

Living the Journey: When Do We Get to Make Good Men Better?

(A Prequel to “Winds of Change”, published September 6, 2021)

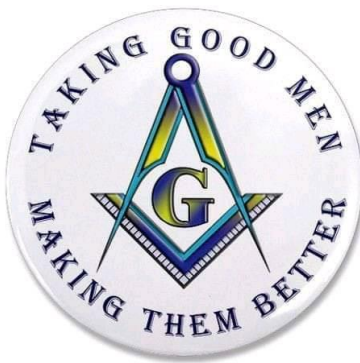
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“Freemasonry: Making Good Men Better”. That’s our motto. That’s our proclamation. When can we start? What’s the plan? How do we do that? Are you a master mason and have you ever wondered either “how would I explain ‘*making good men better*’ to a prospective candidate” or “when is someone going to explain to me how we do that”? If so, first, don’t feel bad and second, the answer may surprise you.

Perhaps you have been waiting for the day when you find the dusty book in the storage room of your lodge called “How to Make Good Men Better”. Maybe you have found books on Amazon called “Making Good Men Better” or some variation of that, and then been sorely disappointed because it just doesn’t provide the information you were expecting – or need – to understand how we, as a fraternity make good men better. It is possible that while you may be looking in seemingly logical places, perhaps you are not looking for what it is you should be looking for and it has been right in front of you the entire time – just like a famous pair of ruby slippers¹!

There are some critical factors we must understand if our institution is to survive and actually make good men better. First and fundamentally, we – you, me, individual brothers going about their lives – don’t *make* good men *do* or *be* anything. This is not to say that we cannot or do not influence our brothers toward good and meaningful labors and studies, but individually we cannot *make* a man do anything he does not feel and desire in his nature and in his heart. If a man is guilted or pressured into behaviors and actions, his efforts are doomed to eventually fail when he walks away, frustrated and defeated.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, we must understand the “initiativ process”, follow it as we apply it in masonry, and allow it to serve its function and purpose. The initiatic process is a much-studied, much-written-about transformational process where we open ourselves to learning and to forming

¹ From the movie “The Wizard of Oz” and referring to the scene near the end when Glenda the Good Witch explains to Dorothy an important lesson about the search for things we urgently desire and need

ourselves into that better man. Manly P. Hall is one of the most talented and fascinating writers on this subject and you will be greatly enriched if you study his work on the subject.

With these important factors in mind, exactly how is it that an institution such as freemasonry can make a good man better if freemasons individually cannot? The first and most critical requirement is the desire and discipline of the good man to engage in the process and the opportunities that freemasonry offers. Indeed, the secret to the success for each and every man, each and every mason, lies in his desire and willingness to conform to the customs and usages of our ancient order. The emphatic charge we give new masons regarding recommending others for the degrees in masonry is to *"...be particularly attentive not to recommend him unless you are convinced he will conform to the laws, customs, and usages of the Order..."*, and we must understand that it is not merely because of the disruptive aspect of non-conformity, but more so because the man who will not follow our customs and usages will, by default, not improve and will not be made better and will end up wasting the time, energy, and good will of good brothers along the way.

By now you may be silently screaming "but how?", "what bolts do we turn, what wrench do we use"? "What are the rules"? Even, "I can't find or I'm incapable of seeing and understanding the instructions".

The answer, my brother, lies in the two factors I have just described. We start with the good man and we immerse him in the initiatic process. Because famous writers and deep thinkers have studied and written extensively on the concept of the initiatic process, I won't attempt to re-state all of the existing thoughts and descriptions of it here. Instead, I will briefly define it as I understand it and explain it as I see it in the context of masonry making good men better:

The initiatic process is that process followed in masonry by which an already-good man is transformed, remade into an unburdened and strengthened "better" version of himself. It involves a spiritual stripping away of the burdened and weak parts of the self to make room for the much-needed growth of an – improved – self. In the military, we recognize basic military training as the tearing down of the civilian to make way for the recruit, the new man, the better man. In masonry, we take the man, remove his defensive exterior, darken his world, and surrender him to the care of a trusted friend to open the door to the possible, the door to this man's new and approaching future. In the masonic initiatic process, a man is taught to clean his slate by using specific working tools, a clear roadmap, and the unquestioned friendship of a worldwide fraternity of men and brothers to use going forward on this personal journey which, through his very life and travels, will yield the new, good, and better man. The initiatic process could be said to be the core or heart of masonry, yet we pay little heed to it and spend little time understanding it, teaching it, or holding it in our highest esteem as the enabler it is for our respective masonic ideals and journeys.

"In the ancient system of initiation, the truth seeker must pass through a second birth, and those who attained this exalted state were known thereafter as "the twice born." Only one who has been born again can understand the mysteries of heaven. This new birth, however, is not attained by merely joining a sect. It must be personally earned through a complete regeneration of character and conduct."

- Manly P Hall

We greet a man at the west gate and welcome him inside. We agree with this man to admit him among us and in return we ask that he make certain commitments. We ask that he commit to being at lodge at certain times on certain days, we ask him to participate fully and enthusiastically in his first three lessons (degrees), we ask him to essentially learn an entirely new language and to describe actions and events that occurred while he was deprived of sight and the necessary light around him, explaining the sequence, purpose, and meaning of the lessons. And in each case, we asked him to put his complete trust in a brother he does not yet know and follow this new friend and brother wherever he leads.

