

What Came You Here to Do?

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I come to you today from the George Washington Masonic Memorial, a temple built to the memory of that great man and Mason. The memorial is a landmark of our American heritage that belongs to all Masons in this country. Every Mason should feel that that temple in part belongs to him, as it represents our shared Masonic heritage as well.

I speak of heritage because we are living in a time where our heritage seems to be in danger of being forgotten; where the values which built this nation, and which sustained our families in times of trouble seem to be no longer important to some. We are living in a time

where many of us appear to no longer understand how we became the nation that was once called the hope of the world.

So, when I look at that Masonic Memorial, which is one of the great

buildings of the nation's capital region, I am reminded that it stands exactly for that heritage and those values that we find exemplified in the life of George Washington—in his strength and his humility; in his deep sense of home and duty; in his hope of liberty and prosperity. In the midst of all the other monuments which surround it, the Memorial alone stands for the enduring message of Freemasonry, and the Godly fortitude our Craft brings to the human spirit. It alone contains within its walls, even more than the actual Washington Monument, the lessons of morality, equality, and rectitude of life that not only sustain us as Masons, but which slowly—and at times painfully—crafted the story of America. And every time I enter that building, it reminds me that we must stand strong in defense of those values, as men and Masons, even if all around us seem to have abandoned them. We will defend our heritage, we will defend our sacred freedoms, and we will defend our way of life. I invite every Mason in North Carolina to come visit the Memorial and see for yourself the lessons we seek to teach to the thousands who come through our doors each year.

Now let me speak to you a bit about Masonry.

As many of you are aware, there is an excitement taking place right now in Masonry. The excitement stems from a new energy that has arisen from brothers throughout the states, brothers who are seeking an approach to Masonry that asks for the very best work in the quarries that can be done. It's not just happening in one part of a state either. Brothers are talking about ways to bring their lodges back to the serious, educationally-based environment that their Masonic forefathers enjoyed, where the lodge truly was a place of learning and self-improvement in the most sincere sense of those words.

Freemasonry is undergoing a transformation of unparalleled proportions, not seen since the beginning of the speculative Craft. Everywhere in this country, Masons are asking questions about why they do what they do, and they are investigating the origins and historical documents of the Craft in order to answer those questions.

What they are finding in many cases is that over time, our Craft has been riddled with innovations, and they are at long last mustering up the courage to say to their Grand Lodges that something somewhere is not right, and that if the Craft wishes to be true to all it teaches, those things that are not right must be put right. Through their earnest study

and investigation of our history, these brothers are now demanding that speculative Masonry be restored to the intent of its founders, in almost every aspect of its practice. This transformation arguably springs forth from a question. The question I want to bring before you today is that very first substantial question that every initiate is asked when he is asked to recapitulate what he has just undergone: *What Came You Here To Do?*

The answer of course, is: to learn to subdue my passions, and improve myself in Masonry. Now, we say that, but no one explains how we are supposed to go about doing that.

What are the Passions we are aiming to subdue? - the desire to bring the profane self into the Lodge - the desire to bring particulars of our religion into the Lodge - the desire to bring politics or political sentiments into the Lodge

What came ye here to do? How exactly are we to improve ourselves in masonry? - to build true tolerance and intellectual openness to discussing ideas among brethren - the need to understand and develop civility in the human condition - the need to develop oneself as not only a good citizen of our own country, but a true and faithful brother in all of God's world

When we put those things together, we can understand that improving ourselves in Masonry equates to an instruction in

the very discipline and meaning of life itself.

But behind this question today is a deeper concern about the purpose and meaning of the fraternity. That concern arises from the failure to even attempt to answer that question of what came you here to do?

Freemasonry is suffering from an epidemic of brethren who appear to think that Freemasonry itself is not enough. Men join thinking that it will be one kind of thing or join not understanding at all what it is. Then, rather than going out and seeking the understanding of what it is, they will simply attempt to make it just like every other thing in their lives, bringing in the various elements of their non-Masonic life into the Craft, because they can't admit that perhaps Masonry is not what they really were looking for in the first place. They want something else, something that involves their families, their particular religious tradition or political worldview, and they seek to superimpose that onto the Craft rather than learning the original disciplines of the entity they chose to join.

