

LIVING BY DEGREE

By Wayne T. Adams 33^o, from an article in *The Northern Light* (August 2008)

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Masonry is a progressive science. This term has been used for at least a hundred years. The word “progressive” is used in the sense of making an advancement or moving forward. The word “science” is used to mean a system of knowledge.

Taken together, “progressive science” connotes making an advancement in a particular system of knowledge. Ancient craft Masonry and Scottish Rite Masonry are part of a system of knowledge, and there is throughout, a common purpose and a continuous progression.

PATTERN

In each degree there is an opening which insulates the participants from the hurly-burly of the outside world and focuses attention on the matter at hand.

Preparation of the candidate, both outside and inside the lodge room, sets the stage for the obligation, the story, the symbols, the allegory or story within the story, and the lecture or recapitulation to follow. The three craft degrees follow a very similar pattern and structure.

The Scottish Rite Degrees place less emphasis on the individual participation of the candidate—an exemplar is used, for example—but more emphasis on dramatization with longer speaking parts, costumes, extensive use of props and very often the accompaniment of music. But the basic elements of the degree pattern are there throughout all the degrees.

This pattern or surface similarity is apparent to every Mason, but there is much more to be found in these degrees, in their purpose and in their progression.

PURPOSE

The common purpose of all Masonic degrees is to engage us in a process. One of the characteristics—indeed one of the beauties—of Masonry is that there is no authoritative interpretation. This author will suggest one of several possible interpretations of this progress.

One of the significant characteristics which sets humans apart from all other beings is that we know our time on earth is going to come to a close.

No one thinks it’s going to happen very soon, but knowing that it’s going to happen some day, enables a man to stand back and see a life cycle of birth, reproduction and death.

An anthropologist can elaborate on this a little bit and say we’re born, we eat, we mate, we nourish our young and so forth, but the story always has the same ending.

With this realization, men take many different paths. Each of us has seen it happen. Some men are attracted by false beacons and end up on the rocks. Some wander down the dark alleys of life and become hopelessly confused. Others spend their lives just running around in circles accomplishing very little, but sooner or later man men say, “*There must be more to life than this*”.

From that moment—whether a man realizes it or not—he is on a spiritual journey. Every Mason is, at least symbolically, on such a journey. It is really more than a journey: he is on a quest to define some purpose that distinguishes him, that sets him apart from transitory beings that are simply born, mate and die. This journey, this quest, is the expression of a man coming to terms with his own fate.

Masonry has no dogma. It doesn't tell us what is true or false. It doesn't tell what our purpose is, but it does it very systematically and progressively offers each one of us a means which will point us the way to what has proven to be good and true.

In its progression of degrees, it presents a series of experiences designed to help a man discern, discover and define what he wants his purpose to be. That is the very crux of the matter.

We are at any given point in our lives the person we discover ourselves to be: it is about what we want to become. Masonry is more than a social club: it is a thinking man's organization.

The ritual of all our degrees makes ample use of the English language, but Masonry speaks most profoundly in the language of symbol and, very often, the question is not, "What does this word mean?", but, "What can this symbol mean?"

Instead of telling people what to do or what to believe, Masonry invites men to see things differently, confident that if they do, their behavior can change for the better. It calls on a man's imagination more than on his reason or his will.

If a Mason is to accept this invitation, the place to which he is invited has to seem comfortable and familiar to him. Most men are, to some degree, familiar with the basic working tools of the builder's trade. Consequently, Masonry begins with those concrete particulars. It speaks of setting mauls, rules, squares, levels, plumbs and trowels, of ashlar and perfect ashlar. These items are very much a part of a man's world and, consequently, give Masonry an opening ring of reality.

Then having gotten a man that far, having gotten his attention with things he knows to be true, it carries him on a trajectory of belief.

The phrase "trajectory of belief" is important for its deepest meaning is that Masonry locates the authority for its teachings not in doctrine or dogma, but in men's hearts. Its teachings are true, Masonry holds, not because they come from doctrine or dogma, but because our own hearts know them to be true.

We all start our Masonic career in craft masonry. We know that in the Entered Apprentice Degree we receive instruction in the four cardinal virtues: temperance, fortitude, prudence and justice; on the three theological virtues; faith, hope and charity; and in the tenets of our profession as masons: brotherly love, relief and truth.

We know that as Fellow Craft Masons we are instructed in the seven liberal arts and sciences and are shown very practical applications of that knowledge in our daily lives.

As Master Masons the example of Hiram teaches us that at the end of our days—when all else is gone—the one thing that will still be important to us is the knowledge that we have been faithful to our obligations. Understanding those obligations and trying to live by them is as far in Masonry as many good men want to go.

Scottish Rite Masons have opted to explore further into human experience. The vocation of the Scottish Rite is to take a Mason to a new level, a level where he is given the tools to consider, study and use principles in a fairly sophisticated way to the end that he can find for himself the perfect ashlar within, the ashlar he wants to be.

The Scottish Rite builds on craft Masonry and offers four additional groups of degrees, each designed to provide more light in Masonry. There are six essential or core Scottish Rite Degrees. The 4^o is really an introduction to Scottish Rite Masonry and explains that the four groups are the ineffable degrees of the Lodge of perfection, the two historical degrees of the council of Princes of Jerusalem, the two philosophical degrees of the chapter of Rose Croix and the 14 chivalric degrees of the consistory.

