

The Initiatory Experience and Human Nature

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The Master Craftsman carefully withdraws the hot iron from the fire and places it in the perfect place for the best results. His strong, well trained arms work with speed and precision. Sweat drips from his soiled brow. Wood ash and burnt iron stain his clothing. He raises his hammer and, in the instant it takes to bring it to the anvil, the two blazing orange billets are forever joined in a weld that has been well planned and executed. To bring to fruition this permanent joining of two pieces of iron, the Master Craftsman carefully prepared his materials, devises a plan of action, and executes his plan with precision to bring forth the uniting of two into one.

Just as our ancient craftsman working at the forge has perfected his skills for this union of iron to iron, we, as Speculative Freemasons, desire to perfect our skills for uniting Man to Lodge. This union of Man to Lodge and to the Brothers within that Lodge begins long before the night of initiation and requires the same planning and execution demonstrated by our ancient craftsman. As we explore this process, we discover numerous opportunities to use many characteristics of human nature to bring this goal to fruition.

We are all Homo sapiens and have evolved over tens of thousands of years. The Great Architect has equipped us with emotions that proven valuable to our survival over the millenia. As a result, we have developed complex societies driven by our emotional character to work together to fulfill our needs.

The long-term success of these societies and the interdependent relationships they support rely upon fundamental characteristics of trustworthiness and accountability. The warrior must trust that the farmer will share his bounty, and the farmer must trust that the warrior will exercise his skills to the benefit of the farmer. There must also be a system of accountability encouraging each member of that society to contribute to the society as a whole by making available rewards and sanctions. Without the cement of trustworthiness and accountability, society will deteriorate into Chaos.

Although we are blessed with the qualities of trustworthiness and accountability, we are also cursed with selfishness, greed, arrogance, and hubris. These can lead us to abuse the trust others have invested in us and contribute to the downfall of societies. This is the Dark Side of human nature.

When we look at these fundamental truths as they reveal themselves in Freemasonry, it is important to recognize that the initiatory experience is far more than merely a formal ceremony that begins at the opening of the entered apprentice degree. It is, in fact, a process where a special bond or relationship is formed between a man and a Lodge framed by the principles of Speculative Freemasonry. Throughout this process, we have many opportunities build on the glowing qualities of our human nature, those characteristics encased in our DNA, to make this relationship a mutually beneficial and enlightening experience. As we look into this process, we will find opportunities to use our understanding of the emotions of Homo Sapiens.

Psychologists tell us that man is driven by needs including the need for protection and security where we avoid dangers. Emotions provide us with valuable information about how we can better meet our needs through relationships.

When a man begins to explore Speculative Freemasonry he has curiosity which is an emotion that signals the need to understand. He may experience Boredom which signals the need for stimulation. On a deeper level, he is likely to be experiencing a sense of loneliness or longing which is an indicator of the need for a special kind of relationship.

A man exploring Speculative Freemasonry is likely to feel that something is missing. He is often seeking to add to the quality of his life or develop a particular kind of relationship. His curiosity is likely based on a vague, difficult to describe sense of emptiness. He is likely to have difficulty articulating or even identifying this feeling. Let us face it, in our current society, men are not encouraged or skilled to explore and articulate their emotional experiences.

Therefore, our conversations with this enquirer should not just focus on superfluities such as employment, career, or activities, but should specifically explore a critical question.

“What brings you to the door of Freemasonry?”

We need to recognize that when a man expresses a desire to learn of Freemasonry, it is the first step of the initiatory process. As the conversations between Brothers and the enquirer progress, the questions discussed will assist him in clarifying that for which he is truly seeking. As we learn about this man on a factual level, we should also attend to those statements that disclose his hopes, goals, and desires. This will assist us in understanding if Speculative Freemasonry can offer the kind of relationship he appears to be seeking. If we overlook this step, we do ourselves a great disservice by failing to

learn about this potential Brother and the contributions he can make to our Order. We also perform a great disservice to this man by assisting him down a path that may not be appropriate for him.

