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Topic 7

“What Makes You a Mason?”

Freemasons are often asked about the fraternity to which they belong. Who are the Masons? What is Freemasonry? What does the organization *do*? Some men may say that the organization is the oldest, most prestigious fraternity our world has ever known. Some may respond by saying Freemasonry is a fraternal order that takes good men and makes them better. Others may choose to allude to the explanation given in the interrogatories of the first degree, which suggests that the fraternity is a course in morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols. The list certainly goes on. Many answers are given, and many times the responses end up taking more than one statement to meet the inquirers' expectations.

Unfortunately, many men will not mention the word “initiation” when they are explaining the fraternity, and there are several reasons why this probably occurs. First, the word “initiation” has negative connotations in our society. In today's world, hazing incidents have tainted the term. It seems as though “initiation” and “hazing” end up being virtually synonymous in today's vernacular. Newspaper articles and televised news casts are quick to report on questionable initiation ceremonies that involve things such as consuming mass quantities of alcohol and participating in pranks leading to personal danger and property damage...or both. If the word “initiation” is not followed by a hazing story, then often the words “strange” or “bizarre” are mixed into the story's content. For sure, modern society has not been friendly to “initiation.”

Second, initiation is a deeply personal experience. Men rarely vocalize anything that touches them on a personal level. It makes a man uncomfortable to express how deeply a ceremony can move and unite him to a group. When we couple this quality of initiation with the previous one, the problem with expressing our thoughts is compounded. Not only is it uncomfortable to discuss a deeply personal experience, but the experience is also viewed in a negative light by the popular culture. As long as we avoid the topic altogether, we don't have to worry about feeling vulnerable or odd.

Finally, Masons are bound to secrecy, and often times our members don't understand what is considered "secret" and what is open to discussion among the profane. Rather than violate one's sacred obligation, many Masons choose to not say anything at all about the fraternity's ceremonies. Instead, when asked about the fraternity they respond with vague generalizations. If questioned further, they say they can't talk about it and end the conversation.

However, discussing Freemasonry and avoiding the concept of initiation is to ignore the very nature of our Craft. Freemasonry is an initiatic tradition. Initiation is what separates members of the Order from every other man in the world; it's a binding process reserved only for members of our Craft. As such, it must be understood and accepted by our members and fellow Masons.

The Nature of Initiation

The word "initiation" is a noun that has been in the English language since at least the 1580's and derives from the Latin word "initiatione," which means "participation in secret rites." The word is associated with the adjective "initial," which also comes from the Latin term "initium" meaning "of or pertaining to a beginning." Depending on the form of

the word, it can be used as a noun meaning "a beginning, an entrance" or a verb meaning "to go into, enter upon, begin" (Harper). The Romans used the term to refer to one's admission into the mysteries of sacred or secret rites. Its root "initia" refers to the principles of science, which should remind Masons of the Fellow Craft degree among others. The Greeks used the word "initiation" in the same manner as the word "mystery," hence the term the "mysteries" of Masonry (Mackey, 353).

Masons use the term "initiation" to denote that we are admitting a new member into our brotherhood. As an initiate, a man is beginning his experience as a Freemason. Since our fraternity is rooted in the ancient mystery traditions, we too use the term to allude to the practice of admitting men into our secret, mystical rite.

According to Pike, the mysteries used initiation as a "school" where certain "truths" were taught relative to the "existence and attributes of one God, the immortality of the Soul, rewards and punishments in a future life, the phenomena of Nature, the arts, the sciences, morality, legislation, philosophy, and philanthropy..." (Pike, 372). Further, he explains that initiation took the form of a "mystical death; a descent into the infernal regions, where every pollution, and the stains and imperfections of the corrupt and evil life were purged away by fire and water" (Pike, 373). Thus, initiation is a process of being regenerated and purified as well as a time when universal truths and the nature of all is revealed..

The Purpose of Initiation

There are various purposes for using initiation ceremonies. In its most basic form, initiation is intended to teach the candidate certain truths in a way that encourages him to ponder these lessons and question their application. In *A Bridge to Light*, Hutchins remarks that the purpose of initiation is "to develop in the candidate those human qualities which

are part of the Divine” (Hutchins, 204). Likewise, Wasserman describes the purpose of initiation as an act of “participating in an increasingly intimate union with the Holy...designed to illuminate the nature of the Divine though (this) initiatic” experience (Preface IX). When we ponder the nature of the Divine, qualities such as compassion, justice, reason, love, and wisdom come to mind. Throughout a man’s progress through the various Masonic degrees, he is equipped with lessons that hone his rough nature into perfection. He is taught to be temperate, just, courageous, prudent, hard-working, fair, loyal, faithful, wise and true.

Maybe a better definition of the term “initiation” as it applies to Masonic practice is a “formal introduction by preliminary instruction or initial ceremony in some *position...society, or to knowledge*” (Murray – emphasis added). Every degree of Freemasonry serves as preliminary instruction to the greater lessons of the Craft. Step by step, we are admitted into a society of friends and fellows who are obligated by solemn ties, binding us to one another, to our creator, and to ourselves – that is, to our *true* selves. As we advance, the knowledge of Freemasonry is imparted bit by bit as veils of allegory are pushed aside and layers of symbolism reveal deeper and deeper truths.

The 24th Degree, Prince of the Tabernacle, seems like an unusual time to discuss initiation, for at this point the candidate has certainly undergone several initiation ceremonies prior to this degree. However, as we find in other degrees, the 24th Degree is a turning point in our journey through the Masonic degrees. As a Prince of the Tabernacle, we are being admitted to the Greater Mysteries of our Craft (Clausen 146). As such, we are to possess the Lamp of Trismegistus, the Cloak of Apollonius, and the Staff of Patriarchs. The Lamp refers to reason or science; the Cloak refers to liberty and self-control; the Staff

refers to faith and spiritual truths. Thus, another Masonic triad is formed by reason, knowledge, and faith (De Hoyos, 123). We have seen these concepts referred to in other degrees, but now we are at the point where we must contemplate the lessons more deeply, for now we are expected to learn the deeper teachings of our Craft. We are expected to understand the universal nature of our lessons - to analyze and synthesize.

Conclusion

Initiation is the process by which a Mason is slowly introduced to the deeper truths of our Craft. The lessons are not always obvious; the teachings are not always explained. In a world where information is downloaded and uploaded in mere seconds, initiation seems outdated and tedious. However, imparting wisdom takes time, and the reception of her pearls is not instantaneous.

Though plagued by dishonorable stories and skepticism, initiation is a truly pure and sacred act designed to evoke only the most honorable thoughts and ideals among its candidates. Done appropriately, initiation can be one of the most awe-inspiring and moving experiences in one's lifetime. The initiation ceremony is more than the words the candidate hears and actions he witnesses – it is a binding experience that unites men into a sacred bond of brotherhood, inspiring men to seek the limits of their potential and obligating them to the most solemn of ties. Initiation, like our obligation, makes one a Mason. Let's be proud of our tradition of initiation.

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