

5 Minute Mason - Why Are We Here?

To learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry. As Freemasons we have heard this phrase many times, and chances are you have recited it many times. Have you truly thought about it what it means? Many times since becoming a Master Mason, forty years ago, I've asked myself "How does attending lodge make me a better man?" It can't be the meal we serve or the opening of the lodge. It probably isn't the Secretary reading the minutes of tonight's meeting or the Treasurer's report telling us how many 'obligations we have incurred', or the annual Trustee's report of how well our investments have grown. Don't get me wrong, those are important things to know...for the health of your Lodge. But, was I missing the real point?

I would suggest that the answer has a much deeper meaning. It was developed during the early 19th century; when Masonry was a far more philosophical than moral undertaking. It commonly goes something like this: What came ye here to do? To learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry. The interesting question is this: Are there any commas in this sentence? I think that there are. I think if the answer was actually written in most Masonic monitors, it would sound like this: To learn, to subdue my passions, and improve myself in Masonry.

If I am right, then there was a new admonition added to the task of an Entered Apprentice as the philosophical integrity of our Craft ritual expanded; namely—that he first learns. It finally occurred to me one night while the officers were performing the opening ritual. While my premise may be simplistic I feel it's fairly accurate. I also believe all Masons feel these things are important. But I think the different generations of Masons place the importance in different areas, and for different reasons. So, here is my answer to 'why are we here'? I believe there are three upright steps to becoming a better Mason.

To learn: Upright step number one. You have been learning since your mother gave birth to you. You learned to sit up, talk and eat without assistance. As you progressed in age you attended school. You never quit learning. The question remains, what can you learn from attending lodge?

As you progress through your degrees you hear certain words and phrases. At first these words sound unusual because they are phrased in a way in which our language is no longer spoken. Yes, it's English, but not 'our' English. Understanding what is being said to you is difficult to understand at first because you aren't used to being spoken to in 'Old English', or what I refer to as 'the Kings English'. I believe this is why the Craft asks you to memorize the work. Repetition and memorization helps your brain convert these words into a beautifully spoken and mostly forgotten language.

Sadly, in Masonry today, many are convinced that the only reason we memorize these works is so we can advance to the next degree or learn the remaining ritual so we can help with the performing of the degree work. I truly believe this could be one of the reasons some men find it difficult to find what they are truly seeking in our fraternity.

In my opinion memorization for advancement is only a tiny part of the catechism or lessons to be learned. Whether we realize it or not our ritual isn't just a bunch of words thrown together to sound pretty and impress people. The ritual is a roadmap for our journey to the East to find that which was lost, and as I have said many times in my presentations...Masonic Education is a lifetime journey.

The ritualists who developed our degree work relied on 'Old English' to impress on our minds great and important truths. Each word of that beautifully phrased script is designed to be studied. I feel the archaic language is designed not to just sound impressive, but to peak your curiosity and encourage you to research what you've heard. Each word and syllable should be dissected and studied to find out its meaning.

Floor work is also very instructive. If you have taken an office in your lodge or filled a chair for an absent officer, I know you have encountered the floor work. Proper floor work is vitally important for several reasons. First it does impress the candidate and secondly, when properly done, is so very beautiful to watch.

Whether it's the opening or closing of a lodge or within the degree work, the floor work was designed to teach our Brethren about symbolism. Each step you take, how the deacons hold their staff, which way you turn, or 'squaring your corners' with a bit of military-like decorum, is designed to display symbols which give you a nugget of information that you can add to your knowledge and ultimately to your self-improvement. Expanding your mind through the study behind the ritual and understanding the symbolism which is hidden within the floor work of the lodge is the first upright step on your journey from the darkness toward the light of self-improvement.

To subdue my passions: The second upright step in your journey to becoming a better man is learning to subdue your passions. I feel this phrase means learning to do things in moderation.

We all know that the Junior Warden is placed in the South to watch over the assembled craft and make sure that no one converts "refreshment into excess". This is a lesson that is important to everyone. I also feel we each have to subdue our passions for different things.

Each of us has one or more passions we find difficulty in subduing. In my opinion the self-reflection we learn through the study of Masonry and its symbols will help identify the passion which you need to control and place you on the right path to gaining control. I'm not saying it will be easy but since your faith is in God and is well founded with prayer and self-control, you will be successful.

And improve myself in Masonry: Each of these upright steps will help us improve in Masonry. I feel the third upright step is continuing your journey by attending your lodge. Each of us, no matter who we are, needs help in maintaining the progress we have made through learning and in our effort to subdue our passions. Interacting with Brethren who are on the same journey of improvement as you are should give you motivation to continue your work and help encourage another brother to work harder on his goals. Spreading the cement of Brotherly love does indeed strengthen each of us.

It may be difficult to see how sitting through the portion of the meeting where you hear the reading of the minutes and paying of bills will make you a better man, but if you can look past what Masonry has become and try to see “what may have been lost” perhaps you can find the working tools in the ritual to help mold your ‘rough ashlar’ into something that's just a bit closer to becoming a perfect stone. For the Mason, the lodge is the receptacle, the personal space, the sacred environment that will either facilitate his learning, or prevent it.



... The 5 Minute Mason: #85 in a series of nuggets from the Quarry of Freemasonry.SM

Douglas M. Messimer, PM, LEO Tuckahoe Lodge 347 8/16