Most explanations of Freemasonry focus on the simple, factual elements of the fraternity such as describing the process of completing a petition, outlining the three degrees, and other basic information. If we realize that this man is also seeking an emotional experience, a way of fulfilling fundamental psychological needs, then WE should share our experiences about how we have been able to connect with the concept of “Speculative Freemasonry” on an emotional level.

To assist him in making this connection, we should share our own emotional experiences with Freemasonry. Telling our personal story, sharing what we enjoy about our Order, the anxieties we experienced, and the satisfaction we have received. This teaches this potential Brother that our Masonic life is more than merely a set of simple activities. It teaches him that emotional experiences are part of our Order ultimately adding color and spice to the quality of our life that is often lacking in most activities.

It also assists him in connecting with his own emotions assisting him to further understand those fundamental needs that he is attempting to fulfill through his exploration of Speculative Freemasonry.

Masonic lodges do not consist of just one Brother, but of groups of Brothers. For a man to be able to comfortably engage in a meaningful relationship with a Lodge, he must have opportunities to meet, greet, and begin to build relationships with numerous Brothers of that Lodge.

Investing sufficient time in this process allows this man and the Brothers of this Lodge to explore their comfortability with each other, to learn about their desires and goals, and to further determine the quality of the “fit” between this man and the members of this particular Lodge.

Like everything else, our formal education about speculative Freemasonry begins at the beginning. Formal instruction in the concepts and principles of Speculative Freemasonry can and should begin well before the night of initiation. To pursue this goal, many Lodges have created a “Pre-school for Freemasons.” At Arts & Sciences Lodge, we call this the “School for the Profane” where we introduce the concepts of formal study of Freemasonry through reading, discussions, and exploring various other resources.

This introduces the man to several modes of learning that are consistent with those used in ritual experiences within the Lodge. Topics explored include the nature of allegory by reviewing Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. We discuss symbols, their uses, as well as the use of metaphor. This process develops

basic communication skills, primes the mind, and encourages a further awareness and sensitivity to the power of these modes of teaching. This creates fertile ground for the future lessons which will come in our ritual.

From a psychological standpoint, this not only helps to introduce the enquirer to what our Order has to offer, but it also shows that we are willing to invest our time in forming a quality relationship with him. As he notices that we are investing time in him, he becomes more willing to invest his time in the growing relationship he has with the Lodge.

Many say that such a process is too difficult and time-consuming to be practical. They believe that many men will not tolerate any delay in moving forward in Freemasonry or put forth the effort for preliminary work before obtaining that which they are seeking. Psychological research offers great support to the belief that “anything which was easily obtained is little valued.”

We should remember that we, too, are driven by the same emotions as those seeking involvement in Freemasonry. When we have invested significant time and effort in building a relationship with this man, we are likely to notice if he misses a Lodge meeting, social activity, or distances himself from us in the future. As a result, we will take steps to strengthen and preserve this relationship.

The ritual of Freemasonry has been designed from the beginning to engage this Brother on an emotional level. Our experiences tell us that the amount of factual information retained by the candidate on the night of one’s Entered Apprentice degree is very limited. As each of us recalls our personal experiences as we experience the ceremonies of Freemasonry, our memories are dominated by the emotions of the evening, not the specific details of the lessons of the degree and related lectures.

From our first contacts with a potential brother, our actions should strive to instill in him a sense of solemnity about our ritual as he is received into our Order through the ceremonies of Speculative Freemasonry. We need to impress upon our future Brother a sense of respect and celebrate the importance of this occasion. We can reinforce these concepts through our dress, actions, and conversations. Through our actions, we show this future Brother that we value our involvement in Freemasonry and impress upon him the expectation that he should do the same.

Many of our Masonic ancestors specifically wrote of the opening ceremonies of a Lodge meeting transforming an ordinary space into a sacred space for the practice and study of Speculative Freemasonry. These ceremonies should assure that the Lodge is a refuge from the distractions of daily life and the world around us focusing our attention on the practice of Speculative Freemasonry to the exclusion of all other demands.

