

When the World Grows Dark, We Build

The Enduring Value of Freemasonry



A tradition of fraternity, reflection and service, carried forward in a modern Canadian setting.

In a world that often feels increasingly divided, Freemasonry offers something remarkably simple: a place for men to find fraternity, purpose, personal growth and meaningful connection.

There are moments in history when the world seems to lose its balance. Wars, revolutions, political extremism, religious intolerance, economic uncertainty and social division have all marked different generations. In those periods, fear can become louder than reason, neighbours can begin to see one another as enemies, and institutions that once appeared permanent can suddenly seem fragile.

Our own time is not unique in this respect, but it can certainly feel unsettling. We live in an age of extraordinary communication, yet meaningful conversation sometimes seems more difficult than ever. Information is everywhere, but wisdom remains elusive. Technology has given us remarkable tools, but it cannot answer the most important questions of human life: What kind of person should I become? What do I owe to others? How should I use the time I have been given? What does it mean to live honourably?

These are not new questions. Freemasonry has been asking them for centuries. That may be one reason the Craft continues to have something valuable to offer. Freemasonry does not claim to

possess a simple solution to the problems of society, nor does it promise perfection to those who enter its doors. Its proposition is more modest, and perhaps more demanding: before attempting to improve the world, a man should first be willing to examine and improve himself.

The Ancient Language of the Builder

The central language of Freemasonry comes from the builder. Long before the emergence of modern speculative Masonry, skilled stonemasons travelled through Europe constructing castles, bridges, abbeys and the great cathedrals that still dominate the skylines of many ancient cities. Their work required knowledge, patience, discipline and cooperation. An apprentice learned not from a classroom in the modern sense, but from experienced craftsmen. He observed their methods, practised the use of tools, learned proportion and geometry, and gradually acquired the judgment necessary to become a craftsman himself.

There was also something deeply humbling about the work. Many of the great medieval building projects took generations to complete. A mason might spend much of his life working on a cathedral whose finished form he would never see. Yet the stone he shaped still had to be prepared correctly, because his work would become part of something greater than himself.

This tradition of building eventually provided Freemasonry with one of its most enduring metaphors. Modern speculative Freemasonry is not an unchanged institution stretching uninterrupted into antiquity, although much of its symbolism draws upon very old traditions. Historically, its roots are most securely associated with the lodges and customs of operative stonemasons. By the seventeenth century, men who were not working masons were being admitted into lodges, and by the early eighteenth century speculative Freemasonry was emerging in the form that would eventually spread around the world.

The transition was profound. The tools remained, but the object of construction changed. The square, the level, the plumb and the compasses were no longer simply instruments used to raise walls and shape stone. They became symbols through which a man could reflect on his own conduct. The rough stone became an image of the unfinished human being. The finished stone suggested what discipline, reflection and education might allow him to become. In this sense, Freemasonry took the language of the operative builder and applied it to the construction of character.



The ancient language of the builder remains at the heart of Masonic teaching: learn, practise, improve, and eventually help another man do the same.

The Journey Begins With the Apprentice

A man therefore does not enter a Lodge as a finished product. He enters as an apprentice. That idea alone has considerable value in a culture that frequently rewards certainty, self-promotion and the appearance of having all the answers. The Entered Apprentice begins from a very different position. He accepts that there are things he does not know, that there are lessons he has not yet learned, and that he may discover things about himself that require correction.

The early lessons of Masonry concern morality, restraint, charity, responsibility and the relationship between the individual and those around him. Just as importantly, the new Mason begins to learn the discipline of listening. He observes. He reflects. He gradually discovers that understanding cannot always be rushed and that symbols may reveal different meanings at different stages of life.

This is one reason the image of the rough ashlar is so powerful. It does not represent a wicked man. It represents an unfinished one. Freemasonry does not begin with the assumption that its members are perfect. Quite the opposite. Its symbolism assumes that human beings possess imperfections, prejudices, weaknesses and rough edges that require work. The relevant question is not whether a man has faults. Every man does. The question is whether he is willing to recognize them and undertake the work necessary to improve.

