

Creating the Lodge Culture

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On the dark, rainy afternoon of Thursday, March 2, a young man traveled 125 miles from his university dorm room to his hometown. As he approached town, he turned onto Main Street and drove to the northeast corner of the town square where the Masonic lodge building stood. At the appointed time, he entered the unmarked door at the side of the building and climbed the stairs to the facilities of the local lodge. The lodge had met at that location since the late 1840's.

As the young man reached the top of the stairs he was met by three older gentlemen who welcomed him, made him comfortable, and then proceeded to read to him from a book about Freemasonry. As a college junior he found this session very unusual but patiently set through the reading of the material for new candidates. As the reading drew to a close, the young man noticed other men arriving and passing by the sitting room. The three greeters then left him in the room with instructions that someone would return shortly.

Sitting in solitude, the young man began to wonder what was to occur next. Another gentleman soon entered, introduced himself, and directed him to a small preparation room. At that point, he was asked several questions related to his interests in Freemasonry. He evidently answered in an appropriate manner, as he was instructed to disrobe, remove his eyeglasses, watch and jewelry, and put on a pair of one-size fits all blue, drawstring cotton pants so he could experience the initiation ceremony. He was then told to sit and wait patiently.

The young man nervously sat at the door as many questions raced through his mind. Why was he here? What caused him to petition the lodge? Why did he wish to join this organization? Why did he want to associate with this group of men? What did he expect to gain from membership? What could he learn? What did this organization offer him that he could not obtain from church, friends, student organizations, professors, older mentors, and his university education? What brought him to this door? Why?

At the door, each Freemason stood on the threshold of our fraternity and asked similar questions. The knowledge, background and understanding of this organization each possessed at that time was decidedly different, just as the reasons for petitioning were varied. Without a doubt, each man had a feeling of uncertainty tempered with anticipation, realizing he was about to embark on a journey without knowing the destination.

At the door, the young man knocked three times and waited anxiously. In time, I heard the voice of my high school counselor greeting me at the door. The sound of a familiar voice was comforting. As I entered the lodge room, I heard the voice of my father asking me to profess my faith in God. While circling the lodge room, I was greeted by the recognizable voices of men I knew and respected in the community.

It was at this point I knew why I had stood at the door and why I wanted to become a Freemason. I wanted to be associated with these men and others like them. Not just any men, but these men, men in my community who I admired and respected from various backgrounds and professions. My father, who instilled in me many values, teachers and coaches, church and civic leaders, doctors and lawyers, professionals and blue-collar workers, all had left an impression upon me in their own way while I was growing into adulthood. They represented hard work, dedication, faithfulness, and upright living. They were men of integrity!

This was what I wanted and why I stood at the door of Freemasonry. I desired their companionship and the opportunity to share membership in their organization. I would later come to realize what I sought was a sense of fraternalism, a bond we shared through the experiences of the initiation ritual. This common bond drew me closer to these men. They, and other Freemasons I would come to meet, helped me grow and mature in ways I could have never imagined. Men who would share life's experiences with a twenty-one year old and, at the same time, listen intently to things I wanted to share with them. They offered wise counsel and served as a sounding board in helping me develop my own values and priorities, all within the framework of the teachings of Freemasonry. My Lodge and my Masonic experiences, offered the culture and atmosphere that allowed me to develop my Masonic edifice and to mature into manhood. It helped me become a better citizen, a better husband, and a better father!

As a Fraternity, we must offer a Masonic experience that appeals to today's man if we are to grow and prosper. Our ancient brethren were on a quest, a spiritual search to understand man's relationship to his Creator and his fellow man. Freemasonry must continue to offer that quest in order to appeal to men in today's society. Davis suggests there are seven pillars of success for manhood. These are:

- 1) To possess a high self-esteem;
- 2) To understand what we really want in our lives;
- 3) To live responsibly;
- 4) To guide our public and private lives with integrity;
- 5) To take charge of our life;
- 6) To cultivate friendships with men of high integrity; and,
- 7) To fulfill our obligation as role model and mentor.

