

# **IT IS TIME TO CROSS THE RUBICON AND BATTLE OUR 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RUFFIANS**

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Rubicon was a small river that divided the Roman territory of Italy from that of Gaul. Italy was controlled by a fellow named Pompey, who was a military leader in the Roman Province of Italy. Gaul was controlled by Julius Caesar. Pompey got nervous about Caesar's expanding his Empire. So, around 51 BC, during a time of peace, Pompey proposed to Caesar that, since his army was no longer needed, it should be disbanded and Caesar be demoted as the Governor of all the provinces outside of Gaul. That would be sort of like the Grand Master of Texas telling the Grand Master of Oklahoma that he ought to give up control over his own jurisdiction since Oklahoma is only an outlying province of Texas anyway. Of course, that would never work because everyone knows you can't outlie a Texan. (But I digress).

Anyway, Caesar's response was to form an army on the banks of the Rubicon to take over the province of Italy for himself. As the story has it, just before he ordered the Rubicon to be crossed, he realized how great an enterprise he was undertaking. He paused and turned to the men in his immediate vicinity and said, "And Yet, friends, we are still able to turn back; but once we pass over this little bridge, there will be no business but by force of arms and dint of sword." By crossing the river, this famous act, now enshrined in the catch-phrase, "to cross the Rubicon," came to stand for making a momentous decision. It means that it is a decision for which there is no turning back. Caesar gave his men a choice; and they chose to follow his leadership. His decision literally meant death or success to him and all his friends. He had at hand an army of 5,000, and he had only 10,000 ruffians to overcome—the army of Pompey. And he was victorious.

I recount this story to engage your thinking about its parallel with where we are in Masonry today. When we encounter a bridge in our Masonic rituals, they all mean the same thing. We are moving from one point of awareness to another. We are overcoming and transcending an old frame of mind that no longer works and leaving it in the past of our experience. And we are creating another which enables us to go forward, to move, to do, to think and act in a wiser and more enlightened way.

I join with a number of Masonic thinkers I know and respect who believe that American Freemasonry may be at a bridge, or point of crossing, in this moment of our organization's history. And we're concerned that if we don't cross the Rubicon and start doing battle with ourselves; that is, our organizational paradigms which are now harming us, we may end up a tiny cabal of old men, who offer no significance to both Masonry and the outside world. You see, our American Grand Lodges are standing at a threshold between a Renaissance and the demise of our fraternity at this point in our history. And the first ruffian we must encounter is that the bulk of our Masonic leaders and Lodges are currently unaware of the profound significance of this moment. Yet, if they would undertake a statistical analysis of the real condition of our Grand Jurisdictions, they would come to the reality that, if we don't make some substantive changes soon, Freemasonry will be in 15-20 years where the Odd Fellows are today. We will still have a few lodges, but too few to enable us to recreate ourselves as an organization. The choices we make as Grand Lodges and Lodges over the next several years (and I'm talking about the years left in this decade) may determine whether or not Freemasonry will thrive or die in the next 30 years.

We live in a time where it is exceedingly difficult for people to find authenticity in their lives. But authenticity is always tied to perception. The central question for our organization today is how does Freemasonry render authenticity? Young men entering our fraternity today often know far more about Masonry than we do. They have already arrived at their own conclusions that Freemasonry is a venue for truth-seeking, a vehicle for self-development; a quest for the spiritual. There are secret associations to be discovered there. Men are coming into our Order with these kinds of perceptions about us. We must ask ourselves if the "real" experience they will find in lodge is compatible with their expectations of us. We all

know that too often it is not. And when we have a “disconnect” with our new brothers, its best chance of being reconciled is not to force them into compliance with our way of thinking. Because, for most of us, our way of thinking is tied only to the period in which we have lived. If his perception of what is authentic in Masonry is quite different from the actual Masonic experience you have had, I suggest that the solution to this conundrum can be found by working it out together, while focusing on Masonry’s traditional ways of doing things in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. After all, that was a model of success for 200 years.

So a second ruffian we face is the mediocrity we have brought into the practice of our Craft over the past 80 years. One reason we have become so passive in our approach to Masonry is because 20<sup>th</sup> Century Masons were not taught the purpose of, reason for, and profound significance of the initiatic experience. They have not focused on how Masonry actually informs the transformation of the individual.