The result has been the unfortunate tendency to seek to make Masonry in our own image. To an extent, it is human nature to attempt to mold things in this way. Yet Masonry is not just what anyone wants it to be, and it surely cannot be only that which our father and

grandfathers have told us it is, because in so many cases they did not tell us at all what Freemasonry was. And in so many cases they never bothered to study it, they had no desire to understand it more deeply than the surface, and as a result they lost all ability to communicate effectively to today's generations what they were supposed to get from it. Thank God that the brethren coming in today are asking these core questions about what the Craft is, and voraciously reading the history of our institution so that they can understand what it is they came here to do.

As a result, we then have to ask another question that strikes at the very heart of what it means to become a Freemason.

Do we give in to the tacit state of human nature in accepting what is familiar and comfortable, or do we challenge ourselves to find something more in ourselves, and become that which was offered to us in the beginning, something better? If the answer is to be the latter, then it requires our singular focus, dedication, and commitment to the equally singular institution from whence all of this came. That brings us to the pursuit of excellence within that institution.

It is a paradox of history that when something becomes available to everyone in a given society, that thing tends to lose its value. Any economist, regardless of his political tendency, understands

that scarcity is what gives a commodity its value. Roman citizenship was immensely valued in the early days of the Empire, when the rights it bestowed ensured not only the social rank of its bearer, but often the intelligence and abilities of such a person. As it was extended further and further over time, it eventually reached the barbarians at the gates. At that point, it no longer communicated the same value because anyone and everyone had it.

Likewise, we have seen that the extension of Masonry to all and sundry that has taken place in recent generations, has brought with it the concomitant decline in the quality of Masonic meetings and events. The hunger for numbers has taken the place of the hunger for knowledge; the pursuit of popularity has replaced the pursuit of excellence. The desire to make it easy for a man to become a Mason is going the same way as all similar endeavours have done since the beginning of time. The result becomes a fraternity that asks nothing from, and then gives next to nothing to its members in the way of real philosophical instruction but congratulates itself in how well it mimics the social functions of service organizations.

An organization which is altered to be easily accepted, joined and understood by everyone will sooner or later assume the form of everyone, and in so doing will inevitably become a social rather

than a singular enterprise. It therefore will also lose that which gives it distinction from other things that may be similar to it in form. This is not the definition of any craft.

Masonry began as a skill, based upon a need. It then became a trade which was organized into a guild. It required diligence and a commitment to quality work. Not just any man was taken on as an apprentice; a man was asked to measure up for a job he sought before he was allowed to do it. More important, no man who was unwilling to work to learn how to produce good work was allowed to remain long with the Craft.

Speculative Masonry also has the same requirements, but because the work expected is that of the improvement of the individual, taking place inside that individual, it is not as easy to tangibly evaluate the quality or the results. But here again, any man who is unwilling to learn to produce good work should also not be allowed to either enter or remain in our Craft.

For years we have explained to men who ask about the value of Masonry that what you get out of it is what you put in to it. This is a ridiculous and lazy non-answer, a mere platitude, and the result of it has been that men have been allowed to bring anything they enjoy from their daily lives into the Craft and call it Masonry. The assertion behind this appears to be that so long as what we are

doing is good, it must obviously be that which we define as goodness, and therefore that overall effort expended towards general goodness is what makes us better men, and that then must be what Masonry is all about.

Undoubtedly, the world we live in needs more goodness, more acts of loving kindness, and concern for one's fellow man. And Masonry calls us to perform such actions as part of our obligation to humanity and creation. But this is no more the sum of Masonry than it is algebra or physics. Surely every human being should be called to goodness, be it through their faith, or, for a non-believer, whatever ethical system they might use to guide their actions. But what the observant Mason must ask himself is: What about Masonry distinguishes it from that goodness that we hope for in every human being or from other benevolent organizations? If Masonry is about nothing more than what any good man expects from all good people, why should anyone bother to seek initiation into our institution as opposed to another group of well-intentioned people who do good things?