From Apprentice to Craftsman

As the Mason progresses, the character of that work changes. The Fellowcraft represents intellectual and personal development. Historically, an apprentice could not become a competent craftsman merely by owning tools. He had to learn how to use them, understand the principles behind his work and develop sound judgment. Speculative Masonry preserved that idea by encouraging the Mason toward education, reason and curiosity.

The traditional symbolism of the Fellowcraft directs attention toward knowledge, architecture, geometry and the liberal arts and sciences. The purpose is not to transform every Mason into a scholar, but to remind him that ignorance should never become comfortable. A mature man should remain teachable. He should be capable of reconsidering an opinion when evidence demands it, interested in ideas beyond those already familiar to him, and willing to learn from people whose experiences differ from his own.

This lesson may be particularly valuable today. We live in a world in which almost unlimited quantities of information can be obtained within seconds, yet information and understanding are not the same thing. A person may have access to facts without developing judgment. He may be highly educated and still intolerant, technologically sophisticated and still susceptible to fanaticism, professionally successful and still deficient in character. Freemasonry therefore does not separate intellectual development from moral development. Knowledge should be accompanied by humility. The more a man genuinely learns, the more he ought to appreciate how much remains unknown.

The Master Mason and the Value of Time

Eventually, the Mason reaches the degree of Master Mason. To someone outside the Craft, the title may sound like the completion of a journey, but in many ways it represents the beginning of a deeper one. The Master Mason is confronted with themes of fidelity, mortality, responsibility and the passage of time. These are solemn subjects, but their purpose is not to make a man fearful of death. It is to make him more conscious of life.

Time matters because it is limited. Friendship matters because no relationship lasts forever. Integrity matters because circumstances will repeatedly tempt a man to compromise it. Service matters because no office or title is permanent. Someone else will eventually occupy our chair, inherit our responsibilities and continue work that we have left unfinished.

The Master Mason thus comes to understand that there is no final degree in the improvement of character. There will always be another weakness to confront, another assumption to reconsider, another opportunity to help someone, another lesson to learn and another generation to prepare. Freemasonry, in that sense, is not a course that a man completes. It is a method of travelling through life.

A Lodge as a Small Exercise in Civil Society

Much of that journey occurs through the relationships formed inside the Lodge. A Masonic Lodge is an unusual social institution because it brings together men who might otherwise have little reason to meet. One may be a physician, another a tradesman, another an engineer, teacher, student or retiree. They may differ in age, income, political opinion, religious background and social status. Outside the Lodge, society may place them in very different categories. Inside it, they address one another as Brother.

That word carries a serious idea. It suggests that equality does not require uniformity. Men can disagree and still respect one another. They can hold different convictions and still recognize a shared humanity. This is one reason traditional regular Freemasonry excludes partisan political and sectarian religious debate from the Lodge room. The subjects themselves are not considered unimportant. In fact, they are important precisely because they can generate powerful disagreements. The Lodge seeks to preserve a space in which fraternity takes precedence over political division.

In an age of increasing polarization, that principle deserves attention. A Lodge can function as a small exercise in civil society. Its members learn how to speak, but also how to listen. They learn how to lead, but also how to follow. They discover that authority is temporary, that offices eventually pass to others and that an institution is strengthened when leadership is understood as service rather than possession.

The real experience of brotherhood also extends far beyond formal ceremony. It appears in much simpler moments: setting up a room before a meeting, helping a Brother learn a piece of ritual, preparing a meal, driving an elderly member home, visiting someone who is ill, supporting the family of a deceased Mason or simply welcoming a visitor who enters the Lodge knowing nobody. The principles may be philosophical, but fraternity becomes meaningful through ordinary acts.



Freemasonry creates something increasingly uncommon: meaningful friendship, mentorship and fellowship across generations and backgrounds.

