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# Work Your Own Stone: Why Fixing Someone Else's Problem Is Usually About You

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## Work Your Own Stone: Why Fixing Someone Else's Problem Is Usually About You

by Brian Mattocks

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A friend calls. He's barely three sentences into the problem before something lights up in the back of your skull, quiet but insistent, like a pilot light catching. You know the answer. You can see the whole shape of the situation, the obvious move, the conversation he needs to have, the boundary he needs to set. And there is something that feels genuinely generous about having it ready.

That feeling is worth paying attention to, because it is doing a lot of work it never announces.

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### The Itch and What It's Actually Telling You

The urge to fix is so deeply ingrained that most of us have never seriously questioned whether it belongs to us or to the person we're trying to help. We were rewarded for solving. From childhood onward, problem-solving earned praise, belonging, a particular kind of worth. As Harriet Lerner observed in *The Dance of Anger* (Lerner, 1985), the caretaking role is often less about the other person's need than about managing one's own anxiety in relational systems, and most people who wear it have been wearing it long enough that it no longer feels like a costume.

So when a friend arrives in pain and you feel that itch to solve, the honest question is not "how do I help?" It is "whose discomfort am I actually trying to resolve?"

In *A Mason's Work*, Brian Mattocks frames this through the Workman's Rules, a set of nine operating principles for self-development that run through the book's symbolic architecture. The third rule is the one that cuts deepest here, and it is worth seeing in full:

> Work your own stone. Insight does not grant jurisdiction. Your work ends at your own borders.

The full list earns its place alongside that rule:

1. Use your Trowel: Prioritize cohesion over correction.
2. Don't Spread Salt: Unskillful or hurtful speech corrodes relationships.
3. Work your own stone: Insight does not grant jurisdiction. Your work ends at your own borders.
4. All work is stone work: All suffering contains the opportunity for development.
5. You'll work the same stone until you get it right: Avoidance is merely a delay.
6. Never judge your work relative to someone else's: Comparison is a distortion.
7. Never judge someone else's work relative to your own: Hierarchy is an error.
8. You can't work another man's stone, but you can lighten his load: Mentorship is load-bearing, not direction-giving.
9. Right tool, right place, right time: Restraint is as vital as technique.

Rule 3 is the one that first sounds like an argument for detachment. It isn't. But to see why, you have to hold it against Rule 8, and Rule 8 will not make sense until you genuinely believe that Rule 3 means what it says.

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## What the Rough Ashlar Actually Belongs To

The Rough Ashlar is the central operative symbol in Masonic self-development, the unfinished stone each man brings to the quarry of his own life. The whole point of the symbol is that the shaping matters as much as the shape. A stone dressed by someone else's hand is a finished object, not a completed apprenticeship.

This is not a metaphor that works only in the abstract. Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) demonstrates precisely this: the development of capacity requires that a person work through the resistance themselves. When someone else absorbs the difficulty, the learner gets the answer but misses the skill. They have an A on the test and no understanding of the mathematics.

When you take the chisel from someone struggling with their own stone, you are not helping them become a workman. You are producing a surface they didn't shape, and you are robbing the process of everything it was going to build. The struggle is not incidental to the work. It *is* the work.

There is also a longer-term relational cost. When you establish yourself as the person who solves, you establish the other person as the one who needs solving. Over time, the clinical literature on codependence describes what that arrangement produces, a loop in which your need to fix and their need to be fixed become mutually reinforcing, and neither party develops any genuine capacity for the problem in front of them (Beattie, 1986). The relationship becomes load-bearing in the wrong direction.

Even the lighter version does damage. You solve a problem, they bring the next one, and suddenly you are on the hook for all of it, with finite time, finite patience, and a relationship that has quietly restructured itself around your availability as a solution service.

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## The Ego That Learned a New Trick

Here is where the arc sharpens into something less comfortable.

Somewhere in the process of learning that you shouldn't just give people answers, most thoughtful people make a pivot. They start asking questions instead. They read about Socratic method. They learn to say "have you thought about just talking to them?" and lean back, feeling appropriately wise.

This is the part that deserves the most honest examination, because the ego that wants to be the hero does not retire simply because you have learned a better vocabulary for heroism.

What "have you thought about just talking to them?" almost always is, when you pull it apart, is the answer you already had, with a question mark pressed onto the end. You took your conclusion and reformatted it as an inquiry. The delivery changed. The underlying architecture did not.

This is what Rule 9 is pointing at: right tool, right place, right time. A question can be a tool misapplied just as easily as a piece of direct advice. The form is not the substance. And the test that Mattocks offers is blunt in its usefulness: before you ask a question, ask yourself whether you already know the answer you want them to arrive at. If the answer is yes, you are not opening a space; you are leading a witness. The courtroom metaphor holds. Leading questions are still leading, regardless of the inflection at the end.

