

Slaying Dragons: Pulling off the Hoodwink

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You cannot fight what you cannot see. That is the whole problem, and the whole point.



The Gym You Never Go To

Imagine you only went to the gym when you needed to be strong.

Not on a schedule. Not as a practice. Only when you were already outmatched, already under the car, already at the bottom of the crisis. How do you think that works?

It doesn't. And yet that is precisely the approach most of us take to the interior work, the cultivation of what Freemasonry has always called the *ashlar*. We wait until the crisis arrives to begin building the capacity to survive it. By then, it is far too late.

The Craft understood something that modern psychology has only recently begun to articulate in clinical language: that resilience is not a resource you draw on in hard moments, it is a *practice* you build in ordinary ones. Neurologically, this makes sense. The prefrontal cortex, the seat of executive function, emotional regulation, and deliberate response, is most trainable during low-arousal states (Arnsten, 2009). When the cortisol spikes, when the threat is real and present, the brain routes around it entirely. You respond from older, faster architecture. You respond from your shadow.

The regular Tuesday. **The unremarkable Wednesday.** The commute, the meeting, the argument that goes nowhere. These are the moments when the real work happens. Not the peak experiences. Not the grief or the triumph. **The mundane middle** is where you build the capacity that determines who you are when it matters.

hoodwink-is-actually-for">hoodwink-is-actually-for">hoodwink-is-actually-for">What the Hoodwink Is Actually For

In Masonic ritual, the candidate enters in a state of symbolic darkness. The hoodwink, the blindfold, is not a symbol of ignorance or punishment. It is a symbol of **the condition we already arrive in**. You were already in the dark before anyone put that cloth over your eyes. The ritual simply makes it honest.

The shadow, in Jungian terms, is exactly this: the part of your behavioral repertoire that has moved outside your visual field. Carl Jung described it as the unconscious repository of everything the ego has refused to acknowledge; not just the shameful or monstrous parts, but the whole catalog of responses, patterns, and drives that have been pushed below the waterline (Jung, 1963). It is the stuff moving beneath the surface that hasn't broken into something you can work with.

In Masonic terms, it is the rough parts of the stone you haven't yet found.

The shadow is not evil. It is not a character flaw. It is a survival mechanism that outlived its usefulness. Somewhere, at some point, a version of you encountered something they could not process. The reaction was entirely rational for the organism you were then: avoid the pain, seek relief, push the unbearable thing out of view. Any reasonable creature does the same. The problem is not that you did it. The problem is that the mechanism persisted long after the threat had passed, and it took your agency with it.

This is the foundational tragedy of the unexamined life: you are being driven by a response that was designed for a version of you that no longer exists.

How to Find It

The shadow, by its nature, resists detection. It does not announce itself. It is you, from the inside, which is exactly why you cannot see it without specific tools.

There are three reliable indicators.

The disproportionate reaction. You find yourself angrier than the situation warrants. More wounded than the offense justifies. More afraid than the evidence supports. That gap between stimulus and response is the shadow's signature. Psychologists call this an affective mismatch, and it is among the most reliable markers of unresolved material driving present behavior (Greenberg, 2002). When your reaction doesn't fit the room, something else is running the room.

The unfulfilled wish pushed to the margins. There are things you want, genuinely want, that never become concrete steps. They stay in the realm of *I wish* or *someday* or *I'm not the kind of person who*. That last phrase is particularly telling. It is not a description of reality; it is a description of your shadow's veto power. The wishes you refuse to act on are a map of the territory you've walled off.

The repeating pattern. Every time this kind of thing happens, you do that kind of thing, across years, across contexts, across relationships. The faces change; the structure does not. Repetition compulsion, as Freud originally described it and as trauma research has since elaborated, is one of the clearest signs that a response has become automatized, running from below the level of conscious choice (van der Kolk, 2014). You are not responding to the present. You are re-enacting the past.

The work begins not with solving these things, but with *noticing* them. You don't have to fix the overreaction today. You only have to find it. The moment you start looking is evidence enough that you have the capacity to face what you find. That ability to look is the light coming in; it is the hoodwink beginning to come off.

Why It Came From Where It Did

Before going further into the work of dismantling the shadow, it is worth spending a moment with the version of you who built it.

They were not weak. They were not broken. They were a person confronted by something they could not yet handle, and they did the only reasonable thing available to them: they put it somewhere safe and kept moving. The child who pushed down shame was surviving. The adolescent who learned to perform confidence instead of asking for help was solving a real problem with the tools at hand. The adult who learned to rage instead of grieve was protecting something genuinely worth protecting.

This matters because the work cannot be done with contempt. You cannot chisel a stone you hate. The **rough ashlar** does not become the **perfect ashlar** through punishment; it becomes it through patient, skilled, intentional labor applied with respect for the material. Jung was emphatic on this point: integration of the shadow requires not exorcism but *dialogue* (Jung, 1963). You are not trying to destroy this part of yourself. You are trying to meet it and bring it into the light where it can be seen for what it actually is.

And what it actually is, almost always, is a fear wearing the costume of a fact.

The Pronoun That Changes Everything

This is where the real work begins, and it is uncomfortable in a way that is hard to overstate.

When we are in the grip of the shadow, the language we use is almost always *projective*. He did this to me. She caused this. The system failed me. They made me this way. That **grammar**, where the causation always lives outside the self, is the shadow's native tongue. It keeps the shadow exactly where it wants to be: invisible, interior, and in charge.

The single most powerful intervention available is to change the pronoun.