Isn't this what Freemasonry offers? We tell our candidates prior to initiation that the purpose of Freemasonry "is to make its members wiser, freer, better, and consequently happier men." Isn't this the product of these pillars of success? Isn't this the very quest in which our ancient brethren were engaged and the very principles that Freemasonry teaches?

I think men, especially young men, are looking for what Freemasonry has to offer, if we would only do so. Unfortunately, many Masonic lodges are simple associations of men that do not comprehend the meaning of Freemasonry. These lodges are Masonic lodges in name only as they fail to practice Freemasonry or teach their members how to live Freemasonry.

The ideal of Freemasonry offers a system wherein a man can develop these "pillars of success," but in order for our current lodges to be successful, we must recapture the concept of the lodge room as a sacred space for the practice of Freemasonry, for Masonic education, and for intellectual stimulation.

The lodge is a sacred space for Masonic education and enlightenment, creating a moral discipline founded on the highest standards of ethics, morality, and character delivered by ritual, symbols, and allegory. Following the work of the lodge, the brethren can adjourn to a festive board for fellowship, friendship, and fun. It is during this period where fraternal conviviality is enjoyed in a haven of mutual respect and toleration and the members truly become a "band of brothers" joined together by the mythical tie of Freemasonry.

Within this lodge model, a man can enjoy the fraternalism offered by Freemasonry while on his quest for enlightenment and understanding of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. It is here, where he can successfully build his pillars of manhood and develop life-long

friendships. It is here where he refines and develops the spiritual portion of himself so that it controls his human and worldly nature.

As Masonic leaders, we must have the faith, and the courage, to create an atmosphere where Freemasonry is “divinely taught to men divinely inspired.” We must communicate the mission of Freemasonry to the public, but we can only do so when we begin to live and practice those things that Freemasonry teaches and for which it stands.

Freemasonry must deliver on those expectations and provide Masonic education so that the member has an understanding of the relationships man has to other men, to his institutions, to nature, and with his God, and allow him to develop an internal compass that guides him “toward right, ethical values and sound moral principles” by which he can live. In addition, Freemasonry must offer an open environment for the social interaction of men, fraternity, away from the trials and distractions of daily life. Where men and brothers can share their hopes and dreams, their pain and sorrows. Where men can share life’s experiences with men of integrity without fear of ridicule or shame. Where men can be mentored and learn to be mentors. The lodge must provide opportunities for personal growth, leadership development, community service, and family involvement while keeping a focus on Freemasonry.

To be a Freemason is to be both a member of an institutional fraternity and an heir to a vast legacy of man’s perception and inspiration about the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Few members of Freemasonry develop a vision of what the Craft could be because there is no emphasis on the richness of the fabric of Freemasonry. Freemasons have largely stopped cherishing this legacy; not because they do not love it, but rather because they do not understand it! The capacity to allow the mind and spirit to roam in and through the Masonic ethic is almost extinct. Freemasonry must return to the Lodge model and culture that allows us to create that sacred space, that special environment where each of us can build our Masonic edifice!

I am going to suggest eight characteristics that I believe need to be adopted, implemented, or changed within our current lodge system to meet the needs of our membership.

- 1) Excellent Masonic ritual: The Masonic ritual should be completely and artistically rendered from memory. The ritual is fundamental to Freemasonry and without it we are nothing more than a social club. Within the ritual we deliver the lessons of Freemasonry!
- 2) Masonic education: It is our responsibility to teach our members the principles of Freemasonry. The Lodge must provide a regular program of education and enlightenment in the rich symbolism, allegories, philosophy, morality, history, literature, and traditions of Freemasonry.
- 3) Festive board: The Lodge must offer the festive board tradition with accompanying social programming where men become members of a band of brothers. While it is not necessary for a formal festive board at each meeting, we must offer those opportunities for us to socialize in either a pre- or post-Lodge environment for a meal or dessert. It is here in this convivial setting where we can enjoy fellowship, friendship, and fun.
- 4) Member commitment: The Lodge must demand for a real sacrifice of time, talent, and means from those who seek to exercise leadership in the lodge. It must insist on some commensurate commitment from those brothers who simply wish to sit on the lodge’s sidelines. It should demand a financial and time commitment of all its members to create and strengthen the bonds of brotherhood.