Freemasons at Turning Points in History

This combination of personal growth, education, fraternity and civic responsibility helps explain why Freemasonry became woven into the history of so many societies. The Craft has crossed paths with some of the great turning points of modern history. In Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald, the country's first prime minister and one of the Fathers of Confederation, was a Freemason. So were figures such as Sir Sandford Fleming, Tommy Douglas and John Diefenbaker. Their Masonic membership should not be used to suggest that all of their actions or political decisions somehow represented the Craft. Historical figures are complex, and their records must be judged in their full context. Nevertheless, their presence in Freemasonry illustrates the significant role Lodges once played in Canadian civic life.

The United States also offers important examples. George Washington was a Freemason and served as Master of Alexandria Lodge, while Benjamin Franklin held significant Masonic offices in Pennsylvania. Their Masonic membership should not be treated as an explanation for the American Revolution or the creation of the republic, but it is another reminder that Freemasonry formed part of the broader culture of voluntary association, civic responsibility and Enlightenment thought in which many political leaders of that era moved.

Across the Atlantic, Giuseppe Garibaldi became one of the most prominent Freemasons associated with the nineteenth-century struggle for Italian unification. Before achieving fame in Europe, he

had spent years in South America and was initiated into Freemasonry in Montevideo. His life unfolded within a world in which political, philosophical and fraternal ideas circulated increasingly across national borders.

The revolutionary transformation of France also included prominent Freemasons such as the Marquis de Lafayette and Georges Danton. Their presence does not mean that Freemasonry as an institution created the French Revolution, a claim for which the historical evidence is far more complicated. What it does demonstrate is that Lodges were among the social environments in which men encountered Enlightenment ideas concerning civic equality, constitutional government, religious toleration and freedom of conscience.

Latin America presents an especially fascinating, though historically complex, example. The independence movements of the early nineteenth century developed within a world of secret societies, revolutionary associations and organizations that sometimes adopted Masonic structures or symbolism. The famous Lautaro Lodges, associated with figures such as José de San Martín and Bernardo O'Higgins, played an important role in the independence movements of South America. Historians continue to debate the precise relationship between some of these organizations and formal Freemasonry, and that distinction is important. What can be stated with confidence is that Freemasonry formed part of the intellectual and social environment through which concepts of liberty, constitutionalism, civic equality and resistance to inherited privilege circulated throughout Europe and the Americas.

When Darkness Turned Against the Lodge

Those principles also help explain why authoritarian regimes have frequently viewed Freemasonry with suspicion. During the twentieth century, the rise of totalitarianism in Europe brought serious persecution of the Craft. Nazi Germany suppressed Masonic organizations, confiscated Lodge property and seized archives. Nazi propaganda incorporated Freemasonry into elaborate conspiracy theories, often linking it with liberalism, internationalism, religious tolerance and Jewish emancipation.

As German power expanded through occupied Europe, Masonic organizations in other countries were also closed and their records seized. Freemasons were among those persecuted, although historians properly caution against simplistic estimates because many of those targeted were simultaneously persecuted for political, religious or racial reasons.

Under Francisco Franco in Spain, Freemasonry was likewise treated as an enemy of the state. Legislation was enacted specifically for the repression of Freemasonry and Communism, and Masons were investigated, prosecuted and forced into exile or secrecy. It is worth asking why authoritarian governments would devote so much attention to what might outwardly appear to be a fraternity devoted to symbolism and ritual. The answer lies less in the ceremonies themselves than in the principles behind them.

Freemasonry creates voluntary associations independent of the state. It establishes fraternal relationships that can cross national boundaries. It emphasizes freedom of conscience, moral

responsibility, tolerance and the dignity of the individual. These concepts are fundamentally uncomfortable for systems that demand total ideological conformity.

Freemasonry did not defeat those regimes, and its history should not be romanticized. What is significant is that it endured. Lodge buildings could be closed, property confiscated and records destroyed, yet wherever freedom of association eventually returned, Freemasonry could be rebuilt because its essential structure did not reside in furniture or architecture. It resided in people, memory and shared principles.

