

The Winds of Change

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PROLOGUE

Scene: a fictional, random discussion about masonry between a generic Prospective Candidate and a Master Mason. The Prospective Candidate comes into a local lodge one evening in 2019 before a stated meeting to find out about becoming a mason.

Prospective Candidate (PC): Hi. Is there someone around that I might talk to? I'd like to find out more about masonry

MM: Sure, come on in and we can talk, have a seat.

PC: Great! I wasn't exactly sure what I needed to do to find out about joining and I saw the cars in your parking lot, so I decided to stop in.

MM: We're happy to talk to you. How did you come across masonry or what aroused your curiosity? Do you have any family members who are masons?

PC: Actually yes, my grandfather and his brothers were all masons, plus one of my uncles is a mason.

MM: Awesome! So, did they talk to you about what masonry is, or why they joined?

PC: A little bit. Mostly my uncle, but I only see him once or twice a year because he lives up north. He told me about making good men better, and about going through degrees, but he didn't really tell me any details. I have done some digging around online and I've read a lot of things I found there.

MM: Well, we really don't encourage internet searches because there is a lot of incorrect and flat out bad information online. But I see you're here, so nothing scared you away I guess?

PC: (Chuckles) yes, I know there's bad info out there, my uncle warned me. I did find some things that he said were pretty good after he looked at them.

MM: Well good. Did anything in particular catch your eye?



PC: Yes, I'm really intrigued by the history and the how the degrees work. I have a lot of questions about old traditions and how masons have kept a lot of things from way back in the 1700's. I love history and customs and I'm really intrigued about joining something, a club or a fraternity or something that is historic and stands for things, has principles, and keeps them going.

MM: Well that's great. I think we have a lot to talk with you about.

THE WINDS OF CHANGE



Flash forward two years to 2021 and our prospective candidate is now a young master mason (YMM). He is sitting in a lodge dining room with some brother master masons, talking about the needs for masonry to change to better accommodate the new and coming generations of masons.

YMM: I still say candidates and instructors should be allowed to use cypher books for the catechisms.

MM: But our tradition is the “instructive tongue to the receptive ear”. That is how we have historically passed the work along to new generations

YMM: Times change and we need to change with them. And it's time for festival format degrees like other states do! We need to get out there and actively recruit new members and then initiate candidates in one-day festivals! And the only memory work we should ask them to do is the Master Mason's Obligation. Why do we waste everyone's time learning catechisms?

MM: Shouldn't we honor our brothers that have gone before us and provided us these unique and beautiful degrees, and lessons, and traditions? Should we just let our traditions die off?

YMM: It's time to change. Today's masons don't have time for all this memory work and they don't have a year to waste on progressing from one degree to another. We need to change to accommodate today's prospective members. Men today want to get right to the lessons and to making themselves better.

MM: Couldn't it be that by practicing the discipline and patience needed to learn and teach the catechisms, we are beginning and applying major lessons of making ourselves better? And could it be that by following the prescriptions and methods of those brothers who have gone before us that we are not only preserving the history and legacy of masonry, but deepening our own commitments to self-improvement through our service to our brothers? So, perhaps the instructor teaching a new brother the catechisms is not simply an act of teaching a brother to memorize scripts, but perhaps it is two brothers engaged in improving themselves through masonry; one is improving his knowledge and patience by learning the ritual he needs to advance, the other improving himself in masonry by supporting a brother in need by imparting information this new brother must have?

MM (continued): Is it not true that each and every step and action we take in the masonic traditions and methods is a step or action that reinforces our own self-improvement? Let me recast the simple act of instructing a candidate in his catechism as such a lesson; consider the act from this perspective: “my brother, seeing you are entirely destitute of necessary knowledge, and knowing it is necessary for you to have it at this time, I present you this knowledge which you are required to have and the gift of fraternal brotherly love given freely through my commitment and sacrifice of time”.

MM (continued): If we skip these early, necessary processes and time requirements to join, learn, and advance, wouldn't we be depriving ourselves and future candidates of those first vital lessons in self-improvement, those being discipline, patience, and commitment to others such as our brothers, our fellow man, and causes larger than ourselves?