Masonry calls us to excellence, or what one might specifically refer to as the perfection of the stones with which we work. Excellence is a word so commonly used today to describe the degree of quality of a thing, that one fears we might forget that it is a noun derived from a verb. To excel means to surpass

someone or something, to be better than we have been, in a particular quality or action. The etymology of the word from its Latin origin reveals an engaging meaning for Masons, to rise out from or rise up.

Clearly, we are not just talking about simple goodness, but rather an attempt to surpass, or rise out from ourselves as we were, to make ourselves something more than we have been in every respect. It cannot be just getting out of it what we put in, or we will have ended up with nothing more than what we started out with. That means that we will have never moved beyond the question of what we came to the Craft to do. Sadly, many Masons seek to get out of the Craft only what they wish to put in, and despite physically moving through the degrees, they have never truly advanced beyond the door of the Lodge to understand the business in which they are meant to be engaged.

The pursuit of excellence in every aspect of your life is what it means to observe the Craft. That means seeking more out of yourself, and consequently seeking more out of the Craft than you might have originally done. It means a continual effort at self-development and lifelong learning, at least one part of which is manifested in physical representations of things which are themselves considered to be exceptional.

Here we are not talking about matters of elitism in socio-economic class or possessions; we know well that Masonry regards no man for his worldly wealth or honours. We are talking about very old, primal elements of human interaction which accompany the spiritual process of self-development; dress, behaviour or mannerisms [which we might call ritual], and even sharing food.

Each of these, since time immemorial, have been methods of establishing inner and outer psychological and sociological identity. Among Masons, these elements are part of the edification in which we are involved; they are living tools, every bit as much as our symbolic working tools, to perfect our living stones.

So in the same way as the Buddhist monk may be known by his saffron robe, his mantra rituals, and his vegetarian diet, the Freemason is ideally known by his ultimate standards in Western dress, his precision in his ritual, and the traditional celebratory feast of Western culture. To excel in these pursuits is an important part of how we observe the Craft. 6

But how do we relate this demand for excellence, for that man who will agree to surpass himself, to the composition and identity of the Craft? We start by understanding that Freemasonry, unlike other social endeavours, is not for everyone, and should never be offered as such.

Masonry is and was always intended to be an initiatic organization that an individual must seek to join. He does so not out of necessity or hope of material benefits, but out of an inner calling to greater wisdom, i.e. intellectual and spiritual light. Then after he makes that choice, he must in turn be chosen by others who agree to admit him into their assemblies. In such an environment, the nature of the individual far outweighs the number of men knocking at our doors, quality of character far outweighs quantity of candidates, and less is more. While the idea that fewer men should become Masons might be utterly baffling to some brothers, the idea is not so difficult to understand.

If a craftsman carefully selects ten exceptional men to whom he can teach the whole of his craft, each of those ten men can then teach ten others. By working with fewer but dedicated men, the craftsman gains more; he gains the survival of his craft. If however, he tries to shout his knowledge out to a crowd of one thousand men who simply want to have what he has, the fullness of his knowledge will never be transferred, both because it is impossible to do so, and because the crowd is indiscriminate.

Yet in some corners of the Craft it is thought that more men need to be convinced to become Masons in order to save dying Lodges, or simply because some brothers are looking at the Craft in the same way that they might look at any

other commercial enterprise. They relate numerical decline—for whatever reason, even if it be the natural result of a decline in population growth—to failure, and then become panicked when the decline is not arrested. In that panic, these brethren are willing to reverse the direction of centuries of initiatory theory and praxis, sacrificing it all in the attempt to seek out new members, rather than having men seek us as they have always done.