An Old Institution for a Modern Problem

That brings us back to the present and to a much more personal question: what can Freemasonry offer a man today? Perhaps he is not particularly interested in eighteenth-century history or nineteenth-century revolutions. Perhaps he has never heard of the Lautaro Lodges, Sandford Fleming or Garibaldi. Perhaps his interest is more immediate.

He may simply have reached a point in life when something feels incomplete. His career may be successful. His family may be healthy. His life may appear perfectly ordinary from the outside. Yet he may sense that he should be growing in some direction that he cannot easily define. He may want stronger friendships, greater purpose, intellectual stimulation, opportunities for service or simply a setting in which he can reflect seriously upon the kind of man he is becoming.

This is where Freemasonry retains much of its contemporary value. It offers fraternity in a period when loneliness and social isolation have become increasingly common. It offers mentorship in a culture where intergenerational relationships can be difficult to find. It offers ritual in a society in which meaningful ceremony has often disappeared. It offers continuity in a world that constantly celebrates whatever is newest.

It also offers leadership, while reminding the leader that authority is temporary. It encourages education, while warning that knowledge without humility can become arrogance. It promotes charity, while insisting that generosity involves more than money. It brings together men of different generations and allows them to discover that experience and wisdom do not always flow in only one direction.

Who Are You Becoming?

Most importantly, Freemasonry creates a structured environment in which a man is repeatedly encouraged to ask himself a difficult question: Who am I becoming?

That question matters because character develops whether we consciously attend to it or not. Repeated actions become habits. Habits gradually become character. Character shapes relationships, and relationships shape communities. Freemasonry begins from the idea that this construction should not be left entirely to chance.

A Mason is therefore not handed a finished Temple. He is given tools. The old builders understood that anything worth constructing takes time. A cathedral cannot be completed in an afternoon, and

neither can a human being. Wisdom takes time. Friendship takes time. Trust takes time. Character takes time.

A young Mason may initially be concerned with learning where to stand during a ceremony or remembering a few lines of ritual. Years later, he may find himself helping another Brother through exactly the same experience. Later still, he may occupy an office in the Lodge, perhaps even the Master's chair. Eventually he will surrender that chair to someone else. If he has understood the lesson, he will not see this as a loss of status. He may discover instead that one of the most satisfying experiences of his Masonic life is watching someone he once encouraged assume responsibility and succeed.

This is how institutions endure. One generation prepares another. The medieval craftsman might never live to see the cathedral completed, but he placed his stone correctly because someone else would build upon it. Our own lives are not entirely different. Much of what we create will ultimately belong to people we will never meet: institutions we strengthen, younger people we mentor, standards we preserve, communities we serve and examples we leave behind.



Personal growth does not have to be a solitary journey. Freemasonry brings together men who can learn from one another, across generations, experiences and perspectives.

Light Is a Responsibility

Freemasonry often describes its journey through the symbolism of light. It is an attractive symbol, but it carries a serious responsibility. Light may represent knowledge, truth or enlightenment, yet knowledge has value only if it changes conduct.

If a man has learned tolerance, the lesson matters most when he meets someone he dislikes. If he believes in equality, the principle matters most when inequality would benefit him. If he values truth, it matters most when a convenient falsehood would serve his interests. If he believes in charity, then generosity matters even when nobody will ever know what he has done. If he has been taught to govern his passions, the lesson matters precisely when anger feels justified. Otherwise, the symbols remain merely decorative.

The purpose of Masonry is not therefore to remove a man from the world. He must leave the Lodge and return to ordinary life. He goes back to his family, his workplace, his community, his responsibilities and his disagreements. The real question is whether he returns better prepared.

The Work of Our Time

This may be one of the most useful contributions Freemasonry can make in difficult times. It will not eliminate political polarization, end wars or solve every social problem. It cannot remove prejudice or guarantee wise leadership. It does not pretend to possess that kind of power.

