A fellowcraft's application of the plumb, the square, and the level in medical practice

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ABSTRACT

In Freemasonry, each degree represents the refining and transformation of the individual through a unique set of working tools that symbolize the progression of lessons from an entered apprentice to a master mason. For a fellowcraft, the lessons are represented by the tools of the square, level, and plumb. With these tools, masons are reminded how to conduct themselves and interact with others. The application of the fellowcraft working tools to medical practice emphasizes aspects of the physician-patient relationship and the ethical treatment of patients.

KEYWORDS Fellowcraft; Freemasonry; level; medical education; plumb; square

My journey as an entered apprentice (EA) mason was long and arduous, requiring dedication and learning the lengthy responses to questions about the fundamentals of Freemasonry and the lessons of an EA. The oral transmission of information required a new method for memorizing the topics needed to demonstrate proficiency. At moments, I doubted whether I would be able to overcome the challenges. After completing my proficiency as an EA, I progressed to the fellowcraft degree. In Freemasonry, the fellowcraft degree represents the transition from youth to adulthood whereby lessons, skills, and moral character are further refined to prepare for the tasks and challenges ahead.¹ Each degree is taught through unique working tools. In the EA degree, the working tools are the 24-inch gauge and the common gavel, which represent the discipline and initial transformation of individuals as they progress through life in maturity and in their chosen profession. For the fellowcraft, the lessons of the degree are represented by the square, level, and plumb. As Albert Mackey summarized, “The *Plumb* is an instrument made use of by operative masons to raise perpendiculars; the *Square*, to square their work; and the *Level*, to lay horizontals; but we, as Free and Accepted Masons, are taught to make use of them for more noble and glorious purposes.”¹ Whereas the EA focuses on the fundamentals of Freemasonry, the fellowcraft mason learns that every transition or transformation in

life requires a greater degree of commitment and refinement in one's character, conduct, and responsibilities.

As an MD/PhD student, I observed similar parallels in my transition from medical school to doctoral training. Through my doctoral studies, I learned the importance of patience and diligence dealing with the vast uncertainties, mistakes, and complications performing experiments while working to complete my doctoral requirements. In each circumstance, I had to retrain my own thinking and response to disappointments, frustrations, and setbacks. As a medical student, there is immediate gratification in performing well on an exam, having a good patient encounter, or learning a new skill. In contrast, research requires comfort in the unknown and stumbling in the dark without any guarantee of success. Failure can be more common than success. The two mindsets clashed and required me to transition from thinking as a future physician to thinking as a future physician-scientist. The training required me to take responsibility for balancing both aspects of my career despite the challenges. Given my experience, I wanted to explore the fellowcraft working tools and their relationship to the transformation physicians experience through the physician-patient relationship while balancing the ethical and professional requirements of their profession.

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THE SQUARE

The Square is the symbol of morality, truthfulness and honesty. It symbolizes accuracy, not even varying by a single degree. When we part upon the Square, we go in different directions, but in full knowledge that our courses in life will be going according to the angle of the Square (which means in the right direction), until we meet again.²

The square is unwavering in its form, with equal dimensions on either side. This emblem for Freemasons represents the constant requirement to treat their fellow man with integrity and honesty regardless of race, ethnicity, or previous actions. In Freemasonry, “the square is the symbol of regulated life and actions. It is the masonic rule for correcting and harmonizing conduct on principles of morality and virtue.”³ Thus, the square is a reminder that the ethical principle of beneficence should be unwavering in the physician-patient relationship. Physicians have an obligation to be truthful in the assessment and prognosis of a patient’s medical condition. Such honesty empowers patients to take charge of their own health decisions, evaluate their goals, and develop a greater sense of control and peace facing the vast unknowns of their disease. Yet there are some circumstances when the truth may conflict with physicians’ responsibility to maintain beneficence, nonmaleficence, and the autonomy of their patients.⁴ For example, debate continues on whether patients with cognitive deficits or dementia should be told the full truth, given their inability to comprehend or make informed health care decisions for themselves.⁴ Although there are other circumstances where being truthful may harm a patient, physicians should always seek to bring truth and openness to a patient despite the inconvenience, suffering, or potential conflicts that may arise.⁴ When our medical decisions provide patients beneficence, the physician and patient benefit from the exchange, growing deeper in love, trust, and respect.⁴

For masons, the square embodies the hope and promise of living an honest life, not only for the individual but for society and the grand scope of human history. For physicians, the square is a reminder that temptations to avoid difficult situations, delivering a poor prognosis, or being honest should never compromise their ability to preserve a patient’s beneficence, nonmaleficence, and autonomy.