- 5) Candidate admission: The Lodge must require a scrupulous screening of candidates and affiliates to insure that only the most excellent of men, those clearly superior in character, ability, and potential are admitted to membership. It must explain its expectations to the potential candidate and also demonstrate the commitment the Lodge will have to him as a new member. There must be a period of time where he gets to know the Lodge and the Lodge him prior to his submittal of a petition.
- 6) Masonic charity: The Lodge must teach and practice charitable outreach to the immediate community of the lodge itself and the families associated with it. This is Masonic charity and should be our first priority. Our public charities provide an opportunity to provide support to society but real charity starts at home.
- 7) Financial commitment: The dues and fee structure of the Lodge must provide a perception of value to its members, the community, and those interested in joining our fraternity. The Lodge must require a commitment of the member's financial resources as well as his time and talent.
- 8) Respectful dress: The Lodge must require as much elegance of dress as its resources can muster. With time, society has become more casual in attire, appearance, and in relationships leading to a lack of respect for others. The Lodge must demand appropriate dress for its meetings as it creates a culture of mutual respect and admiration between its members.

For Freemasonry to prosper in the future, I believe many lodges must change their culture by adopting and implementing these eight characteristics within the lodge system. If the lodge leadership fails in this responsibility, then the membership must demand this organizational change to ensure its growth. These changes will not be easy, nor will they occur overnight. However, with the focus on creating the proper culture in our lodges, creating the sacred space within our lodge walls, they will become habits for the practice and teaching of Freemasonry to our membership! I firmly believe that if we practice Freemasonry, if we teach Freemasonry, then our members will return to our lodge meetings, not in a trickle, but in droves to be able to participate in our activities!

Brethren, you and I are Freemasons because we found something in this organization that meets our needs as men. We expend our time and effort participating in its activities because we gain some personal satisfaction in doing so. We desire for our Fraternity to continue to be strong and vibrant because we believe Freemasonry has something of lasting value to share with future generations.

Within the lodge space, we meet to share each other's company while seeking to create a moral and social order based upon virtue, liberty, and equality. Freemasonry must return to these ideals, within the sacred space of the lodge room, if it is to meet the needs of today's man. Masonic lodges must be composed of men who are of quality and good rapport and are committed to real fraternity. Freemasons must be men who are anxious to be brothers and be treated as brothers, both in and out of the lodge room. Freemasons must be men committed to improving his understanding of his relationship to God and the universe. Freemasons must be men who come to lodge regularly because doing so is an event that educates them, enlightens them, inspires them, amazes them, and delights them.

Brethren, I have been fortunate to have been a member of lodges such as this. I have been educated, enlightened, inspired, amazed and delighted by my Masonic experiences. I have met men within the Masonic fraternity who have shared their lives with me and influenced me in

countless ways, men that I would not have met outside our fraternity. I want my son, my son-in-law, and my grandsons to have those types of experiences and meet these kinds of men. I want you, your sons, and your grandsons to have those experiences. I want men to be exposed to those experiences, but I especially want young men to have the opportunity to have similar types of opportunities and experiences, because the younger generation is the one that will carry our beloved fraternity into the future. But if we don't practice Freemasonry within our lodges and within ourselves so the new member can experience true Freemasonry, he will soon leave us behind as a time-consuming, useless enterprise out of sync with today's fast-paced society.

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