The fundamental problem with such a viewpoint is that Freemasonry is not just another commodity to be bought and sold. To be fair, the selling of degrees to all comers was a practice that affected the Craft from the very beginning of speculative Masonry. At the turn of the 18th century, so-called ‘Masons’ could be made instantly, in dockyard pubs, merely by paying a nominal fee.

But what is significant to point out about that fact, is that it was perceived to be such an unacceptable situation that it was one of the motivations for the creation of the Grand Lodge in 1717. In that moment, which was the first codification of Freemasonry as we know it today, reputable brothers saw the indiscriminate mongering of Masonic initiations as a problem and took steps to correct it. Imagine what those brethren might think of the billboards and television advertisements found in some places today, which openly solicit men to become Masons, to do what they have

not yet arrived to do of their own free will and accord.

Are such efforts any different than the efforts of those who attempted to sell Masonry so long ago? What should the response of the observant Mason be to such forms of recruitment?

William Preston’s response in 1772 was stern and uncompromising, and could just as well have been written today:

It is an obvious truth, that the privileges of Masonry have long been prostituted for unworthy considerations, and hence their good effects have been less conspicuous. Many have enrolled their names in our records for the mere purposes of conviviality, without inquiring into the nature of the particular engagements to which they are subjected by becoming Masons. Several have been prompted by motives of interest, and many introduced to gratify an idle curiosity, or to please as joy companions. A general odium, or at least a careless indifference, must be the result of such conduct. But the evil stops not here. Persons of this description, ignorant of the true nature of the institution, probably without any real defect in their own morals, are induced to recommend others of the same cast to join the society for the same purpose. Hence the true knowledge of the art decreases with the increase of its members [emphasis added], and the

most valuable part of the institution is turned into ridicule...’

Our response, therefore, must be that not only should not every man be a Mason, but not even every good man should be a Mason, any more than he should be an airline pilot, doctor or mechanic.

Only the man who knocks in earnest, in full knowledge of both the risk that he may be rejected, and yet proceeds anyway because the search for light is that important to him— only such a man is one who should become a Mason.

Why? Because such a man will understand that as with all things worth doing or having, the ‘true knowledge of the art’ takes time and cannot be achieved in a day. It requires a sincere pledge of time and effort.

Men who should be Masons will make time for the Craft. If we truly are an organization that claims to want only the best of men, then all men who seek our company must rise to meet the Craft and make time for our methods as well as the commitment asked of men by the Craft.

A man who ‘hasn’t time’ to make that commitment is a man who, no matter how fine he may otherwise be, is not ready to become a Mason, nor should we want him to. The Craft must not change its principles, methods or techniques to descend to take all men at all costs, especially those who have told us that they do not have the time for it.

Consider a man who asks you if there is a quicker way to do a job, not because he is looking for a better way to do it, or one which would provide savings to you, but simply because he hasn’t time to do it the usual way, the way a true craftsman would work. Would you hire such a man who says he hasn’t time to do the job right? Nor then should any such men be brought into the Craft, and especially not for fear of declining numbers or any other such sense of desperation. An undignified and undemanding approach to membership results in an undignified and undemanding organization.

And the demands made by the Craft can be easily studied and determined when we look at the question of intent. The intent of those men who founded Freemasonry was not to have a jovial supper club. It was to contemplate and discuss the meanings of things philosophical as well as empirical, and to establish a space where that might be done in freedom and tolerance. So, in this sense, what one claims here is that there was a clear intent on the part of those men who shaped the Craft to make it a thing of earnestness, piety, and decorum. Therefore, to improve ourselves in Masonry is to do these things in both a respectful and respectable manner.

Freemasonry does not offer itself up to those who are outside of the doors of the Lodge, or even to those who may simply be curious about its contents. The very

essence of membership in the Craft is not about bringing people in, for whatever reason; that is the function of those religions which proselytize, and of political parties seeking voters. Again, the essence of membership in the Craft is that it must be sought.