THE LEVEL

The Level is a symbol of equality. We do not mean equality in wealth, social distinction, civic office, or service to mankind; but, rather, we refer to the internal, and not the external, qualifications. Each person is endowed with a worth and dignity which is spiritual, and should not be subject to man-made distinctions.²

In the EA degree, masons are taught that a person is qualified to be made a mason by their internal and not external characteristics. For Freemasons, all human beings are viewed as equal before God; therefore, individuals’ social, political, or economic standing in society should not dictate their worthiness. The fellowcraft degree expands on this lesson with the level, which emphasizes the equality between all

members of society regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity. Although people do not possess equal ability, gifts, and talents, Freemasons believe human beings should be treated with equal respect and opportunity to thrive. In the medical profession, the level represents the beneficence with which physicians and health care professionals should treat their patients. In the medical community, physicians should treat each patient equally and judge, if so lightly, based on the person’s character rather than physical appearance, sexual identity, or other external qualifications. For example, many patients with limited proficiency in the English language are among the most disempowered and disadvantaged, which increases the cost of care, mortality, and morbidity.⁵ Clinicians who are aware of these inequalities and have access to interpreters and other health care resources for these populations improve health care outcomes and solidarity in minority communities.⁵ By leveling their minds from biases, physicians can better empathize, connect, and improve the quality of care given to patients.⁶

Despite improvements in social, political, and racial equality, the medical profession still has issues related to the prevalence of minority groups and women in the profession.⁷ With the rise in globalization, inequalities among minority groups in several countries have risen given the increased demand and resources needed for physicians to address the complex medical needs of these communities.⁶ However, physicians can unshackle themselves from destructive thinking and better prepare their minds to live a larger life dedicated to service, love, and compassion. In this manner, the level is a constant reminder for physicians to be unbiased, fair, and equal with all their patients while remaining diligent in their civic duty and charitable to all human beings. The daily “leveling” of the mind through meditation, reflection, and dialogue with different social, ethnic, religious, or political groups can remind physicians of the importance of remaining equal toward every patient. The practice reminds physicians that despite their status and skill, they share a common bond with their patients in their mortality, frailties, and journey to live peacefully and in harmony with all people.

THE PLUMB

The Plumb is a symbol of uprightness of conduct. By understanding the Plumb, a Mason is to judge his Brothers by their own standards and not those of someone else. When the Plumb line is thought of in this way, it becomes a symbol of an upright life and of the conscience by which each person must live. This idea is closely tied to the concept of Justice. For, in truth, Justice is giving another man his due.²

In Freemasonry, the plumb reminds masons to equally apply their own standards of justice and moral character to themselves and society. The tool is meant to prevent hypocrisy while encouraging Freemasons to engage society as a means of maintaining social order and moral conduct. Furthermore, the plumb admonishes all Freemasons at all stages of life to live a life in which any person will know “how he will act,

and what he will do, because he stoops to nothing mean or petty, a debt of a few cents is just as sure to be paid as one of a thousand dollars.”⁸ According to the plumb, a physician can practice justice through providing care equally to all who need it, distributing resources properly based on need, providing equal access to care, maximizing the benefits of available treatment, respecting the autonomy of patients, and limiting the waste of government funding and other medical resources.⁹

A just physician impacts not only patient care but the larger scale of social, political, and economic trends in society. Justice can be practiced through the physician-patient relationship and the physician’s commitment to fight for a patient’s access and affordability to medical care. Specifically, this activity is directly related to a physician’s professionalism, which includes maintaining the primacy of patient welfare, patient autonomy, and social justice.¹⁰ In this manner, the plumb reminds physicians to act with proper conduct within and outside the clinic, remembering that their calling is one that represents the central ideals of society and the pursuit of health and happiness. Physicians are held to a higher standard given the sacred nature of their work dealing with patients at their moment of weakness or at death’s door. Overall, the plumb reminds clinicians that their actions, standards, and ethics extend beyond the clinic into society and with their creator, with whom they will be held accountable for every decision.

DISCUSSION

As learned in the EA degree, the symbols of Freemasonry are meant to teach an EA the “importance of integrity and honor, reliance, self-control, trustworthiness, the realization that humans have a spiritual nature as well as a physical or animal nature, knowing how to love and be loved, and the importance of keeping confidences.”¹¹ Starting as an EA, the symbols teach the fundamental purpose, mission, and organization of the Freemason fraternity. The fellowcraft degree expands upon the ethical and moral aspects of Freemasonry, whereby masons fit themselves for their eternal home with their creator by continually refining and improving their character. Through the square, level, and plumb, masons are reminded how to conduct themselves and interact with others. The fellowcraft is constantly reminded through the working tools that upright conduct and character must be practiced diligently without ceasing or reservation. Furthermore, the tools serve as a warning of “how easy it is to misread the plan, and how we need a good light. We have only to seek, and we will find the light that we need. The light of a Master Mason is but darkness visible, that is, ignorance realized, for there is no greater darkness than ignorance not realized.”⁸

As in the fellowcraft degree, the transition from a medical student to a physician requires a greater appreciation and growth beyond technical and clinical skills toward embodying the character needed to maintain the physician-patient

relationship. In this process, the medical student is taught the application of the four principal components of medical ethics: autonomy, justice, beneficence, and nonmaleficence.⁹ Through the cauldron of medical training, the medical student is molded to fit the image of a physician tried and tested and willing to be tried again. In this manner, the working tools of a fellowcraft remind prospective doctors that their journey as a physician extends beyond their technical abilities to their values, moral character, and conduct. As Sir William Osler eloquently summarized:

The cultivated general practitioner. May this be the destiny of a large majority of you . . . You cannot reach any better position in a community; the family doctor is the man behind the gun, who does our effective work. That his life is hard and exacting; that he is underpaid and overworked; that he has but little time for study and less for recreation—these are the blows that may give finer temper to his steel, and bring out the nobler elements in his character.¹²

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