PROGRESSION

The four groups of degrees make sense only when one understands that they share a common purpose with the other degrees in their group, and that the degrees of craft Masonry and the degrees of the four bodies of the Scottish Rite taken together offer us a progressive instruction in the formation of personal values and in the making of personal choice

The degrees in each body are not isolated in purpose from each other, and the five bodies—blue lodge, Lodge of Perfection, Council of Princes of Jerusalem, Chapter of Rose Croix and Consistory—offer a progressive advancement worthy of study and contemplation, in answering the most fundamental questions a Mason ever asked: “From whence come you? Wither are you traveling? Of what are you in pursuit? And to what do you allude?”

In modern jargon we might say, “Where are you coming from? Where are you going with your life? What on earth are you trying to accomplish? How are you measuring your success?”

In answering these questions you will arrive at a self-knowledge about yourself, that will enable you to square your life away. And right there we have the next step because the symbols, legends, and allegories found in our degrees will help you arrive at answers which are meaningful to you.

As you start to put this all together in your own mind, it is useful to remember the advice of Julian Rees in his book *The Stairway of Masonry*. He writes, “...the (Masonic) journey is concerned not with learning other people’s answers, but in working it out for yourself.”

The fact that you decided to seek more light in Scottish Rite Masonry may indicate a curiosity or a desire just to join another body you have heard about, but I choose to think that most Masons who approach the Scottish Rite do so because they have a desire—a thirst—to learn something about themselves and the way they want to live their lives.

The degrees of craft Masonry offer instruction in how a Mason should order his own life. In the Lodge of Perfection—the ineffable degrees—he is caused to reflect on those divine and spiritual attributes which form a good man’s life.

However, with study and reflection of the situations presented in the Lodge of Perfection, a Mason can come to a better understanding of the qualities of our God. For example, in the 14^o we learn that one of the names used for deity is Yaweh which in the Hebrew language can mean “I speak” denoting that one of the greatest qualities of God is that He came speak to each one of us individually. He speaks to us from a study of sacred writings, from the example, of others, and from the inner recesses of our own conscience.

The two degrees of the Council are called historical degrees because they present historical situations. In these degrees we witness the interplay of values and temptations which visit every good man’s life.

There are several characters in the degrees of Masonry which have a profound effect on us. The first of course is Hiram Abif in the 3^o. Hiram offers us the example of a man who was faithful to his obligation even in the face of physical violence which led to his death. Masons all around the world witness that degree with awe again and again. We wonder if we would have the same stamina, resolve, determination and sheer will to resist if we were put to such a test.

In the 15^o we are introduced to Zerubabel, another powerful figure in Masonic ritual. Zerubabel was confronted with a hard choice. Some wonderful things could happen if he could just once, in one little way, break faith with his obligations. We have all been in such situations. Zerubabael had to resolve in his own mind if an unworthy means could justify a worthy end. His fidelity to his obligation was a powerful influence on Darius, the Babylonian king. This degree suggests to each of us that fidelity to our obligations is not just the right thing to do, but that it can be a powerful influence on others and can profoundly influence the way others see not only us but the world.

The two philosophical degrees of the Rose Croix invite us to reflect that there are certain fundamental values common in every man in every age and in every culture. Those fundamental values embedded in our ritual, parallel perfectly the founding philosophy of this nation. It is a philosophy which holds that all men are created equal. It holds that every man is deserving of our help, fairness and plain dealing. It holds that inclusion, toleration and affirmation among men are essential in building strong families and strong communities.

The philosophical degrees urge us to be tolerant, to overlook superficial differences among men, to look for the basic goodness found in every man and, where possible, to help a man build his life on the common values developed in these two philosophical degrees.

The 14 Consistory degrees frequently suggest a choice—not just a choice between right and wrong or between good and evil. These degrees present situations in which a man is challenged by competing obligations and has to make a moral choice.

Constans in the 31^o is the most powerful figure in the Scottish Rite degrees. He is faced with several temptations which he is able to handle easily. Then he is faced with the very difficult situation of faithfulness to two competing obligations over which we will see him agonize. All of us have faced choices between right and wrong as did Hiram. Every one of us has had slightly more complex choices where we were tempted to let the ends justify the means as was Zerubabel. And now Constans we understand that a man often has to make moral choices between two inconsistent obligations.

A full examination of how the characters in these degrees progressively develop and explain the fundamental principles of Masonry and of how each one handles the difficult choices in life is the glory of the Scottish Rite. It is the offer of the Scottish Rite to each Mason who seeks further light. In the 32^o we see Constans again, having learned all the lessons and successfully passed all the tests, he is created a Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret. Scottish Rite Masons symbolically receive that degree. It does not mean you are a prince. It does not mean you have the royal secret. It does mean that your own personal value system is a work in progress, and it suggests a goal.

First, master the virtues, tenets and lessons of blue lodge Masonry. Second, discover the power of the ineffable divine in the Lodge of Perfection. Third, learn the power of truth and fidelity from the historical examples in the Council of Princes of Jerusalem. Forth, reflect on the lessons of universality and toleration taught in the Rose Croix degrees, and finally, acquire life experience in the difficult task of balancing the moral dilemmas as presented in the Consistory degrees.

A Mason who follows these steps will indeed have progressed to a point where he will be regarded by his fellows as a prince among men and possess the secret to living a life which is good and true.