This process of disengaging from daily life to focus one's attention on the experiences about to be had reinforces an important concept. It emphasizes that the activities within the Masonic Lodge meeting are special and of great importance and that they should not be taken casually or approached in a haphazard manner. This is not only true for the candidate, but should be a focus of attention for all within the Lodge. Our approach to the ritual including the opening and closing of our Lodge meetings, communicate to this candidate that we value this opportunity for spiritual growth and that it is this opportunity that separates Speculative Freemasonry from "social clubs" or service organizations.

It is likely that one or two Brothers of the Lodge have already formed a connection to this candidate. They should greet him at the door and act as his ambassador throughout the evening. This is an anxious time when the candidate is being asked to participate in unknown activities with unknown risks. He may have even heard rumors of physical hazards, goats, and other activities that have no place in Speculative Freemasonry. Being in close company with men with whom he has begun to develop a comfortable and trusting relationship will comfort his anxieties. This positive experience on the night of his initiation helps fulfill one of our fundamental psychological needs. When feeling anxious or fearful, we seek comfort. We trust those in whom we have found comfort in the past and feel a connection with them. Because they have helped us, we now feel obligated to help them. This is an essential component in the Masonic bond we strive to forge between Brother and the Lodge.

When received at the door of Freemasonry, we experience a surprising event. This symbolic physical threat is to remind us that violating the sanctity of the obligations of our Order will result in a separation from the Order and its valuable relationships. It reminds us of a possible return to isolation, a return to that place of darkness, fear, and loneliness symbolized by the preparation room.

In our ritual, a candidate is provided an escort. This candidate moves about the room blindfolded having no sense of place and no awareness of threats or hazards. He is physically dependent on his escort for his safety. During this time, he should experience a supportive, comfortable guide who provides a sense of physical safety by using a comfortable pace, a firm grip, and adequate direction to avoid excessive fear or confusion. The physical experience of being comfortably guided will serve as a reminder of that feeling of safety and protection from those fundamental fears that membership in the Order can provide.

After entering the Lodge, candidates kneel for the benefit of prayer. At this time, he is again alone, untouched, and provided with no assistance in

answering a simple but important question. Just as in the preparation room, he again experiences a time of isolation being alone with his own fears and limitations.

From a psychological point of view, he is helpless, defenseless, and forced to rely on his own resources. He has been promised caring, support, and safe passage through this mysterious journey. He has found that the promises made so far have been fulfilled. Therefore, he will find comfort in the belief that persevering through this time of darkness will lead to acceptance and support within our Order.

After responding in a manner consistent with our values, he is congratulated and given the promise of ongoing emotional safety by “following your guide and fearing no danger.”

The obligation is a critical point in this man’s Masonic journey. It is essential to recognize that the time spent at the altar is this man’s last opportunity when he is left alone, untouched, unsupported, and is free to answer in his own way. He has been physically guided, comforted, and assisted through the process this far and again enters a place of loneliness and isolation where his fears and anxieties arise. However, his previous experiences with Freemasonry have taught him that trusting in those around him will lead him through this time of difficulty and assist him toward a caring, supportive, and trustworthy relationship..... that which he is truly seeking.

We talk of bringing a Brother “to light” at the conclusion of the obligation which can be viewed in several different ways. Physically, he is able to see reducing his anxieties as darkness is a place of fear. Intellectually, he is being introduced to the “light of knowledge” regarding the specific symbols, history, and factual information related to our Order. On an emotional level, bringing him “to light” shows him that his trust and confidence in us have been well-placed. He has traversed a dark and dangerous path having to trust in our relationship as his only source of safety. This successful experience strengthens his confidence in us.

