**A Single Step: The Masonic First Degree**

*(Richard H. Ryder, 2016)*

According to Lao-Tzu, *“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”*. This is true for many of life’s journeys, and for Freemasons these profound words have special meaning.

A first step toward the East begins our Masonic journey down a symbolic path from youth into manhood, toward age and eternity. The first degree symbolically prepares us for that journey from the rough to perfect ashlar and forms a cornerstone for a firm and supportive foundation.

Like all beginnings, the first step in Freemasonry is accompanied by feelings of anticipation and uncertainty. A new initiate may ask many questions of himself: “What brought me here?”, “Why am I here at this point in my life?”, “What can I offer?”, and “What do I expect to gain”? In a period of darkness, having prepared his heart and mind, he seeks the light of truth and answers to life’s basic questions. With God’s help and his own exertion he seeks admission and takes that first step toward understanding.

As from the quarry, he emerges in a state of roughness and purity. Destitute, uneducated, and innocent, he relies on others to guide him. He meets resistance along the way, which teaches him valuable lessons that he stores within the repository of his soul. Silence is broken by words spoken from those who have already taken this journey and now impart the same wisdom and encouragement passed on through generations of predecessors.

And then begins the lifelong process of self-reflection and internalization of Masonic lessons. Like the ancient workers, he begins to form his own internal temple made not with stone, but with the building block of life’s lessons. These are the true secrets of Freemasonry, present to all beings, but now perceived within the context of a much larger set of experiences. He learns of the everlasting impact of charity, the application of the builder’s tools to remind him of important lessons, the guiding influence of those who came before us, and the power of Masonic tenets, namely, brotherly love, relief, and truth. And finally, virtues are impressed upon the mind that he may judge wisely, moderate self-interest, practice self-control, and confront uncertainty with strength and courage.

From this meaningful ceremony emerges a transformed individual prepared to view life from a completely new perspective. The new entered apprentice is now able to look at himself and others in new ways and better understands that it is not the outward appearance of a man that is important, but the internal qualities. With this newfound understanding he begins to prepare himself for the rest of his journey from the rough to perfect ashlar. He will soon realize that all men, having taken this same step, are willing to assist him on his journey under the watchful eye of a Supreme Being who stands watch over all of us into eternity.