

Oriental-Martha's Vineyard Lodge



Initiation

Bruce E. Nevin

An initiation is not a status or an achievement, an initiation is a beginning.

Every initiation has an outward aspect carried out by particular people, with you, the initiate, at a certain time and place. At the same time, there is always an interior aspect taking place within you. The inner initiation is the true significance of the outer events, and is their purpose or aim.

The outward ritual is almost always imperfect. One person may fumble some words or even omit whole paragraphs. Floorwork may stumble, ritual actions may be malformed, jogged out of place, or forgotten. And even if the officers perform flawlessly, with deliberate, clear diction supported by gestures and body language that “suits the action to the word,” nevertheless, as the initiate your perception of the ritual is surely incomplete. The very meaning of what is said is not immediately available to you, much less the full import of the symbolism.

Later, as from the sidelines you witness the ritual being performed with new initiates, the significance of different aspects opens to you more and more. Each such witnessing furthers your inward initiation. Still more rapidly and fully, the more you involve yourself as a participant, the more light is opened to you; or, more truly, the more you open to the light.

The purpose of initiation is to change people—to make good men better, as we say. Ritual does its work within you because your subconscious mind is always amenable to suggestion. Since it is your subconscious mind that builds and daily reconstitutes what you are as a person, that little word “always” is worthy of your careful consideration. Absolutely anything that you experience or do or say or think may be accepted by your subconscious as a suggestion, on the basis of which she changes the way you are constituted as a person. Feelings give rise to thoughts, thoughts form words, words lead to actions, actions repeated become habits, habits congeal as character. And there you are.

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote a small book entitled *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. What is it to purify the heart, and so to will one thing? Surely, it is to know what you want. What is your heart's desire? But that simple question “What do you want?” is much easier to ask than to answer.

We all have so many desires for and against this and that, jostling and competing with one another. We are like young Al Addin, who found an old lamp from which, when he rubbed to clean it, emerged a powerful Jinn. Only when *we* make a wish, a suggestion to our subconscious, and the spirit turns to do our bidding, another voice within us cries “No, wait!” and substitutes a different wish. No sooner does the Jinn turn to the task than there is another wish, and then another, and that mighty servant can only spin around like

a whirlwind, doing nothing productive, and maybe even knocking things over by accident.

Where do all these competing motivations come from? All our lives we have collected shoulds and shouldn'ts, musts and cannots, like barnacles. Our desires and aversions have been manipulated. Advertising and media suggest that if we have this or that possession, others will see us with the trappings of style and success, and we will feel happy and fulfilled. That smiling man, that smooth-skinned, poised woman, they cannot possibly suffer the frustrations and petty conflicts that I have to deal with, and if I were successful like them it would all be smooth sailing for me too!

We know all about these tricks of the PR game consciously, intellectually, but our subconscious mind is naïve, like a child within us. We have to stop letting just every suggestion in willy-nilly. Discrimination is vitally important, and that requires a working relationship with your subconscious.

A working relationship with your subconscious. That's not quite like rubbing dirt off an old lamp. It's more like a courtship. It takes time, and persistence, and you have to care. It has to matter to you. This is how the fox explained it to the little prince:

"Please—tame me!" he said.

"I want to, very much," the little prince replied. "But I have not much time. I have friends to discover, and a great many things to understand."

"One only understands the things that one tames," said the fox. "Men have no time to understand anything. They buy things all ready made at the shops. But there is no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship, and so men have no friends any more. If you want a friend, tame me . . ."

What does that mean--'tame'?"

"It is an act too often neglected," said the fox. "It means to establish ties."

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"What must I do, to tame you?" asked the little prince.

"You must be very patient," replied the fox. "First you will sit down at a little distance from me—like that—in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day . . ."

The next day the little prince came back.

"It would have been better to come back at the same hour," said the fox. "If, for example, you come at four o'clock in the afternoon, then at three o'clock I shall begin to be happy. I shall feel happier and happier as the hour advances. At four o'clock, I shall already be worrying and jumping about. I shall show you how happy I am! But if you come at just any time, I shall never know at what hour my heart is to be ready to greet you . . . One must observe the proper rites . . ."

"What is a rite?" asked the little prince.*

What is a rite? What is a ritual? Surely at the least it is something done at a regular time and place, in the same way each time. But that is not enough. With those words we could be talking about mere habit.

