

Introduction to Freemasonry

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This essay is an excerpt from the introductory chapter of the book, *Journey on the Level*.

ISBN-10: 0615452884 ISBN-13: 978-0615452883 pp. 170 © 2011 Owen Shieh

The ancient and honorable craft of Freemasonry has had a long and storied past. At once a community service organization as well as a deeply philosophical and historical entity, Freemasonry in the modern world is a fraternity that exists in a category of its own. Throughout history, it has shaped the evolution of civilization by offering a platform for freethinkers and men to help each other become better citizens and better people. How did Freemasonry distill into its current form through the ages? A common and almost trite phrase that has been used to summarize the essence of the Craft states, “Freemasonry is a system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols.” But why symbols? And why bother with allegory? To answer these questions, we must briefly discuss the history of Freemasonry.

The exact beginnings of the teachings and philosophy of Freemasonry are lost in time. Many of the symbols and ideas that were adopted into the ritual were no doubt related to the philosophical ideas prevalent throughout the Old World. Some have suggested that the ancient philosophies of China, Egypt, Rome, and other civilizations have contributed to the development of Masonic symbolism. Although much of the allegory and symbolism of Masonic ritual come from Abrahamic religious traditions, it is clear that much of the philosophy can be traced deep into history prior to the development of organized Western religion.

The term “Freemason” is known to have existed as early as the year 1212, and the Regius Poem of 1390 is one of the oldest known Masonic documents. It discussed the topic of geometry and the importance of moral guidelines alongside the operation of construction projects. During the Middle Ages, when the building of cathedrals was a prominent trade throughout Europe, guilds of stonemasons were widespread. The operative Freemasons were part of the select few who had the privilege of traveling freely between cities to obtain work. As such, they guarded their cathedral-building craft intensely and trained the juniors in their trade through a master-apprentice system.

Unlike their specialized, modern-day counterparts, the cathedral builders of the Middle Ages were not just construction workers; they were scholars, philosophers, artists, writers, mathematicians, and community leaders. During that time, since formal education was primarily restricted to the domain of the Church, the highly educated Freemasons appealed to many. Those who wished to join in the fellowship, particularly scholars, were eventually accepted into the group and became speculative Freemasons. As such, the fraternity in its modern form was born.

Freedom of thought, expression of intellect, and promotion of liberty formed the mutual interests of the early Freemasons during the Age of Enlightenment. Within these lodges of members, they found solace in their mutual bond that was founded upon not only their trade, but also their philosophical interests. In the age of monarchies and religious intolerance, this was a comfortable abode for those whose thirst for mental freedom yearned to break free. After the Reformation and the age of the great cathedrals began to decline, Freemasonry evolved and became

speculative, dominated mostly by accepted members rather than those who were trained in cathedral building.

In London, on 24 June 1717, the first organization of several Masonic lodges appeared, and the Grand Lodge of England was born. However, due to differences in opinion over the standardization of Masonic philosophy and ritual, a solid foundation upon which a global Masonic fraternity could rest did not materialize until the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England on 25 November 1813. Since then, the grand lodge system has served as a standard by which “regular” or “mainstream” Masonic lodges are organized.

Masonic lodges spread quickly throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas, and today, lodges exist worldwide. With around six million members, Freemasonry has been described as the oldest and largest fraternity in existence. However, despite popular myths, it does not have a governing body on the global scale. In fact, any semblance of organization and standardization of ritual between grand lodge jurisdictions relies solely upon the adherence to fixed traditions, or “landmarks,” and mouth-to-ear instruction between master and apprentice that has existed since “time immemorial.” In the United States, where approximately 1.5 million men are Freemasons, each state operates under a separate and sovereign grand lodge. While they can trace their roots back to the United Grand Lodge of England, they do not have any national governing body that oversees their activities.

Today, the techniques and tools used by the early, operative Freemasons are taken as symbols for constructing our mental and spiritual edifices, rather than actual buildings made of stone. Any honest, upright man of good reputation and character may apply for membership in any Masonic lodge, pending an investigation and interview by a committee and a favorable, unanimous vote by lodge members. Members cannot recruit a man to join. Prospective members must *aské* to join. This is to ascertain that all candidates are approaching this fraternity of their own choice and free will. The greatest achievements and accomplishments in human history have come from the will and volition that originates from a person’s heart and mind, divorced from any form of coercion. Thus it is with Freemasonry. A person who is willing to take upon himself a journey of personal and philosophical discovery must do so on his own accord.

A few other prerequisites for membership in a Masonic lodge are worth noting. Depending upon the grand lodge jurisdiction, a man must be at least a certain age. In some jurisdictions the minimum age is 18, whereas in others the minimum age may be 21. This is for the obvious reason of making sure that the candidate is fit to think on his own. Mental and intellectual independence is of utmost importance in Freemasonry, given the reasons already described.

The candidate must also believe in a “supreme being.” Some jurisdictions may refer to this as “God” or, in order to maintain religious neutrality, the “Grand Architect of the Universe.” The important thing to note is that even though much of the ritual is based upon Biblical allegory, the institution of Freemasonry is absolutely committed to religious freedom and dialogue. In fact, it encourages its members to hold steadfast and diligently practice the religion of their choosing, rather than imposing one belief over another. The idea and conceptualization of a “supreme being” can be highly dependent upon the religious ideas of the candidate. Regardless of the names assigned to “Truth,” the key point is that the candidate must believe that there is something more, something unknown, and something beyond our limited understanding of the material world – something that relates to the underlying order of the universe and to the true nature of our consciousness. Howsoever the candidate would like to define “supreme being” is entirely up to him.