My brothers, I've provided this fictional conversation to illuminate the questions, decisions, and quandary's confronting today's masons. First let me be clear, I am *not* automatically against change or modernization. I *am* against reflexive change or changes for the sake of convenience. I am stridently opposed to change(s) that would remake our fraternity into something unrecognizable. And I am thoroughly confounded by the thought process of a prospective or new member who joins an organization because they admire and respect its form and function, and then set about trying to change it into something other than what it was and that they said they admired so much when they joined.

I think we, as humans, crave change and constant improvement. We like to see things advancing and new technology has raised our expectation that changes mean better, faster, and more efficient. That may be true, but is that appropriate for the world's oldest fraternal organization? Do we want masonry to change and improve, or do we enjoy the privilege of membership in a microcosm of society that honors and guards our history and our legends? Or are we simply looking for a social club as a network to swap life's lessons and call it making ourselves better?

We have come to know freemasonry as “a system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols”. This is the most common description of our fraternity. We are brothers who join together for the purposes of improving ourselves in masonry and preserving and participating in this system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols. The term “system” itself informs us that freemasonry is the sum total of many parts working together methodically to preserve, perpetuate, and promulgate masonic ideals.

The system, or the “whole” is comprised of four specific parts; 1) the structured fraternity (lodge and system of lodges) which sets moral expectations and behavioral and learning requirements for the members, 2) the processes (i.e. degrees, instructive tongue to receptive ear style, proficiency examinations, etc.) for conveying and learning the ideals, 3) the instructional style and form (allegory and the stories conveyed through the degrees) for conveyance of the ideals, and finally, 4) the collection of symbols (i.e. S&C, Square, Level, Plum, Working Tools, etc.) that illustrate and represent masonic ideals.

Changes to masonry are difficult and they are difficult for a reason. When we change the process for conveying and learning the ideals, perhaps by adding festival-style degrees, allowing the use of books to learn catechisms, and so forth, you've changed the "process for conveying and learning the ideals" as promulgated by our fraternal ancestors and you have changed the "system"; it is no longer the historic and traditional system with the unique customs practices that sets masonry apart from other fraternities and clubs. More importantly, you remove or diminish a disciplined, self-improvement-based approach which provides for a brother to commit (sacrifice) his time to his brothers in need and thereby exercising, practicing, and improving his own charitable qualities. Instruction is never only about the candidate; it is about one brother helping another. What becomes of this lesson in a modernized version of our fraternity where catechisms are either no longer required, or candidates are allowed to study them from books?

I provide this piece for your consideration. I am not reflexively against change(s) and I can in fact list two or three ideas that I support that would make things better but keep our system essentially intact. I *am* reflexively against changes simply to shortcut the system (of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols) and that stray from masonic ideals simply for convenience sake. Once we make such changes in the name of making things easier or "adapting to modern times", we have changed the nature and the character of our fraternity which is, after all, only one of four parts of our greater system of morality, but it is *the* part designed to perpetuate masonic form, lessons, and ideals for future generations and the one that distinguishes masonry as unique among all community, professional, and social organizations.

One thing I urge you to do when considering major changes to our system in order to save it is to learn as much as you can about why the system is the way it currently is. What was the intent behind the current process or rule? Sometimes you may be surprised to find sound reasons for the current form or you might find that the changes you seek may have unintended effects on other masonic traditions or ideals. If we unleash the winds of change, can we control them once they set upon the craft? Will we recognize our fraternal order in five, four, or even perhaps just three generations?

EPILOGUE



Flash forward with me one more time, this time to the year 2321. The scene: two masons sitting in the masonic meeting room of a local community center in San Antonio. They've just completed the online video meeting for the annual statewide, Grand Lodge "Make a Mason" Ceremony where they prepared and assisted the San Antonio candidate.

M1: Is it me, or are these things taking longer and longer?

M2: No, it's not you, this one ran almost a full half hour, for no reason that I could tell except that Grand Lodge wasn't ready.

M1: It would sure be nice to get these down to about 15 minutes. I mean, how long should it take for seven men to read a script off a prompter, even if they are in seven different parts of the state? I think the oath is too long. Most of it doesn't even really apply anymore. I think we can get the entire initiation down to about 10 minutes and that includes giving them their Square and Compass pin and certificate. If a man wants to be a mason, why should it take a half an hour on a Saturday morning? That's when most of us have to cut the grass and do our chores. Maybe we should try to change things to where we can make masons here, locally, in our own meeting rooms.

