

The Great Inversion: From Transactional Living to Life's Indebtedness

A Masonic Reflection on Modern Existence and the Silent Withdrawal of Youth

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Introduction

In the hallowed halls of Freemasonry, we often speak of the fundamental principle that "you get out of the fraternity what you put into it." This transactional wisdom, while containing essential truth, may inadvertently reflect a broader cultural paradigm that has begun to fail our youngest brethren and the generation they represent. As we witness the silent withdrawal of young men from traditional markers of engagement—education, employment, relationships, and civic participation—we are compelled to examine whether our philosophical framework itself requires reconstruction.

The ancient craft teaches us that wisdom is the principal thing, and with all our getting, we must get understanding. Perhaps it is time to understand that the very transactional nature of modern existence has created a spiritual poverty that no amount of conventional "getting" can remedy. This essay proposes a fundamental inversion of our relationship with life itself: rather than approaching existence as debtors seeking return on investment, we might consider living so abundantly that life becomes indebted to us.

The Masonic Foundation: Beyond Transaction

The Entered Apprentice learns that Freemasonry is "a system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols." Within this system, the notion of reciprocity—giving and receiving—forms a cornerstone of our understanding. The working tools of each degree teach us that labor, when properly applied, yields both material and spiritual rewards. Yet this very framework, when extended to life beyond the lodge, may have contributed to the spiritual malaise we observe in contemporary society.

Carl H. Claudy, in his foundational work on Masonic education, reminds us that "we live and walk by faith, not by sight; and to know that fact is the beginning of wisdom" (Claudy, 1924, p. 45). This profound insight speaks directly to the limitations of transactional thinking, which demands visible, measurable returns for every investment of energy or effort.

Consider the young man standing at the threshold of adulthood in our digital age. He has been taught that education leads to employment, that employment leads to financial security, that financial security leads to relationship success, and that relationship success leads to fulfillment.

This algorithmic approach to existence reduces the grand mystery of human experience to a series of transactions, each demanding its proper input to generate expected output.

The Masonic tradition, however, offers a deeper wisdom. The Volume of Sacred Law speaks not merely of reciprocity but of abundance that transcends calculation. The parable of the talents suggests that true wealth comes not from careful preservation of what we have been given, but from the generous deployment of our gifts, even unto the point of apparent recklessness. The widow's mite demonstrates that the measure of our offering is not found in its material value but in the spirit of abundance from which it flows.

The Digital Dissolution of Human Connection

Our current age presents unprecedented challenges to the development of human character and connection. The Master Mason who has traveled through the symbolic death and resurrection of the Third Degree understands that true transformation requires presence, witness, and the irreplaceable alchemy of human interaction. Yet we have created a world where the majority of human exchange occurs through digital mediation, stripping away the subtle energies that have historically forged bonds between individuals.

Manly P. Hall, in his comprehensive work on esoteric philosophy, observed that "to live in the world without becoming aware of the meaning of the world is like wandering about in a great library without touching the books" (Hall, 1928. P. 127). This metaphor perfectly captures the predicament of our digital age—we are surrounded by information yet starved of wisdom, connected yet isolated, informed yet unaware of deeper meaning.

The lodge room represents more than mere meeting space; it is consecrated ground where human beings encounter one another in their full complexity. The position required to receive the substitute for the lost Master's Word cannot be transmitted through fiber optic cables, nor can the recognition that passes between brethren in genuine fellowship be replicated in virtual reality. These physical, embodied experiences create bonds that transcend the merely transactional.

Young men today often find themselves isolated despite constant connectivity. They may accumulate thousands of digital "friends" while experiencing profound loneliness. They may achieve high scores in video games while feeling powerless in their actual lives. They may consume endless streams of content while feeling empty of purpose. The very tools that promise connection have created a generation that struggles with the fundamental human skills of presence, attention, and authentic relationship.

The Great Withdrawal: A Masonic Interpretation

The phenomenon of young men "silently going away" from traditional markers of engagement represents more than mere social trends; it signals a spiritual crisis that demands our attention as builders of character and community. When we examine the statistics—declining college enrollment, reduced workforce participation, delayed or abandoned relationship formation,

decreased civic engagement—we see not merely economic or social problems, but symptoms of existential despair.

The Entered Apprentice begins his journey by knocking at the door of the lodge, seeking admission to mysteries that promise transformation. But what happens when the doors young men encounter in contemporary society seem to lead only to further transaction, further debt, further obligation without corresponding meaning? What happens when the very act of engagement feels like a fool's errand in a rigged game?