What it can do is help form men who are better equipped to face those challenges: men who know how to listen before reacting, who can disagree without hatred, who recognize the difference between knowledge and fanaticism, who understand that liberty requires responsibility, and who see leadership primarily as service. It can encourage men to form friendships across differences and remind them that strength does not require cruelty. Perhaps most importantly, it can teach them that before demanding improvement from everyone around them, they should first examine the stone closest to their own hands. That stone is themselves.

There is nothing spectacular about this method. Freemasonry does not promise revolution. It promises work: patient work, sometimes frustrating work, often invisible work. Yet the old builders understood that civilizations are constructed in exactly this way. Great structures are created from many individual stones, each prepared and placed carefully.

Human society may not be so different. Improve the individual. Strengthen the family. Support the Brother. Serve the community. Preserve institutions worth preserving. Teach those who follow. Place the stone carefully, and trust that another builder will eventually place the next one.

The Enduring Value of Freemasonry

Freemasonry has survived enormous transformations. Monarchies have vanished, empires have collapsed, countries have been created, wars have redrawn borders, industrialization has changed the nature of work and technology has transformed communication beyond anything earlier generations could have imagined. Yet the essential subject of Freemasonry has remained unchanged because its essential subject is the human being.

We still experience pride, jealousy, anger and fear. We remain vulnerable to prejudice and fanaticism. We still seek friendship, meaning, belonging and purpose. We still wonder whether our lives will have mattered when they are over. The tools therefore remain useful. The square still asks whether our conduct is right. The level reminds us that beneath social distinctions lies a

common humanity. The compasses ask whether we are capable of governing ourselves. The rough stone remains an image of our unfinished character. And the Temple remains incomplete.

Perhaps this is why Freemasonry has repeatedly endured through periods of darkness. Its lessons do not depend upon the world being peaceful. In many ways, those lessons become more important precisely when the world is not. Freemasonry does not assume that human beings are perfect. Its symbolism begins from the opposite assumption. It does not require every Brother to think alike. It asks whether men who think differently can nevertheless recognize one another as Brothers. It does not promise to make a man perfect. It invites him to become better.

For the man seeking personal growth, that invitation may be more meaningful than any grand promise. The Masonic journey begins with the humility of the apprentice, continues through the curiosity and development of the craftsman, and deepens into the responsibility of the Master. If the lessons take root, the Mason eventually discovers that the work was never exclusively about himself.

He improves himself so that he may become more useful to others. He learns so that one day he may teach. He receives assistance so that someday he may provide it. He inherits a Lodge so that he can eventually leave it stronger than he found it. He receives light so that he can carry some of it beyond the Lodge room.

That may be the enduring value of Freemasonry. When society becomes divided, it reminds us of fraternity. When ignorance becomes comfortable, it encourages learning. When fanaticism demands certainty, it teaches reflection. When authority becomes arrogant, it reminds us that power is temporary. When material success becomes the only measure of a life, it asks questions about character, duty and legacy.

And when the world grows dark, Freemasonry returns to the ancient language of the builder. There is work to be done. There are still rough stones to shape, institutions worth preserving and generations yet to come. So we pick up our tools, and we build.

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A Note on Historical Interpretation

The history of Freemasonry occasionally contains traditions that are repeated more confidently than the surviving evidence warrants. This is particularly true of claims concerning ancient origins and the Masonic membership of some revolutionary leaders.

For that reason, this article distinguishes between the symbolic inheritance of Freemasonry, which draws heavily upon the traditions and working tools of the medieval builders, and the historically documented development of speculative Freemasonry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The same caution applies to Latin American independence. The importance of organizations such as the Lautaro Lodges to the independence movement is well established, but historians continue to debate whether those bodies were Freemasonry in the formal sense or revolutionary societies that employed Masonic organizational forms and ideals. This distinction does not diminish the historical relationship between Freemasonry and the wider movements for education, freedom of conscience, civic equality, voluntary association and constitutional government. It simply allows that history to be presented without requiring legend to take the place of evidence.