M2: I know. I hear what you're saying and I agree. But it *is* shorter now. When I joined, it took me almost three weeks to find a mason to help me and then the application by itself was two full pages – I actually needed a reference! My "Make a Mason" ceremony lasted almost an hour and I had to listen to something about history and some cathedrals in Europe; not even sure what that was about. At least it's streamlined now to just taking the oath. What's that you've got there?

M1: It's a book I found online on Amazon Archives. It's called "Monitor of the Lodge" from 2019 and it talks about masonic stuff from back in the 2000's. Pretty interesting, but I don't understand most of it.

M2: Masonic stuff? Like what we do?

M1: Well, it says it's about masonry, and it was published by the Grand Lodge of Texas, but I can't really tell if it's related to what we do or not. The Grand Lodge title includes the letters "AF and AM", but it doesn't really explain what that is. Maybe it was a grand lodge that came before our grand lodge. There's also a section that describes the square and the compass and it describes them pretty close to the same way we do. But there are all kinds of other things I've never heard of before.

M2: Like what?

M1: Well, there's something in here called a twenty-four inch gage which just looks like a ruler to me, and there are gavels, and beehives, an hour glass, and some tools like a level and chisel. There are descriptions about what they mean, but it doesn't really explain what their relationship is to anything we do.

M2: Interesting.

M1: Oh, and the book describes what I think are levels or ranks of masons and they have funny names. From what I can tell a new mason would be something called an "entered apprentice", then at some point he becomes a "fellowcraft". The third rank appears to be called "master" mason. Do you suppose that's how it used to work?

M2: No idea. Never heard of those things.

M1: And it doesn't really say anywhere in here how you go from one rank to another but it seems to describe some ceremonies they might have used somehow to do it. But the writing is very cryptic and I don't really understand how it all fits together.

M2: Seems complicated. I prefer keeping things simple. Why make things more difficult than they need to be? What time are we supposed to meet over at the Shrine's masonic meeting room for the city-wide election of lodge officers?

M1: About two hours from now. What do you suppose they used an "alter" for?

M2: No idea. I'm not even convinced that stuff is related to masonry, at least not what we do today. Maybe the stuff in your book is about some masonic club you could join after Grand Lodge made you a mason. You know, Bobby told me there was a time that all the district lodges had to take their candidates to Waco for Make a Mason day. That sounds like a huge waste of time. What about people that lived in west Texas? That's a long freakin' way to travel just to read an oath and get a pin.

M1: There must be some other books from around that time that explain this stuff. It's very confusing. You want me to drive to the Shrine?

Brethren, this scenario may seem far-fetched to many or perhaps all who are reading this. But within the span of two masonic generations (measured according to masons in the family line) here in Texas, there have been two such changes that have shaped how we understand and practice masonry. In the 1920's, a mere 100 years ago, we added an entire third section to the EA proficiency in order to slow down the progression and accommodate a post-WW I surge in membership. And then, in the early 2000's, we changed the ballot system and eliminated rejection by one black ball, and we completely changed our laws to allow opening and closing in any degree and – more importantly – the conduct of business in any degree. For the first time ever in Texas masonry, non-members, non-master masons were allowed access to petitioner names and ballot results.

One can argue pros and cons to these changes but my purpose here is to show that change(s) of a magnitude necessary to reshape masonry are not only possible, but has already occurred in the current and most recent masonic generations.

After much, thoughtful consideration my brethren it is my opinion that changes to masonry should be approached with caution, respect, and an appropriate amount of fear in order to control and guide our hands lest we unintentionally remake our craft into something we do not intend or desire. We trace our masonic roots and ideals back hundreds of years through documents and legends. The masonic legacy is now in our hands to protect and to provide to future generations along with its sacred traditions, rituals, customs, and symbols. Let us choose wisely as we ponder our decisions and the future of masonry because I do believe a change or cut that is too deep risks severing the cord linking our historic and beautiful roots to the masons of our future generations. Indeed, Change *can* be a force for good, and it can be invigorating. But change for the sake of expediency can be dangerous and even destructive if not well thought out and the potential effects clearly understood.

My brethren, please travel safely and ponder the great issues of our times deeply!

Fraternally yours...

BroBill, "*A Mason's Journey*"