In Masonry, the central point where authenticity enters our lexicon comes from a line in Shakespeare’s play “Hamlet.” There is a point in Hamlet where the character Polonius says something profoundly real. At the end of a laundry list of advice Polonius is giving to his son, Leritus, he says this: *“And this above all else-- to thine own self be true. And it dost thence follow as night to day, that thou canst not then be false to any man.”* To me, this verse shouts to the very core of Masonic authenticity. “Know Thyself” is the clarion call of Masonic teaching. We all know that the journey through the degrees of Freemasonry represents each man’s journey of his own life, wherein he is supposed to grow in the discovery of who he is, what has meaning to him, how he can overcome himself, and what will bring him fulfillment as a man. So, if we can agree with this premise, then there are two dimensions to authenticity which we can communicate to our Brothers. The first is “Be true to yourself.” And the second is “Be what you say you are to others.” What Mason would not agree this is at the very heart of Masonic Truth? And perhaps an important corollary here to point out is: “If you are not what you say you are, then you are fake.”

So how does this apply to the Lodge experience? We say we take good men and make them better. But we have to validate this claim to our new initiate. Each man has to ask himself from time to time the degree of honesty in which his lodge

is embracing Freemasonry's real purpose. Do I, as an individual, personally and sincerely believe with all my heart that how my lodge approaches the study, understanding and practice of Masonry intellectually, spiritually, and physically is truly authentic to the Masonic heritage from whence we came? Does my perception of the "true" Masonry get exemplified through my lodge experience? Does it resonate in a way that Masonry's hope for my transformation "feels" real to me when we come together in our lodge setting month after month? Does my lodge honestly facilitate my becoming transformed by my experience as a Man and a Mason?

I don't know the answers to this kind of inquiry for anyone but myself. I can only be true to myself. I can only offer my experience and what authenticity felt like to me. I can communicate two aspects of authenticity that are, in my judgment, critical to the future of Freemasonry. I think you will find that both tie directly to our traditional purpose of improving men.

To illustrate the first essential of Masonic authenticity, I will share something of my own experience. I am the son of a Mason. My father was an active Freemason. And so was his brother. They were both farmers/ranchers in northwest Oklahoma. For as long as I can remember, my father would come in from his work every Wednesday afternoon, take a bath, and put on his Sunday suit. My uncle would come by and pick him up and they would go to lodge. And they did this for 50 years. I can't remember a time when I was not going to be a Freemason.

I also knew the men in my community. It was a place of only 2,500 people. It was where we celebrated the festivals of our lives, went to church, and participated in social conversations outside our home. I knew the most respected men in my town. I can't remember when I didn't know them.

I took the degrees of Masonry during the summer of my 21<sup>st</sup> year. When I arrived at lodge for my Entered Apprentice degree, all these men I had known and respected in my childhood were there. They were my father's friends. I can remember to this day standing in the preparation room, duly prepared, waiting for someone to return my knocks on the door, and thinking to myself: *Tonight, I am going to be initiated into manhood.* I wanted to grow up to be like them. I expected them to facilitate my growth into manhood.

I believe this to be the first essential to an authentic Masonic experience. We have to understand that our organizational purpose is to facilitate each man's journey to mature masculinity. It is fundamental to a man's understanding of his own process of growth. Freemasonry is first and foremost an initiatic society with the calling to respond to a psychological need in men to be initiated into manhood. And the initiatic experience is meant to convey one most powerful idea to the person being initiated. He has left one stage of his life and is entering upon another. He is putting away an old life and taking on another.

Initiation is, by definition, a conferral of a different status on the individual. It is a change in his consciousness which results in some form of rebirth or renewal within the deepest aspect of his nature. That is the meaning of the raising of Hiram. In a Men's House, being initiated means that the Initiate is consciously aware he has entered onto a path toward mature masculinity. The journey begins with his awareness. He has to know what "doing the right thing" as a man means. His perceptions and enforcement of responsibility must come from within. He has to be consciously present with the deepest aspect of his being.

Mature masculinity also has an exoteric dimension which is equally important to authenticity. We must also be consciously aware of how we represent ourselves to others. Truthfulness, goodness, honor, honesty, courage, purity, —by whatever name we give them, our values define us because they also define for the outside world who we are. How we integrate these ideals, convictions, beliefs and behaviors out in the world will determine our social status; that is, whether or not we will be seen by those who know us as men of integrity; as important men. As men one can rely upon. As men who distinguish themselves from the rest of the community.

