

# THE SERIOUSNESS OF PURPOSE IN FREEMASONRY

## THE BEAUTY OF THE STAINED-GLASS WINDOW

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Freemasonry, like a magnificent stained-glass window, reveals its true beauty when viewed from within. Seen from without, its full beauty is lost, and its value underestimated. To see the beauty of the stained glass, a man must enter within the gates, become steeped and illuminated in the teachings of the Order and be gripped by its principles. Then he can realize and find in Masonry its profound value.<sup>1</sup>

The American Institution of Freemasonry has long been addicted to the notion that its success can be effectively measured by the number of names appearing on its membership rolls. It is not argued that the expansion of Masonry is not a good thing, but the way the enormous past expansions occurred is not a tribute to a successful process. The various periods of rapid growth did nothing to better assure alignment of those admitted with the necessary historical intent, aim, and purpose of Masonry. Nor did it enhance any of the long-proven characteristics of sound organizational theory.

Earnest reviews of Masonic literature and our official records tell of many variables that affect the increase and decrease of membership and offer many reasons the Fraternity in America has become peripheral in the eye of the public for more than a half century. Among the variables we find, at least since the latter years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is the ever-ready, common refrain that men are busier now than they were.

The Fraternity's inclination to look first at external reasons that might help to explain decades of lagging interest in Masonry is so commonplace in the mainstream that it might thought of as a Landmark. While there is indeed a range of external situations or dynamics that affect the ebb and flow of organized Masonry in America, it is odd that an institution that encourages members to look inward as a step to improvement has repeatedly refused to look in the mirror in the corporate sense.

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Embracing the notion that just being a member can make a man better; the fraternity has made it easy for men to fall in love with the *idea* of Masonry but has done little to better ensure that those admitted will be faithful to the idea. Being in love with an idea is not the same as being in love with

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<sup>1</sup> Walter M. Macdougall, *Freemasonry: The Vital Exploration*, Macoy, Richmond, VA, 2009.

something that comes from a more stable relationship that develops over time, involving commitment and deeper understanding beyond initial attraction and novelty. It is the difference between infatuation and genuine love.

The love of the *idea* of Masonry, to some, may spring from how simple it sounds to be a better man by simply applying for membership, paying some nominal fees, then deemed being qualified by a lodge, and admitted. Then, after being ushered swiftly through the degrees, – “*voilà!*” – another member is added to the roster with the title, Master Mason. The message projected is that this is all there is to *becoming* a Mason. But being made members refers specifically to the formal, ceremonial act of initiation into the Fraternity of Freemasonry. *Becoming* a Mason is not merely about passing through rituals and knowing the administrative rules of the organization; it entails a transformation in how individuals perceive themselves and interact with the world.

Love of an idea that stands is created through a committed decision. Should the initial novelty of the idea begin to wear off, or the lodge's work fails to inspire and sustain the members' interest, choices will eventually arise.

Since there is no requirement that a member attend and participate in the work of the Lodge, the easy road choice so often taken is to just continue to pay the annual dues that allow a member to remain in good standing. By doing so, the member may continue to wear lapel pins, rings, and all the gear that bear Masonic emblems, as well as retain other rights and privileges of membership, and never see the inside of a Masonic Lodge Room again. Why would anyone think that the title makes a man a Mason any more than in name only? Ritual lays the foundation, but without labor the superstructure cannot be raised.<sup>2</sup> As 20<sup>th</sup> century Masonic scholar Henry Pirtle tells newly raised members in his 1921 *Kentucky Monitor*, “Membership in a Masonic lodge can no more make you a Mason than membership in a musical club can make you a musician.”<sup>3</sup>

The second choice, the less traveled path, demands a deep commitment to the obligation each member voluntarily undertakes to learn Freemasonry. This commitment requires a balanced life, dedicated time, and engagement with those who demonstrate the seriousness of their Masonic journey. It involves studying and applying the principles of Freemasonry to daily life. This may sound simple, but records show that a majority of members do not pursue this path.

The third choice is for a member to dabble between the first two choices under the mistaken notion that the profound value of Masonry can be realized by treating it like a hobby.

