Masonry. Yet, they are where their thoughts have taken them.

So, it is true the magic of Masonry does not work every time. But, for most, contemplation of the high teachings and frequent inculcation to think and act along the very highest moral lines has the effect of uplifting thoughts, and ennobling the conception of what they ought to be. I know it did with me. These things direct the mind upward towards regions of Light, and make dwelling on dark things in our lives less compelling. Just as our arrow will strike where we are looking, our lives began to conform to this higher vision. Our mental focus undergo a transformation, shifting from old habitual thoughts of gloom, hatreds, resentments and distrust towards expansive thoughts of helpfulness, thoughtful actions towards others, sincerity and truthfulness towards all. Eventually, hypocrisy and deceit really do become unknown amongst us.

I can recall well a certain moment when a little quantum leap along these lines happened to me. I was at a Consistory reunion. It had been a long day, everything was going late, and I had eaten little. I was starving. This was back when they were catering, setting up in the lobby of the Green Mountain Masonic Center. So when we finally got to eat, I jumped right into line. As I stood there, I noticed several of my brothers from Montpelier standing quietly off to the side, motioning everyone past them. I looked behind me, where several old women stood. I was instantly ashamed, and in that instant learned something about Masonry. I stepped out of line.

There is one thing more inculcated in those lectures and charges: a vision of God, our "Great Architect." In the end, that is what the Light we seek is. High moral goals cause us to mentally lift up our minds, to look upward, if you will. And way up there, beyond any us, there is indeed a great Light shining down. It's like a man feeling blue going out for a walk. It's a sunny day, so slowly his mind forgets his sorrows and he looks around at the beauty of Nature. Then, feeling better, he looks up and beholds the brilliant orb of day blazing forth in all its glory. When the mind dwells on high thoughts it is preparing itself for the mystic vision, which very often does come as a beautiful Light. As we lift up our thoughts, we set aside illnesses, obstacles, want. The beatific vision is not given to every man, but each can aspire to lift up his thoughts. As our thoughts go, so go our lives. It's really very simple. Dark thoughts, miserable life; light thoughts, happy life. When we see that Light which "none but Craftsmen every saw" then Masonry has worked its magic and transformed us.

First, then, Masonry speaks to the inner self a tale of high symbols of truth and of Deity. Then it encourages us to lift up our minds to "nobler deeds, higher thoughts and greater achievements." These noble thoughts push the rudder of our lives towards the great light of Being. If we get very, very lucky, the symbols drop away, and the power and brilliance of the True Word blazes forth within us.

Before I close, I would like to expand these thoughts a little from the individual to the general. We have all known instances where a man with a problem- say a sore knee- has fervently hoped and prayed for health to be restored, but to no avail. In his prayer, he carefully describes his condition: how much it hurts, how swollen it is, how he cannot knee on it, how everything he has tried to help it has failed and so on. His inner mind, which cannot understand English, sees the man's prayer as a series of images of the bad knee, of its pain, of the incapacitation it has caused. So the inner mind decides that what the man wants is a bad knee, and sets the body to work to make the knee even worse. Natural healing is interrupted and the body does what it can to give the man what his mind is constantly focused upon- a sore knee.

I think we are doing the same thing with Masonry. We can hardly bring up the subject without observing how much it has declined, how it is now lacking in health, how our Bodies and Lodges are dwindling, and, in every way, how Masonry today is not what it once was. Just because our membership is smaller than in the post World War II period does not mean that there is something wrong with Masonry. By constantly focusing our minds on images of Masonic decline, weakness, illness we are only feeding the very problem we want to solve. We are impressing our collective inner minds with this vision of Masonry decayed, and it comes out in many harmful ways. Many times as I am speaking to a prospective candidate about joining, my brother Mason will interrupt to explain to him Masonry isn't as good as it once was, of course. It can be very frustrating. We all walk around with this inner attitude of defeat about Masonry and our Lodges. Why be so invested in numbers? Masonry today is better than it has ever been. If we transform our feelings and have confidence, pride and joy in our Fraternity, then we will really be helping the situation out. Our friend with the sore knee should also focus constantly on the knee being just perfect, and in no time at all it would be.

We have seen how what I have dubbed the magic of Masonry changes us into better men by working with our unconscious inner minds and transforming us from the inside out. So too, we can apply the same magic to our Masonic institutions and they will become once again a magnet for men. Look well to the inner man!

Eric Ginette
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