Now, there are some brothers who are of the opinion that the ideas of Freemasonry should be transformative in the world directly. Consequently, they feel that the increased visibility of the fraternity is useful in achieving that aim. However, that opinion not only plays into the old canard about our seeking to 'control the world', it also forgets that our method of sharing the ideas with the world is through the transformation of the individual. We are a craft; one would no more offer up that craft to the world as the solution for humanity's ills than the potter would offer up his wet clay and the wheel as his final product. The process of transforming clay into an object of utility or beauty is his craft, and as with all crafts, there are techniques, methods and trade secrets that are not offered to or before the entire community, lest the potter find himself with a trade, but no longer a job.

I return to the analogy of the craftsman because it is so relevant to us as brothers in our speculative craft. Just because one knows how to make pottery does not mean that one has the skills of the master potter. What one ends up with when that skill is indiscriminately

dispersed is that same crowd of a thousand people discovering the trade secrets, making their own mediocre cups and plates, while never having the full skill and art of the craftsman. In time, the craft dies out because the masses lose appreciation for the inner method and value of the potter's work. Soon, the master potter's idea is lost. All Masons should immediately connect with this unfortunate scenario.

Our Craft can also be lost if we do not appreciate our trade secrets and choose instead to spread our art before the entire world for the vain and superficial goal of being liked by others who are determined that we be misunderstood anyway.

Freemasonry is older than that nation which gave birth to it; it is older than the established religion of that nation as well. We owe no explanations to anyone else for who we are, what we do, why we do it or how, and no one has the right to demand an explanation from us. We claim this right as a fundamental freedom of conscience, as would any other self-respecting body of thinking people.

If that seems a bit harsh, I can only state once again that nothing I have said here is anything other than that which has been said even more harshly by some of our most respected Masonic forefathers. I am merely adding another voice to affirm what seems to need affirmation

with every new generation of the Craft. Again, the words of William Preston:

Many are deluded by the vague supposition, that our mysteries are merely nominal; that the practices established amongst us are frivolous; and that our ceremonies may be adopted or waived at pleasure.

On this false basis we find too many of the Brethren hurrying through a" the degrees of the Order, without adverting to the propriety of one step they pursue or possessing a single qualification to entitle them to advancement. Passing through the usual formalities, they consider themselves authorised to rank as Masters of the Art, solicit and accept offices, and even assume the government of the Lodge, unacquainted with the rules of the Institution that they pretend to support, and the nature of the trust which they are bound to perform. The consequence is obvious; anarchy and confusion ensue, and the substance is lost in the shadow.

For so many brethren, the substance has been lost in the shadow. They live in darkness despite the light.

The pursuit of excellence in Freemasonry necessarily means that one is placing the structural and philosophical integrity of our system above all other concerns that might be raised in relation to it. It means that neither a concern for numbers, fundraising, publicity nor expediency will

cause us to alter our institution in such a way that it becomes just like any other. This, because that quality of surpassing, of rising up from within ourselves, is not and can never be served by subjecting our efforts to the benchmarks of ordinary commercial endeavours.

You did not join Freemasonry to remain in ignorance. Freemasonry was never intended, and cannot be allowed, to make good men ordinary.

Rather, our object is to sustain intellectual curiosity; to seek to improve our minds through that curiosity, and to dare to be good men who do great things. And this sentiment is validated by the words of one of our great American Masons, Bro. Theodore Roosevelt, who memorably said: Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.

Some might say that I'm taking all of this way too seriously; that in calling for a return to a serious, thoughtful, and accurate approach to the Craft, I am asking for something that can no longer be expected in today's busy world.

But Freemasonry has ever been a serious pursuit. At times, and even today it has been a difficult and dangerous one, and it would not have been so were it not intended to speak to the liberation and

transformation of our minds, free minds
in pursuit of intellectual and
philosophical light.

I suggest to you, and I tell you today that
there are hundreds of brothers across
this nation, in lodges from Miami to
Fairbanks, who would join me in saying
to you, that this is exactly what you came
here to do.