At the altar, he is introduced to the Great Lights of Masonry and provided a simple yet powerful description of their meaning and importance in our daily lives. We take this opportunity to provide our new Brother with his first truly Masonic symbols and begin his instruction on their meaning and usefulness. This begins the process of fulfilling our promises to him to assist him in becoming a Speculative Freemason.

Following the obligation, we are celebrating the transition that has occurred and award him with his first personal symbol of his success. This first and most important symbol of being a Mason, a simple piece of “clothing” which is required at all tiled meetings of Masonic lodges, becomes forever an outward

symbol of his commitment to our Lodge and our commitment to this man. It provides the first physical evidence of the existence and strength of our mutually beneficial relationship which is that which we all seek as did our ancient forefathers when they created their “tribal societies.”

Brother Thomas Smith Webb in the early 19th century wrote wise words to accompany the presentation of the Mason’s apron describing it as “The badge of a Mason” as well as the “Highest of Honors.” I find it particularly important to recall these words during times when power and self-importance can easily become intoxicating.

We again use an experience of uncomfotability to impress upon the mind of this new brother an important lesson. We make a demand of him that is impossible to meet. He again experiences anxieties, fears, and uncomfotability and is again comforted by those around him as the lessons of charity are illustrated. With each repetition of being challenged, uncomfotable, and then comforted, the bond between Brother and Lodge is strengthened.

We then use additional symbols to further this man’s education. Providing our new Brother with the working tools of this degree is part of fulfilling our promise first made to him at the time of his first enquiry into our Order. We promised him that through the diligent study of the lessons of our Order, presented through symbols such as these working tools, he would obtain that for which he is seeking.

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The educational lectures following the ritual vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction regarding their structure, format, length, and method of presentation. As these lectures are our primary means of teaching Speculative Freemasonry, the method of presentation should be one that engages the new Brother on an emotional level as well as on an intellectual level. We should remember that the presentation of these lectures is part of us fulfilling our promise to this man.

If we fail to fulfill our promises to provide this man with a thorough and meaningful education about the lessons and principles of Speculative Freemasonry as illustrated in our symbols and highlighted by the experiences of our ritual, the trust developed throughout this process will be destroyed and our “tribal society” of Speculative Freemasonry will soon degenerate into chaos.

At the beginning of this presentation, I alluded to “the dark side” of human nature and the potential for our emotions to become destructive within societies that are designed to meet our emotional needs. Like our ancient ancestors, we like attention, recognition, and the respect and admiration of others. These are the positive forces that drive us to work harder to the benefit of society. However, the goals of some individuals can shift away from the best interest of the society to maintaining the pleasures and privileges associated with their position and authority. They begin to abuse their power and influence to entrench themselves and their like-minded associates to maintain their status. This shift of focus away from the best interest of the Order or society to the interests of the individual has always proven to be detrimental to the survival of the society, organization, fraternity, or Lodge.

But the wise man who truly understands and follows the teachings of Speculative Freemasonry will recognize that he is the servant of the society. He will recognize that the society will benefit from a continuous flow of individuals contributing to the success of the society and will inevitably include developing new leaders and then moving aside as the society evolves.

My Brothers, we are all slaves to the same physical and emotional forces that drove our ancient ancestors to form their tribal societies consisting of mutually beneficial relationships. Speculative Freemasonry provides a unique, structured system of forming and maintaining these essential relationships. As we attend to our emotions as well as the emotions of our candidates, we can benefit the Candidate, the Brothers of the Lodge, and the Fraternity as a whole. Like the ancient craftsman who studies and perfects his skills in all aspects of forging two into one, we, as Speculative Freemasons, need to continue to study and perfect our skills in forging that Masonic bond between Man and Lodge.

Brothers, As we are about to quit this sacred retreat to mix again with the world, let us leave contemplating what has transpired between us this evening. Bro. William Mercer Wilson, PGM, said the following at the 13th annual communication of the Grand Lodge in London, Ontario in 1868.

“We are told that the three great tenets of a Mason’s profession are Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. And to you, my Brethren, I now say, cultivate them all.”