You see, a man's integrity is clearly within himself, to himself, and for himself what it is to others. This is why it is so important that a man be aware of his dignity at all times. Above all, a specific style of life should be expected from those who wish to belong to our inner circle and wear the title of Master Mason. And that style of life is founded in integrity. The function of Masonic ritual and the Masonic bonding it facilitates for us is no less than a dramatic construct for social improvement. When a King is consecrated, a student is given a doctorate, a groom is married, a man is initiated an Entered Apprentice, or a Worshipful Master is

installed to preside, they acquire a social role which they did not have before. In every honor which bestows upon us new status, we must leave a less worthy state and raise ourselves to a higher state of awareness and duty. The path to enlightenment, social honor, and status is always an upward way. Through our organization we are about the business of communicating and sustaining integrity and grace in the lives of our members. If we do any less, we stop short of fulfilling our promise that we improve ourselves in Masonry because personal improvement implies moving to a higher state of personal integrity.

Freemasonry exists first and foremost to transform men. And that transformation takes place because one is initiated into a fellowship of the right kind of men.

We have everything required to make this process work. We come from a legal founding, we have the longest history of any male society, and we have a lasting legacy of worthiness. And we offer a sense of stability and moral authority that can be respected and passed along to succeeding generations. And the wonderful thing about this scenario is that all of this can occur in the sacred and social space of lodge. It is not dependent upon the success of any hierarchy above it. It's all about what brand each lodge chooses to adopt for itself; and the integrity portrayed by the men in it. Our collective purpose is to grow together in social honor.

These are the compelling reasons for men, especially young men, to join us today. Most men are isolated, both individually and in groups, in occupations and feelings. Many of our younger men come from divorced parents. They seek a common identity with other men. They yearn to share a portion of their lives with other men. They want to be on the journey of self-development and personal improvement. They want patriarchy and role modeling to guide them to mature and manly judgment. They seek truth. They want to be nurtured. They covet brotherhood. They seek meaning in their lives. They want to learn about values. They want to know what real integrity looks like. And they want to follow through on their values with personal action so that they too can become men with status. They are interested in how men are connected, how relationships can have meaning across generations. They want to know why they are here and what will bring them fulfillment. It is this cross section of the society of men we want to look for, cultivate

and have as brothers among us. The lodge and the men in it have always been the receptacle in which these needs are discovered and accommodated.

The challenge of Freemasonry today is not that we don't own the right product. Our challenge is that not enough of our members are representing themselves as men with social honor who are engaged in personally participating in the teaching and mentoring of men—of making men out of guys—so that, when they one day become the next generation of elders, they will still be carrying the torch of manhood and honor to the young men joining their lodge. Our job is to produce men who will have honor and integrity in their own time by the witness of our example. Our responsibility is to raise the generation of men below us in such a way that all men and women who come to know them during their lives will think to themselves, or say to each other; *“there goes a wonderful man!”*

The fraternal movement exists to play out this role in the overall scheme of things--this remarkable purpose of making wonderful and extraordinary men out of good guys.

We need only to guide this collective consciousness within our lodge along a particular spiritual path that literally transforms and improves each of us. That is the path to a Masonic renaissance.

I also know what is not real to me. I do not believe that Masonry is being true to itself when it permits a complete stranger to enter onto the path of the ancient mysteries under the sole assumption that every seemingly good man is a fit for Freemasonry. I sometimes wonder if it is authentic for Freemasonry to be concerned about its public image when it declares to itself that its work is about the “internal” and not the “external” nature of the human condition. I do not believe that Masonry is being served when lodges simply go through the motions of being a part of a fraternity in name only without offering their members a quality fraternal experience, or understanding the significance of what they teach or do. They create a Masonic experience that is a kind of real-fake thing. In a real sense, they offer a pretend experience

A lodge which informs every Entered Apprentice that, through Masonry, he is to become a living and thinking actor filled with moral and intellectual light, while never creating a sacred space within its tiled setting that is so solemn, so unique and so eccentric that its members cannot experience it anywhere else in their lives; without performing its degree work with impeccable accuracy, clarity, and deep meaning; without regularly teaching and discussing its symbolism and allegories, without delivering lectures and sharing dialogue which focuses on revealing the transformative nature of Masonry's intent for the man and his world; without regularly meditating together on the nature of the divine within us and how we can access this power for right purpose and action; is not being real to our fraternity's traditional vision. Again, our ruffian is that we are offering only a real-fake authenticity.