Being faithful to the idea of Masonry and the obligation taken to pursue it is a challenge. It often is the opposite of the path many of those admitted were on in the first place. So, in consequence, many admitted into the ranks fail to see, or even gain a glimpse, of the beautiful stained-glass

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Pirtle, *Kentucky Monitor*, Address to a Newly Initiated Brother, 1921, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Louisville, 1921, p.57

<sup>3</sup> *IBID.* Address to a Newly Raised Brother, p. 154.

window from within and stand idly in the shadow cast by their own underestimation of the value that Masonry can have in their life.

*Being made a member is not enough for any man to become a Mason, except perhaps in his imagination. Calling a dog's tail a leg does not make it a leg. Likewise, calling a member a Mason is not sufficient to actually make him one.*

Rare is the case that members who continue to look at the stained glass from without ever live up to the true meaning of the title *master* Mason. Lodges that make it their practice to admit men who have no time in their lives to pursue and learn Masonry perpetuate a useless parade. Members failing to commit to the study and genuine pursuit of Masonry in favor of scratching the surface and superficially exploring its purpose and value can look forward to continuing to be the same man they were before being admitted to their Lodge.

A member cannot get around the fact that if Freemasonry is to mean anything to a man and he to it, he must spend some time with it. Spending time with it does not mean he merely attends lodge regularly and puppets and parrots his way through years of routinely showing up to meetings. No, spending time with it means that he applies himself and earnestly explores and learns Masonry by study, if, that is, he truly seeks to maintain and deepen his connection to the Craft.

Waking up to that reality, a member comes to recognize and appreciate the fact that the synthesis of faith and reason, science and spirituality as found in Masonry takes time.<sup>4</sup> Being made a member is not enough for any man to become a Mason, except perhaps in his imagination. The misperception that merely being a member makes a man a Mason is not necessarily the fault of the member. His lodge plays a key role in allowing that thinking to exist. Calling a dog's tail a leg does not make it a leg.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, calling a member a Mason is not sufficient to actually make him one. All attempts to sidestep the process intended to guide men toward becoming a Masons produce, at best, semi-manufactured Masons.

In the past and today there are Masons who argue that allowing candidates to learn at their own pace is in the best interest of Freemasonry. Some members may indeed be capable of *becoming* Masons on their own after they have been ushered through degrees, but does that justify the notion that self-paced learning is in the best interest of all candidates or Masonry?

Valid studies about self-paced and self-determined learning tell us enough to cause us to rethink this lopsided concept and question the notion that candidates left to their own devices learn more and understand the degrees *after* they are raised. Such a belief is an illusion. The illusion exists because too many in the Fraternity and its leadership have not sufficiently explored the facts. Why do we

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<sup>5</sup> Allen Thorndike's book, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time*, New York, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1909. The calling a dog's leg a tail is yet another of the dozens of quotes that are attributed to Lincoln to lend credence to them. However, the account has been determined to be accurate, although Lincoln is reported to have said that calling a *calf's tail* and leg does not make it a leg.

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find it so difficult to recognize that those who successfully navigate on their own the arduous task of actually becoming a Mason?

When we put opinion and anecdote to the side and soberly examine this matter, we find evidence that self-paced or self-directed learning (SDL) can lead to procrastination, which makes it even more challenging for some learners to stay motivated and on track because of lack of structure and self-discipline. Potential gaps in understanding the subject can arise, along with reduced accountability, lack of immediate feedback, isolation, and peer association. Those who lack skills to effectively manage their learning process are at a disadvantage, thus disparities in wholesome instruction are likely.

Likewise, we find that self-directed learners experience lower satisfaction and retention rates within SDL frameworks that raise additional questions about its sustainability across varied learner groups. Additionally, such self-paced learning diminishes learners' ability to apply knowledge in real-world contexts.<sup>6</sup> When we find that only three of twelve Masons can identify and relate symbols on our Tracing Boards to any specific degree, or at all, we should at least arch an eyebrow and think about why they cannot.

What is it that makes so many in the fraternity believe that the Institution is immune to such findings and turn blind eyes to at least the consideration that there are legitimate problems to deal with it when it comes to ensuring good and wholesome instruction to candidates *as* men pass through the degrees. What evidence supports the assertion that men have not been exposed to the actual teachings of Freemasonry will learn it all afterward?

