

The Prodigal Prospect

Presented March 22, 2016 at Landmarks/Doric Lodge No. 654

Brethren, as your DDGM this year, one of the roles which I have filled is that of receiving the names of new prospective applicants to our Fraternity; either through our District website, or through walk-ins to the Grand Lodge office next door. There are many ways for these new contacts to be handled. I personally feel that there is no more important task than for each of us as Masons to give each of these individuals our full and undivided attention.

This year, I have taken the time to immediately contact these individuals, usually within 2 hours of receiving the communication. We have then met for coffee one on one, and in most cases these people have turned into thriving new members of several of our Lodges.

Now this process is not without its risks, and we need to keep this in mind. As Canadians, we are as a people quite trusting, though thorough research **before** any contact is made is very important. Your personal safety and security should also be considered and a public place should be chosen for all initial meetings.

I have heard it said many times that new applicants to freemasonry which come from the internet, or through a knock on the door, typically do not pan out. I would propose that in most of these cases, it is us, rather than them, who have failed in this exchange.

Let's consider for a moment, the state of mind of this new prospective applicant. Generally some event has recently occurred in their life to prompt them to approach the Craft. Looking online, they've learned that in order to join Freemasonry, they must first speak with a Mason; except that they don't know any Masons? Feeling perhaps unqualified, they have persevered and they have approached the Grand Lodge office. Nervously, they've sat in their car in the parking lot going over what they'll say, or they've hid around the corner pacing the sidewalk before entering. Nervously they've communicated their details to the friendly staff at the office and have been promised that they'll be contacted. And then what..? A message is sent to the local DDGM, who then traditionally forwards it along to a lodge secretary.. who then forwards it along to the worshipful master.. who then maybe sits on the email for another couple of days before contacting the secretary back asking if anyone has spoken with the prospect. In many cases, this individual has now waited a week, initially considering that perhaps he's not wanted, then perhaps under-qualified by virtue of not knowing a Mason... and finally, he has partially emotionally moved on before he receives the response. It is at this time that he receives an email consisting of nothing but a few cursory and open ended questions... and so our prodigal prospect is lost before he begins.

Perhaps this man ends up joining after all of this, but the spark has dimmed, and this man is now guarded and cautious of getting his hopes up. This, brethren, is why I meet with these individuals before referring them into a Lodge. This year I have met with brethren, who have waited upwards of 6 weeks after I had initially met with them before a Lodge has set a firm meeting. But timing, brethren, is just 1 aspect of this new exchange.

The initial meeting in my experience is the **very best** opportunity to get to know a prospective applicant. As humans we naturally approach these first meetings hoping to learn more, but also trying to put our best foot forward. At this initial meeting, the person generally has very little knowledge of the finer points of our organization, and thus he is unaware of what it is that we are looking for.

In my experience, a strong prospective candidate possesses three common traits. The first, is a level of curiosity and intrigue not just about our Craft, but about the world in general. The second, is that of being on a path of discovery and of seeking truth. We are all living today in a world where traditional quality controls and truths have been lost in the face of distributed and decentralized information sources. We as people are being bombarded on a daily basis with exponentially increasing information,

virtually all of which is unconfirmed. We are also living in a world where divorce, non-traditional, and blended families have become the norm. In many cases, those who are approaching our Craft are seeking those truths, guidance and lessons that we provide which have been passed down from generation to generation. Finally, the third trait is that of having a passion for their value system and self-improvement. Freemasonry as we all know, at its core, is a journey of self-improvement. The prospective applicant may not be aware of this, though it is our role during these initial contacts to not just judge them as fit and proper persons, but also to ascertain if they are in fact fit and proper persons to be made Masons.

So the question remains, what should be discussed? In answer to this question, our Grand Lodge has produced a great primer on the Grand Lodge website called the Five Steps to Application which I recommend to your serious consideration. One addition that I would suggest however, is that at some point during the latter part of your discussions, you clearly say that in order to proceed the individual requires that you sign and endorse their application. Then simply ask the question, is there anything that I should know before I decide to sign for you, - such as any trouble with the law? Then wait in silence.. and allow the person to fully answer the question. On two occasions after an excellent discussion, I have had this question uncover ongoing police and judgement proceedings, followed by a qualifying account by the prospective applicant. In both of these cases, I have suggested that perhaps now is not the time for them to apply, and then having proceeded to answer any other questions about Freemasonry, we have parted ways in amity and without embarrassment to either party.

In my experience these initial discussions must be conducted with open and friendly communication. This is not an inquisition though this is a meeting between two parties which must ascertain on both sides of the table whether or not the relationship is the right fit. Ego and elitism have no place at this table.

And so, with all things going well, and discussions culminating in two confident signatures upon his application, we proceed to make this man a member of our gentle Craft.

In the business world, companies spend a great deal of time and money evaluating prospective candidates for employment. Several interviews occur, background and reference checks, all culminating in the employment offer.

In my professional life I am usually on the hiring side of this equation and a new hire to me is a fresh new opportunity. Each new employee approaches the job interviews with a mixture of feelings including guarded apprehension, critical judgement, excitement, and confidence. After the job offer is accepted however, a new employee is now excited. They've made the emotional decision to start afresh under new employment and in their minds, this new job is going to be fantastic.

That energy and enthusiasm can either be fostered and encouraged or it can be diminished during that first day on the job. As a hiring manager I do a tremendous amount of planning prior to a new hire starting on their first day. Login and access credentials, training resources, employee manuals showing not just rules but also directions to area transit, dry cleaners, restaurants, and other resources, and a full schedule for their first few days are all planned and prepared well in advance of them arriving. That new staff member only receives positive feedback and discussions from the time they enter the office because I always regard every new staff member as an opportunity for positive change.

Brethren, we recently had a Long Range Planning session here in our District where many of our members spoke about the loss of their members after they become Master Masons. I would propose that this may be when some of our members are leaving, but this trend is not starting at the Master Mason degree but rather is systemic of expectations not being met from the moment of the first contact.

If we as Lodges want to move in a new direction, we need only present our new members, with that new direction as our definition of who we are when they join, rather than presenting them with our problems. This communication is as little as changing the words “we really should be doing more masonic education in this lodge” to “in our lodge we have been striving to improve on our masonic education. Here are some resources and I encourage you to take part in what we are doing.”

There is an old Greek proverb that says that “A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.”

Each of our new members embodies fresh fertile soil for these new seeds of wisdom to be sown. The experience of our new members is entirely in our hands to change for the better. Building a strong line of new officers starts with those first few meetings.

Thank you,

R.W. Bro. Devin Tuinstra
District Deputy Grand Master
Hamilton District C