The ancient craft recognizes that the human soul requires more than mere survival; it demands purpose, recognition, and the opportunity to contribute to something greater than oneself. The young man who withdraws from society may be expressing, in his silence, a profound wisdom: that the current paradigm of existence offers insufficient return on the investment of a human life.

The Philosophical Inversion: Life as Debtor

Here we encounter a radical proposition that challenges conventional wisdom while remaining true to the deepest insights of our tradition. Rather than approaching life as supplicants seeking favor, what if we chose to live with such abundance, such generosity, such commitment to excellence that life itself becomes indebted to us?

This inversion does not suggest arrogance or entitlement, but rather a fundamental shift in our relationship with existence. The Master Mason who has learned the secrets of the center understands that the universe operates on principles of abundance rather than scarcity. The acacia that grows from the grave of Hiram Abiff speaks to life's inexhaustible capacity for renewal and growth. As Hall wisely noted, "Man's status in the natural world is determined, therefore, by the quality of his thinking" (Hall, 1928. P. 89).

Consider the implications of this philosophical shift. Rather than carefully calculating what we deserve based on our inputs, we might choose to overwhelm existence with our contributions. Instead of asking "What's in it for me?" we might ask "How much can I give?" This approach transcends the transactional model by creating such an abundance of offering that the question of return becomes irrelevant.

The young man who adopts this perspective is no longer trapped in the anxiety of measuring whether he is receiving his "fair share." He is liberated to pursue excellence for its own sake, to love without guarantee of return, to create without assurance of recognition. In doing so, he builds up a kind of existential surplus that transforms his relationship with uncertainty and disappointment.

The Masonic Path Forward

The craft provides a blueprint for this transformation. The Entered Apprentice learns to work with rough ashlar, beginning the long process of shaping raw potential into polished stone. This

work is not undertaken with the guarantee of immediate reward, but with faith that the labor itself has value. The Fellow Craft ascends the winding stairs, not knowing precisely what he will find at the top, but trusting that the ascent itself is worthy of effort.

Carl H. Claudy understood this when he wrote of the symbolic nature of our craft: "Architecture is perhaps the most beautiful and expressive of all the arts. Painting and sculpture, noble though they are, lack the utility of architecture and strive to interpret nature rather than to originate. Architecture is not hampered by the necessity of reproducing something already in existence" (Claudy, 1924, p. 78). Like the architect who creates without natural model, the Mason who embraces abundant living transcends the limitations of mere reproduction or reaction, becoming instead a creator of new possibilities.

The Master Mason, having passed through symbolic death, understands that true life begins when we cease to cling to the transactional model of existence. The grips of Masonry represents not merely rescue from the grave, but resurrection into a new mode of being where generosity replaces calculation, and abundance replaces scarcity.

For the young men who have silently withdrawn from contemporary society, Masonry offers an alternative paradigm. Rather than seeking their place in a system that seems designed to extract value from their labor while providing minimal return, they might choose to create value so abundantly that the system itself is transformed.

This requires, however, a return to the fundamental practices that our digital age has eroded. The lodge room, with its emphasis on physical presence and authentic encounter, becomes a sanctuary where young men can rediscover the arts of attention, listening, and genuine communication. The ritualistic structure provides a framework for depth and meaning that contrasts sharply with the ephemeral nature of digital interaction. As Hall beautifully expressed it, "The bonds and ties of the life we know break easily, but through eternity one bond remains — the bond of fellowship — the fellowship of atoms, of star dust in its endless flight, of suns and worlds, of gods and men" (Hall, 1928, p. 203).

The Practical Application

The philosophical inversion we propose is not merely theoretical but demands practical implementation. The young Mason who chooses to live as though life were indebted to him must translate this perspective into daily practice.

In his professional life, he approaches work not as a mere exchange of time for money, but as an opportunity to create value that exceeds all reasonable expectation. He becomes the employee who does not ask "What's the minimum required?" but rather "What's the maximum possible?" This approach, paradoxically, often results in greater material success than the transactional model, but more importantly, it generates a sense of purpose and pride that transcends monetary compensation.

In his relationships, he loves without keeping score, gives without guarantee of return, and serves without expectation of recognition. This abundance of emotional and spiritual generosity creates

bonds that far exceed the shallow connections fostered by transactional approaches to human relationship.