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<sup>6</sup> Hong M. Shao, L. Zhao, "Impact of The Self-Directed Learning Approach and Attitude on Online Learning Ineffectiveness: The Mediating Roles of Internet Cognitive Fatigue and Flow State Front Public Health," *National Institution of Medicine*, 2022 Aug 4;10:927454. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2022.927454. PMID: 35991035; PMCID: PMC9387909, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9387909>, Jacy Spencer, "The Effect of Self-Paced Learning on Student Achievement and Motivation within an Eighth-Grade Mathematics Classroom," 2022, Dissertations, Theses, and Projects. 728, <https://red.mnstate.edu/thesis/728>, accessed January 2025, J. Hattie, *Visible Learning*. Routledge, New York, 2009, P.A. Kirschner, Sweller, R.E. Clark, (2006), "Why Minimally Guided Instruction Does Not Work," *Educational Psychologist*, 41(2), 75-86, 2006, R.B Kozma, "Technology And Classroom Practices," *Research Journal on the Use of Technology in Education*, 35(2), 1-20., 2003.

If all that is expected of a wide swath of members is for them to possess but a smattering of knowledge about Masonry before they are conferred the title, “Master Mason,” then we must accept the reality that much of Masonic leadership will continue to come from those very ranks. Thus, the extraordinarily low bar will not only linger, but will self-perpetuate. The beauty of the stained-glass window from within will consequently continue to fade from the view of the mainstream. The seriousness purpose in Masonry will only dim in the minds of candidates. Under these circumstances, those who have and continue to speak of the Fraternity as if it were no more than a social, dining club, or, at best, a benefit society with a mysterious past, will naturally continue to do so. And an even smaller number of candidates are initiated into the Fraternity with but a vague idea of the real meaning of Masonry, what kind of leadership in the future can be expected that is not a crepidarian style?

## DUTY AND REASON

When ushered through the degrees, a man pledges himself more than once to be and to do certain things, all of which represent that which is actually required for him to accurately be entitled to say he is a Mason. Henceforth, he is under a moral obligation to possess himself of whatever knowledge those pledges require of him.<sup>7</sup> Surely, we can agree that a man lacking the fundamental knowledge, which is his duty to have, only carries the title but has not become a Mason.

The degrees are intended to set the foundation and serve as the passport that allows a man to pursue his duty. Ritual is an *expression* of Freemasonry that sets the parameters and guidelines for a man to productively pursue, and learn to integrate into his life, its timeless and proven principles.

The purpose of our lodges is not to serve merely as a meeting place for men to enjoy a meal together, nor as an alms house, but rather as a university with a syllabus and curriculum designed to lead a man to his spiritual regeneration, equipped with the symbolic tools to assist in the quest for perfection.<sup>8</sup>

Those who have observed the beauty of the stained-glass window from within remain the small pockets of Masons as they have always been. They stand apart from a larger group who remain as little qualified to understand the subject as the man who has never entered the Lodge – the man who never rises above himself. The intellectual and spiritual benefits they could have gained from the roadmap - the passport given to them in each degree is unstamped. They have not reached their potential through Masonry, nor do they realize that the number of names on membership rosters has never been, nor will they ever be, an accurate measure of success in Freemasonry.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> H.L. Hayworth, *The Masonic Essays of H.L. Hayworth*, Transactions of the Missouri Lodge of Research, Vol. 20, 1963, Board of Publication, 1963.

<sup>8</sup> W.L. Wilmshurst, *The Meaning of Masonry*, William Ryder & Son, Paternoster Row & Percy Lund, Humphries & Company, 3 Amen Corner, London, 1922.

<sup>9</sup> IBID.

The beauty of the stained glass of Freemasonry is only visible from within. Entry into the genuine mysteries of Freemasonry is impossible without firm commitment.

At The Rubicon Masonic Society's "Masonic Authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" Conference in 2023, RWB Andrew Hammer defined Freemasonry as "seriousness of purpose." Manifestly, that seriousness of purpose is not to be found among mainstream Freemasons in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Simply put, since we do not take ourselves seriously, why should the profane world?

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