Not as a performance of self-blame. Not as a form of punishment or false confession. But as an act of *reclamation*. When you shift from *he did this to me* to *I created this condition*, you are not accepting guilt; you are accepting agency. Agency is the only thing that gives you the power to change anything.

This is not a new insight. Internal locus of control, the degree to which you believe your behavior shapes your outcomes, is one of the most robust predictors of psychological wellbeing, resilience, and adaptive coping in the research literature (Rotter, 1966; Skinner, 1996). People who attribute causation internally, even in ambiguous situations, consistently demonstrate better mental health outcomes, greater persistence under difficulty, and higher rates of meaningful behavior change. The pronoun is not just semantics; it is the difference between being the object of your own life and being the subject.

This is also, not coincidentally, the heart of what Freemasonry asks of its members. The work is not out there. The work is here. You are the **rough ashlar**. The **lodge** is the context. The tools are the method. But the material is always, only, the self.

If the pronoun shift is too abrupt, if *I did this to myself* lands as self-attack rather than self-ownership, there is a gentler entry point. Begin with the imagined conversation. Speak to the person or the situation you have been blaming, not with accusation but with understanding. *I know why you do this. And here is how it has affected me.* That dialoguing process, moving from external target to internal experience, is the beginning of re-internalization; it is the first step back across the threshold from projected shadow to acknowledged self.

Name the Dragon

Once you have shifted the pronoun, you have arrived at the most important question. Not *what happened*, not *who caused it*, but *why did I create this? What am I afraid of?*

Naming the fear is the act that takes away its power.

The unnamed fear operates in the dark, which is, of course, exactly where the shadow lives. It can be anything: fear of consequences, fear of what it would mean about you if you were this kind of person, fear that your needs expressed honestly will drive away the people you need most, fear of the positive as much as the negative, fear of what it would require of you if the thing you want actually happened.

A named fear is a different creature entirely. Research on affect labeling, the practice of putting feelings into words, demonstrates that naming an emotional state measurably reduces its intensity, activating regulatory regions of the prefrontal cortex while dampening amygdala reactivity (Lieberman et al., 2007). The act of naming is not merely symbolic; it is neurological. You are literally changing the brain's processing of the thing by giving it a word.

I avoid this conversation because I am afraid that if I tell the truth, I will not be loved.

I rage at this because I am afraid that underneath the anger is grief I do not know how to carry.

I keep creating this situation because I am afraid that without the crisis, I don't know who I am.

Say it out loud. This is not metaphor; the vocalization matters. Speaking activates a different encoding pathway than thinking alone (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). The dragon you can only think about remains in your head, still in shadow. The dragon you say out loud becomes an object in **the world**, something outside you, something you can now look at. The hoodwink comes off in that moment.

The Tools

The Hoodwink is not just the beginning of the Masonic journey; it is the recurring symbol of this entire arc of work. We enter in darkness. We work toward light. We discover that the darkness was never external. It was always the blindfold we were wearing, and the blindfold was always made of our own avoidance.

The **rough ashlar** is the self before this work. Not bad. Not broken. Unfinished. Coarse and jagged in ways we cannot fully see because we are too close to our own surface. The ashlar does not become perfect by wishing; it becomes more perfect, always more perfect, never fully arrived, through the patient application of the right tools by a craftsman who respects the material.

The **gavel** breaks away only what no longer serves. Not the whole stone, not the parts that hurt when touched, only the excess. Shadow work is not self-destruction; it is precision removal of what has calcified around the fear. The **gavel** asks: *what habit, what story, what automatic response can come away now?*

The **plumb** asks a simpler question: *are you standing in the truth?* Not the truth that protects you. The truth that is actually true. The **plumb** does not grade on a curve.

The Work, Step by Step

Step one: Build in the mundane middle. Do not wait for a crisis to develop the capacity to face it. Choose one regular practice, a daily journaling habit, a weekly review, a moment of stillness before you react, and begin building your interior infrastructure now, in ordinary time, before you need it.

Step two: Find the disproportionate reaction. Think of a recent moment where your response was larger than the situation warranted. You don't have to solve it yet. Just find it, hold it, and look at it without judgment.

Step three: Trace the pattern. Ask yourself whether this has happened before, in a different context, with a different cast of characters, but with a structurally identical dynamic. The recurring theme is the map.

Step four: Shift the pronoun. Take the story you have been telling in the third person, *they did this, she caused that*, and rewrite it in the first person. *I created this condition. I participated in this outcome.* If this is too abrupt, begin with the imagined dialogue. Speak to the other party with understanding before assigning yourself causation.

Step five: Ask why. From the *I* perspective, ask the question underneath: why did I create this? What was I afraid of? What was I trying to avoid? What would it have cost me to respond differently?

Step six: Name the fear out loud. Not in your head. Out loud. Use the full sentence: *I did this because I am afraid of _____.* Say it once, then say it again, and notice what happens in your body when you do.

Step seven: Return to the work. The shadow does not die; it refines. You will find another iteration of this same fear in a different costume, in a different situation, a month or a year from now. That is not failure. The rough ashlar is never fully finished, which is the whole point of continuing to show up.

Closing

The dragon is not out there.

The people and situations you have named as enemies, as causes, as the reason you are the way you are, they are mirrors. They show you the shape of what you have not yet been willing to face.

The work of Freemasonry has always been, at its core, the work of bringing the self into the light; of removing the blindfold not once, ceremonially, but continuously, as a practice, as a commitment, as a way of life. The hoodwink comes off in **the lodge**. The real unveiling happens in the ordinary moments: the argument you chose to sit with instead of flee, the fear you said out loud instead of swallowed, the pronoun you changed from *they* to *I*.

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