In his civic engagement, he participates not as a consumer of services but as a contributor to the common good. He votes not merely for his own interests but for the welfare of the community. He volunteers not for personal benefit but for the joy of service.

The Wisdom of Ancient Teachings

The Volume of Sacred Law, central to every Masonic lodge, contains numerous examples of individuals who lived according to this inverted paradigm. The prophets spoke truth to power not because they expected reward, but because truth demanded expression. The apostles left their nets not because they were promised comfort, but because they heard a call to serve something greater than themselves.

These ancient examples demonstrate that the philosophical inversion we propose is not novel but represents a return to perennial wisdom. The individual who chooses to live abundantly, to give generously, to serve faithfully, enters into a relationship with existence that transcends the merely transactional. Such a person discovers that life, indeed, has ways of honoring those who honor it.

Yet this honor may not come in the forms that contemporary society teaches us to expect. The young man who chooses this path may not achieve conventional markers of success. He may not accumulate the material wealth that others pursue. He may not receive the recognition that ego desires. But he will possess something far more valuable: the knowledge that he has lived fully, given completely, and contributed meaningfully to the human story.

Conclusion: The Master's Word

The Master Mason seeks the genuine secrets of his ancestors, understanding that the substitute word, while valuable, is not the ultimate goal. Similarly, the young man who has withdrawn from contemporary society may be seeking something more genuine than the substitute satisfactions offered by our digital age.

The philosophical inversion we propose—living so abundantly that life becomes indebted to us—represents a return to the genuine secrets of human existence. It requires courage to abandon the safety of transactional thinking. It demands faith to invest ourselves completely without guarantee of return. It calls for wisdom to recognize that the greatest wealth lies not in what we accumulate but in what we contribute.

For the young men who have silently withdrawn, this path offers not merely an alternative but a transformation. Rather than remaining victims of a system that seems designed to extract value while providing minimal return, they can choose to become creators of value so abundant that the system itself is transformed.

The ancient craft teaches us that we are not merely workers in the quarry but architects of the temple. The temple we build is not merely individual but collective, not merely material but spiritual. Each rough ashlar that we shape with care, each perfect stone that we place with precision, contributes to a structure that will outlast our individual existence. As the great Masonic philosopher Albert Pike reminds us: "What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others and the world remains and is immortal" (Pike, 1871, p. 718).

In this great work, the question is not what life owes us, but what we owe to life. Yet in the mysterious alchemy of genuine service, we discover that the greatest debt is always paid by existence itself to those who have given themselves completely to the work of building something worthy of the human spirit.

The young man who chooses this path may find that he has not merely escaped the trap of transactional living but has discovered the secret that the ancient masters knew: that in losing ourselves in service to something greater, we find ourselves; that in giving all, we receive all; that in becoming indebted to life through our service, we find that life has become indebted to us through our contribution. Albert Pike expressed this profound truth when he wrote: "That which causes us trials shall yield us triumph: and that which make our hearts ache shall fill us with gladness. The only true happiness is to learn, to advance, and to improve: which could not happen unless we had commenced with error, ignorance, and imperfection. We must pass through the darkness, to reach the light."

This is the Master's word that cannot be given but must be found: that the greatest riches come not from what we extract from existence but from what we contribute to it. In this contribution, the silent withdrawal ends, and the great work begins.

"Let us remember that the great pyramid of Giza was built not by slaves driven by whips, but by free men inspired by vision. So too must we build our lives and our society—not through the compulsion of transactional thinking, but through the inspiration of abundant service."

"The ideas I have been developing are not new. They are the oldest ideas we have in some real sense. They have a power." -Jordan B. Peterson PhD

References and Further Contemplation

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[Young Men are \(Quietly\) Giving UP ... Here's Why!](#) – The Diary of A CEO

[What if the Solution to Men's Looniness Is ... Freemasonry?](#) Slate – Allegra Rosenberg

Note: This essay draws upon the fundamental teachings of Freemasonry as commonly understood within the fraternity, philosophical traditions of abundance and service, and contemporary observations about social withdrawal among young men. The specific ritual references are intentionally general to respect the traditions of the craft while making the philosophical points accessible to a broader audience.

For further study, the reader is encouraged to explore:

- *The fundamental principles of Freemasonry as taught in the three degrees*
- *Classical philosophical texts on virtue ethics and the good life*
- *Contemporary research on social isolation and digital technology's impact on human connection*
- *Historical examples of individuals who lived according to principles of abundant service*