Of course, it can be argued that what is real and authentic in my Masonic experience is not authentic for everyone. For some people, obtaining the three degrees and coming back for their 50-year pin is authentic. For others, coming to meetings, opening lodge, paying bills, listening to the minutes, closing, and eating stale cookies is authentic. For still others, being in a lodge that is mediocre in every feature of its experience is authentic. But it is only a "real-fake" authenticity. This never was authentic Freemasonry.

The systemic problem in our practice of Masonry is that for each of us here today, our traditions in Masonry have been only what we have experienced in our own lifetime. In reality, perhaps we were too passive in being content just to sustain a particular brand of Masonry that was offered to our WW II era men who were looking for a specific kind of Masonic experience that just happened to be their kind of experience. It was an experience built solely on fraternalism, comradeship, and stability. They were looking for normalcy again. It may have worked for them. But 63 consecutive years of decline has surely taught us that it is not the right Masonry of our generation. Whatever their model was, it is clearly the wrong brand for today.

Today, and in the future, in more and more lodges, we will have to provide a place where our new brothers can have their expectations met; who can genuinely have an experience that is authentic to them because it is also authentic to Freemasonry.

The bottom



line of Masonic teaching is that, through the journey of our degrees, we learn that the attainment of mature masculinity is work; and that divine truth cannot be understood by the human agencies of education, or dogma, or rational thought, or by the evidence of the senses. It has to be perceived directly. And, my Brothers, it enters us through the path of authentic initiation.

And, if such awareness and insight and understanding can happen in the lodge room, then the influence of an improved mind, a better human, can also be felt outside it. Men come into Masonry to learn to improve themselves. If they are coming here for any other reason, then they are failing to represent with honesty what our organizational purpose is. And if you are not on the same path with our organizational purpose, then you are creating only a fake-real authenticity. That is not good enough for a man who distinguishes himself from the rest of the community.

When we, as Freemasons, tell a man to be a man, we mean there is a way to be a man. A man is not just a thing to be—it is also a way to be, a path to follow and a way to walk. Being good at being a man has to mean something. A man is not merely a man, but a man among men, in a world of men.

The bottom line is that when we tell a man to be a man, we are telling him to be a man whom other men hold in high regard—a man who knows who he is because he has integrated his outer consciousness with his mature masculine soul—the divine nature of his very being. And because he has been initiated into a particular group who has a strong sense of its own identity—an identity organized around the ways of virtue—about being a good person, a good citizen, a good role model, a good father, a good member of society—the archetypal virtues directly related to manhood—then there exists a harmony that transcends all outside interests of the group. There is a mutual understanding of the value of their particular social unit. There is an understanding of what men have most often needed from each other; and that understanding is a sense of who they are, why they are here, and what they are supposed to be doing with their life that will shape their masculine psychology. Such men are indeed men among men.

But, again, there more questions we must ask ourselves. Do we follow the path of our mythic hero Hiram in our own lives? As we face our own challenges, and move from one point in life to another; from child to teenager, from teen to adult, from adult to maturity, from old age to death, do we actually integrate the hero's journey into our very own? Do our own challenges open doors to knowledge and understanding? Do we prepare ourselves to face difficulties and use our experiences to become stronger and more capable men? Do we achieve wisdom, strength, and beauty; that is, growth, independence, and harmony, as we make our own journey? Do we become the man we want to be? Do we move from the impetuosity of youth, to mature manly judgment? Have we truly become initiated men? Are we truly worthy of discovering the secrets contained within the fraternity?

The admission of each man into the Masonic Order, then, is a symbolic representation of the beginning of his journey to personal and social honor; of divesting himself of the passions, prejudices, vices, and chaos of the profane world; and vesting himself with those qualities essential for living the kind of life that will distinguish him from the rest of the community.

The way of the craftsman is to build a temple to God. It is *his* edifice of consciousness, in which, he is the architect, the builder, and the building stone. He begins as a rough ashlar. In time he will square his stone, he will make it smooth, he will place it in the temple. And when that temple is complete, God will behold God in the mirror of existence—and there will be then, as there was in the *Beginning*—only God!

Every lodge must create a brand of Freemasonry that is the real-real for that lodge. This is our collective fraternal engagement here. Let us always enjoy it with the deepest of fellow feeling. But let us make our lodge a good fit only for men who are like unto us.

We need only to cross the Rubicon.