Masonry communicates by symbol and allegory. What does this mean? Even though words are spoken in the ritual, they refer to symbols which communicate nonverbally. We must read the symbols the way illiterate people in medieval times used to read stained glass and statuary. Our rituals represent to us, duly assembled with our brethren, what it is to be a Mason. They display a pattern on the trestleboard. These symbolic and allegorical representations are suggestive. As we pay attention to our Masonic rituals (repeatedly, consistently in certain places and at certain regular times), "workmen" of the subconscious reconstitute us according to that pattern, building the temple not made with hands.

Symbols and allegories provoke thought, but at the level of conscious thought their interpretation is not always obvious. For example, the plumb teaches us to be upright, and the level teaches us to deal in all matters on the level with our fellows. But can't a stiff rectitude foster disharmony? Don't you have to go along to get along? Do you perhaps fear being thought a stiff-necked moralizing prig? Think about that felt conflict, for we shall return to it presently. And now consider the example before us of Hiram holding to moral principle even to death, and yet all the while acting entirely on the level with his attackers, not supercilious or aloof in his station. He simply restates the conditions for their advancement, which they well know, and even gives positive assurance that they will receive what they wish when they demonstrate "regular and upright conduct."

While we are in training, moral principles are stated prescriptively, as guidelines that prescribe what we should and should not do. As our inward initiation progresses, those same statements of moral principle become descriptive. Instead of being rules by which we should constrain our behavior, they flow naturally from our inner nature. And this is not by adding them to our inner nature. That true inner nature is within you all along, obscured only by a clutter of conflicting suggestions to your subconscious mind. The transition from rough ashlar to perfect ashlar is accomplished by removing what is unneeded.

The seeming conflict between rectitude and acting on the level, those moral principles that are represented emblematically by the plumb and the level, arises out of our fear of what others might think of us. With the progress of our inward initiation, our intuitions of the thoughts and feelings of our fellows ripen, by a winding way, from apprehension to empathy, from conformity to compassion, and rather than governing, they inform.

To an extent this will happen slowly over time if you merely persist in sitting through the ritual on the sidelines. You are well advised, however, to take matters in hand and

* *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. This little book for children has more to say to us than appears on the surface. See for example *L'ésotérisme du Petit Prince de Saint-Exupéry*, by Emmanuel-Yves Monin.

participate more actively in your own advancement. Memorizing ritual is a first stage. Subconsciousness in a fundamental aspect is a storehouse of memory. To memorize the words, you must open a conversation with your subconscious mind. Make her acquaintance. She works by association. Be alert as she offers you associative clues that will help you to remember the words. Move your body and enact the words in posture and gesture, and, as you do, imagine yourself in your lodge in the places where you will be telling this to new initiates.

The words and images of ritual provoke thought and raise questions in your mind. Write these down, and when you retire at night spend a few moments pondering them. Then when you awaken in the morning, look again and see if some new insights have been offered to you from within. As you learn, think about how to apply those meanings to situations in your daily life. At first you will recognize practical applications only retrospectively as you think back over the events of the day and week. With time and persistence, the principles that you imbibe from Masonic ritual begin to inform your responses. Pay attention. Listen to what comes from within. This is intuition: inner tuition, teaching from within you, from the same teachers who have guided Masons from time beyond memory.

As you watch and listen from the sidelines, as you attend Lodge of Instruction, as you go to rehearsals, even if only to observe and to help when needed, as you move through the chairs enacting your part with your brethren, each part in turn— by virtue of such “homework,” every time the outer initiation comes around the circle it is at a new level of a waxing spiral. Each time, new disclosures open to you, new insight into the significance of the words, and beyond words the significance of the actions, the floor work, the lights, ornaments, jewels, furniture, implements, the officers and their roles—all aspects of the ritual progressively light up with meaning, and shed light each on the others. As that light brightens and spreads within you, all that is not of that light naturally falls away, as shadows, and the light spreads outwardly in all your relations with others, easily, as water flows. This is the progress of your inner initiation, and the true meaning and purpose of the outer.°

° Published in *The Trowel* Spring 2008 and in *The Lodgeroom Magazine International* Nov. 2007 (Vol. 2 No. 11).