

The Winding Stairs



One of the most recognizable symbols of the Fellowcraft degree is the flight of Winding Stairs, consisting of 3, 5, and 7 steps that take the candidate on a journey toward the middle chamber. I enjoy presenting this lecture because it's an opportunity to take the candidate on an interactive journey around the Lodge room. Along the way you get the opportunity to impart some Masonic history and lore, and impress upon the candidate some of the deep meaning of this degree. I personally find that this is the most beautiful of the Masonic degree lectures.

In the Holy Scriptures it is recorded...."they went up the Winding Stairs into the Middle Chamber." There actually was a winding stair in Solomon's Temple, but the scriptures don't specifically mention three, five and seven steps. Only in US Masonic ritual do the Winding Stairs have all fifteen steps. In early ritual the stairs had just five, and later on seven steps. In the ritual that was prepared by Preston there were thirty-six steps in his Winding Stairs.

We also travel up the winding stairs of life climbing steadily from our birth, to youth, then manhood and ultimately ascend toward the Sanctum Sanctorum where our souls find rest in our old age. There is deep symbolism in the fact that the stairs do, in fact, WIND. A straight stairway hides neither mystery nor secret. However, the winding stairs obscures from view whatever is waiting for us just around the corner.

To climb the winding stairs implies that we must exercise courage, determination and above all else - faith. We have no idea what awaits us around the next corner in life. The Winding Stairs leads us into the middle chamber of the unpredictable things of life. Man climbs to new realms of civilization and to spiritual enlightenment. Each one must climb on his own, though your individual experience can be vastly different from that of someone else. The poet Browning said it this way:

"A man's reach must exceed his grasp
Else what's a heaven for?"

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed the same thoughts in this interpretation:

"The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight
But they while their companions slept
Were upward climbing in the night."

And Thomas Huxley wrote:

The rung of a ladder was never meant to rest upon,
but only to hold a man's foot long enough
to enable him to put his other foot somewhat higher.

Man climbs because he has courage; because he has faith challenged by a Divine discontent just because he is a man. By the same token the Freemason must climb, for the winding stairs DO in fact lead somewhere. There IS a middle chamber. There ARE wages to be earned by the worthy brother Fellowcraft, and he climbs in faith because he believes.

The Winding Stairs ties and disciplines a man's soul. He *must* BELIEVE, otherwise no summit will ever be attained. He must climb in faith that there is a summit, and when he sincerely undertakes that climb to new heights, he will eventually reach his coveted goal. Of course, all of this is symbolical of life and manhood. No one knows whether the top of the pinnacle will ever be reached or not, but nevertheless one keeps moving upward in faith and hope that the middle chamber, and his ultimate goal can be reached.

And so the Fellowcraft degree is really one of action...upward movement...climbing on the rungs of knowledge to the seven liberal Arts and Sciences. The Degree is emblematic of the struggle of life, not only materially but spiritually as well. This adventurous climb is not meant for the slacker, but rather for the fighter and the real adventurer. The Fellowcraft must be well equipped with lots of courage, because the achievement really is worth fighting for.

Many may pass through the Fellowcraft degree and see just a beautiful ceremony - something that attracts our attention but may not supply any lasting food for the soul. The thoughtful Mason sees in the Winding Stairs a beckoning call to further knowledge; it's an incentive to know more of the sublime mysteries and urges him on to reach the Middle Chamber. The Winding Stairs is a progressive series of steps to reach that exalted degree of Master Mason, and thereby fit and prepare oneself to reach up to and commune with our Divine Creator.



.....another 'nugget from the quarries of Freemasonry'.

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Portions adapted from comments by R.W. Bro. J. H. Young, 1972; GL of New Brunswick.