Upon acceptance, the candidate is led through three degrees, or ceremonies, that use ritual, lecture, and symbolism to convey the deepest philosophies that have been passed down through Freemasons for countless generations. The degrees are serious, solemn events that encourage the candidate to think and reflect upon important questions in life. The first degree is the Entered

Apprentice. Upon its completion, depending on the jurisdiction, the newly initiated brother is assigned to a mentor who teaches and guides him through some memory work. This is designed to solidify the details of the ritual in the mind of the brother. He then must pass a “proficiency,” or oral recitation of what he memorized in front of his lodge, before he can move on to his second degree: the Fellow Craft. The same process continues until he qualifies for his third and final degree, the Master Mason. He then officially assumes full membership in the fraternity.

The three degrees reflect the method of instruction that was employed by the operative Freemasons of the Middle Ages. During the process, the brother learns the history, philosophy, and traditions of the fraternity; but more importantly, he is challenged to think creatively and independently about his intellectual and spiritual place in society. He also takes a set of obligations, whereby he vows to commit himself to the journey of self-improvement and to help those around him do the same.

So why symbols? And why allegory? Why are they necessary during the conferral of degrees? Unlike the traditional forms of learning that occur in schools, where lessons are taught explicitly as lectures in the classroom, Freemasonry teaches through the communication of symbols. While this may seem like an indirect method of teaching, it forces the brother to find his own answers to the questions posed; it challenges him to see that the *act* of finding answers, *in itself*, is a journey that is valuable. In the end, the man who discovers the answers and experiences them directly is the one who will permanently treat them as his most prized possessions. As such, the power of understanding Truth through symbol and allegory cannot be understated. For example, we can instruct each individual driver of all the cars on the road to hit the brakes at a particular time at each intersection. Or, we can teach the *symbolism* of the color red and the white letters “STOP” placed within an octagon, and leave it up to each individual driver to understand the implied instruction no matter where or when a stop sign is encountered. Which method is more efficient? Once the driver knows that a symbol implies “stop the vehicle,” he can then apply it to each particular circumstance, taking into consideration road conditions, traffic density, and speed of the vehicle, without being explicitly instructed each time. To specify an instruction for each individual occasion would be impossible, given the infinite combinations of circumstances. Thus, understanding a symbol is much more powerful than receiving a series of explicit instructions.

Finally, it would be prudent to address the issue of why only men are allowed to join Freemasonry. Such a requirement may seem archaic at first, given the accepted equality between men and women in modern society. Freemasonry most certainly acknowledges the fundamental equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, race, religion, or social status. The primary reason for its male-only membership rests purely on its status as a *fraternity*. Like any other fraternal organization, membership is typically divided among gender lines. This fosters a sense of “brotherhood” or “sisterhood” among its members that enhances trust and camaraderie between those who may share particular challenges and philosophies in life. Many organizations directly affiliated with Freemasonry, in fact, allow the membership of women, some of which are women-only sororities. Beyond the realm of fraternities and sororities, many other organizations, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, are divided among gender lines. This is not to denigrate the equality of men and women, but rather, to promote a special type of bond and mutual support among the members of each gender.

Given the increased visibility of Freemasonry in recent media and popular culture, many lodges are experiencing a new surge in young membership. This bodes well for the continuation of an organization that has made “good men better” for generations. But unfortunately, throughout history, there have been some misunderstandings about the fraternity that have been perpetuated by conspiracy theorists, totalitarian forms of government, and those who are *not* proponents of religious freedom. For example, the ludicrous speculation that Freemasons are plotting world domination can

easily be shattered by the simple fact that there is no global organization that governs the role of the grand lodges. The list of famous Freemasons is not an indication of an attempt at global control. Rather, the large proportion of prestigious Masonic alumni is likely due to the fact that the reasons for a person's success are intimately tied to the same reasons that he would have an appeal for Freemasonry – the presence of an inner desire for self-improvement and the improvement of society at large. In short, correlation is not causation. These and other myths have been discussed at length by other authors, and the reader is directed to two contemporary and easily-accessible books that elaborate on this topic: *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Freemasonry* by S. Brent Morris and *Freemasons for Dummies* by Christopher Hodapp.

False rumors have been perpetuated throughout history by totalitarian regimes that suppress grassroots organizations or institutions that promote freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the ideals of democracy. These are principles that Freemasonry holds near and dear. It has been said that the governing principles of the United States are a “Masonic experiment.” No doubt, many of our founding fathers such as Brothers George Washington, John Hancock, and Benjamin Franklin had Masonic principles in mind when they began the arduous task of drafting the Constitution of a new nation founded on the principles of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Freemasonry has also come under attack by some conservative religious movements, where the ideals of religious freedom and independent thought are called into question. To those critics, an organization meeting “on the level” with respect to members following different religions could be deemed sacrilegious or even blasphemous with respect to their own particular religious beliefs. Yet it is the coexistence of freedom of thought and mutual respect that is truly one of humanity's greatest capabilities and one of the noble tenets of Freemasonry.

While philosophical in nature, Freemasonry is not a religion. In fact, sectarian religion and partisan politics are not to be discussed in lodge, because these are topics that could be most damaging to a brotherhood, as the history of the world has taught us. Philosophy and world affairs can and should be discussed, as all Masons should hold those topics in high esteem. However, claiming the dominance of one particular viewpoint over another is forbidden. The term “ritual” is simply used to describe traditional activities that are solemn and orderly, not as a reference to anything religious or sectarian. Rather, Freemasonry uses symbols – irrespective of faith – to encourage us to think more deeply about life, and in effect, brings like-minded men together in pursuit of a solid, unshakeable brotherhood of compassion and trust. Rarely do we see a richly philosophical organization foster such close bonds between men of widely different religious faiths, each devoted to each other's welfare and to the improvement of himself as a human being and son of Mother Earth.