It is also the necessary moment in the masonic initiatic process to introduce (or perhaps re-introduce) the man to the Volume of Sacred Law (VSL)² and the sacred word contained therein. We do this through the meaningful lessons we provide by way of direct readings, parables or allegories, and by placing the new mason into each lesson as an active participant. In this fashion, we establish or re-affirm the Holy Bible as the foundation of the new mason's journey, and we teach him how the words and books apply and give him strength and power in his travels. We demonstrate how the Bible serves as his personal rule and guide to a life well and smartly lived and we guide him as a new mason through his very first applications of the word of God as expressed in the books of the Holy Bible and revealed through his degrees.

In his first several months this man, our new brother, has been tested for his sincerity, integrity, humility, trust, and his ability *and desire* to apply the necessary discipline to learn new facts and habits. He has – hopefully – increased and improved each of those qualities through his own actions. Most importantly, our new mason has been reminded of the centrality of the Holy Bible and the word of God in his life and has learned important reasons and ways to apply those words and lessons to his life.

It is our hope for the fraternity that our new brother will continue to honor his commitments to his new brothers, to invest time and energy into his lodge, to assist in charitable acts, to serve the lodge perhaps in the officer line, and perhaps be that brother one can call in a time of need.

This now brings me to what I personally see as the big disconnect between our common practices and our common understanding of this thing called “making good men better”. We focus intently on our new candidate, his development as a new mason, his ability, desire, and commitment to meet these (seemingly) random requirements. And then *poof*, we declare him finished and ready to go out on his own as a master mason to take on his journey and take on the world. No, my brother, this is not as it should be. It is here, it is at this very point we must all recommit *ourselves* to the fraternity and to each other! It is here *we ourselves* are tested in our own commitment to growth, to our brothers, and our fraternity. It is here *we* apply those lessons imbued during our own first three degrees.

Unfortunately, it is also here where some become content, having completed their three initial, major lessons, they slow or even stop their journey(s) having achieved the goal merely of becoming a master mason and satisfied they need nothing further or worse, that masonry has nothing more to provide. There are many reasons, unique among each of our brothers for this choice in the direction and length of their respective journeys. But I fear and am most concerned the most prevalent reason that many of

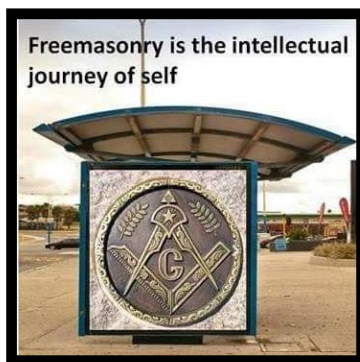
² The Volume of Sacred Law, or the VSL, appears in many masonic writings and refers to The Holy Bible

our brothers feel they've "completed" their work, or claim they have no desire to continue forward, is that they have not seen or made the connection between receiving their three degrees and the lessons imparted therein, and the application of those lessons throughout a journey going forward, teaching, leading, and mentoring those new masons coming along behind him. This disconnect could cripple or even eventually destroy the masonic fraternity if allowed to continue to grow from generation to generation.

We look to our new brothers to apply and reinvest their new knowledge through instruction of new and future candidates in the catechisms and taking on roles in the degrees to impart the necessary lessons to new masons. One might think of the act of instructing new masons and participating in the necessary lessons and degrees from this perspective: "my brother, seeing you are entirely destitute of necessary knowledge, and knowing that it is necessary for you have it for your growth and advancement, I provide you this knowledge as my token of friendship and brotherly love". It is through this change in roles from student and initiate to master and teacher that the chain of masonry is strengthened and lengthened through time, binding one generation to the last and the next in perpetuity.

This begins our own next lessons, next improvements, and next steps in his, ours, and any mason's journey. By practicing and sharing in these reasonably simple tasks about the lodge, we *all* improve and increase our service to others as well as our service to purposes larger than one's self.

Ideally, we all move forward on our respective journey's, serving our lodges, talking to good men about masonry, performing works of charity and relief, and paying heed to our place and position in our community; serving as little league coaches, teaching our families, especially our children, the value of work and charity perhaps by volunteering in our local charities – all things we have seen, learned about, and admired in our brethren but maybe in our pre-masonic lives had never occurred to us as fulfilling and meaningful service to our fellow man.



As we age in masonic years and in physical years, we also grow in our interactions outside the lodge; we are more assured and more decisive. We are improved public speakers, passionate advocates for our causes, and we are terrific supervisors and managers because we have grown in our empathy and learned to educate and persuade through large assemblies, small groups, and one-on-one relationships. Mentorship comes naturally to us and we find ourselves leading in our neighborhoods and communities on the many issues and questions of the day.

All of our journeys must and will eventually come to an end, but labors, growth, and improvement through masonry do not stop, even at the side of the grave. Brothers will again invest their time and personal energies to join at graveside to send our brothers off, to see a brother pass to the celestial lodge and to thank him for his labors, honor his life, and pray for his immortal soul. These men and brothers who so assemble for this solemn purpose come face to face with the reality of human mortality

and are reminded of the need to guard and invest one's time wisely and productively; a valuable reminder indeed.

So, when do we get to make good men better? It all starts at the west gate. It is iterative, and *it is supposed to be never ending*. Every step and every action we take is an opportunity to do something better than we did before. Every brother we meet, every instructor that teaches us, every office we hold, and every candidate and new mason we teach and mentor presents an opportunity to enhance and improve our character, our generosity, humility, and our empathy and openness to the thoughts, needs, and ideas of others.

We have learned much since the days of our own degrees and catechisms. We may not know it, or may not be conscious of it, but we have absorbed lessons and honed our skills and we are becoming the best versions of ourselves. We may not be there yet, but by having gone through the initiatic process and by conforming to the laws, customs, and usages of our unique and beloved Order, our journey continues, and we are better citizens, better brothers, and better men.

Appreciate, enjoy, and *live* your journey my brother!

Sincerely and Fraternally Yours,

Bro. Bill