Edgar Schein's work on process consultation (Schein, 1999) makes a parallel distinction between what he calls "pure inquiry," questions genuinely aimed at understanding the other person's experience, and questions that are actually diagnostic or prescriptive moves wearing the clothes of curiosity. Most people, Schein argues, default to the prescriptive before they have done nearly enough listening. The question arrives before the understanding does, because the goal was never really understanding.

The Worshipful Master's role is instructive here precisely because it is so often misread. The chair represents authority, and the temptation is to read authority as the license to direct. But the symbolic function of the Master in lodge is to open the work, to create the conditions under which the work can happen, not to perform the work on behalf of everyone present. An opening is not a prescription. It is a space. And a space requires that the person who creates it step back far enough to let someone else move freely inside it.

When the Trowel enters here, the distinction clarifies. The Trowel's function is to spread the cement of connection, to build the bond between two people doing their work in proximity. Meddling corrodes that bond because it introduces a hierarchy; it says, implicitly, that one person's judgment supersedes the other's process. Abiding builds the bond because it says, without any words, that the person struggling does not have to do it invisibly.

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## Three Things That Actually Help

If the fix is off the table and the Socratic-question-that-is-secretly-a-fix is also off the table, what remains?

Three things, and none of them are complicated, though all of them require the same discipline: keeping your own ego out of the room long enough for someone else to breathe.

The first is solidarity. Letting someone know they are not alone is not advice. It carries no directive content whatsoever. It is simply a statement of presence, and it does more weight-bearing than most people realize, because one of the heaviest parts of a hard thing is the feeling that no one else can see it.

The second is witnessing. Being present without agenda, without the slight forward lean of a person who already has the answer ready, is rarer than it sounds. Brené Brown's research on empathy (Brown, 2010) consistently shows that the felt experience of being heard, of being genuinely witnessed in a struggle, is itself a profound form of relief. It does not remove the problem. It removes the isolation around the problem, which is often what made the problem feel unmanageable.

The third is opening, done honestly. This means asking questions you do not already have answers to, and it means checking yourself before you ask. The self-examination that Rule 8 demands here is not performative. You are actually trying to find out whether the question serves the other person's process or your own need to be useful. If it serves yours, the most skillful move is usually to return to the first two.

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## The Work, Step by Step

1. Catch the itch before you scratch it. The next time someone brings you a problem, notice the exact moment the solving impulse arrives. You don't need to act on it or suppress it; just notice it, and notice how early it shows up.
2. Ask whose discomfort is driving. Before you speak, locate where the urgency is coming from. Is it genuine concern for them, or is it the discomfort of sitting with their pain without being able to make it go away? Both can be present. Knowing which is louder changes what you do next.
3. Say the first thing clearly. "I'm here with you. You don't have to do this alone." No advice, no reframing, no silver lining. Just presence stated plainly. Practice this until it feels like a complete act rather than a placeholder before the real help starts.
4. Be a witness before you are a guide. Let them describe the full shape of what they're carrying before you say anything that moves toward resolution. Witness the weight. Name what you see, not what you think they should do with it.
5. Run the question test before opening. When you feel ready to ask a question, pause and ask it of yourself first: do I already know what I want them to say? If yes, you are leading. Set that question aside and find one you are genuinely curious about.
6. Notice when your questions carry answers. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" is a judgment dressed as an inquiry. "Have you thought about talking to them?" is an answer dressed as a question. Learn to recognize the grammatical costume.
7. Let the joy be theirs. When someone works through a hard thing and arrives at their own resolution, resist the temptation to retroactively install yourself in that process. The celebration belongs to the person who did the work. Your satisfaction is in having protected the space where it happened.

## What the Trowel Is For

The Workman's Rules are not a framework for standing apart from people. They are a framework for standing with them more honestly.

Working your own stone does not mean refusing to care. It means caring in a way that does not require the other person to be helpless in order for you to feel needed. The Trowel's function has always been to build connection, and connection that depends on one person's perpetual competence and another person's perpetual struggle is not actually connection. It is a particular kind of dependency that flatters the solver and diminishes the person being solved.

The genuine warmth in Rule 3 is this: when you trust that another person is capable of working their own stone, you are offering them something far more durable than an answer. You are offering them your confidence in their own capacity, and you are choosing to sit alongside them in the quarry rather than position yourself above it.

The lodge worth belonging to is not the one where someone has all the answers. It is the one where no one has to face their work alone, and where the work itself is still, always, theirs to do.

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Mattocks, B. (2024). *A Mason's Work: A Speculative Mason's Workbook*. A Mason's Work Press. The source for the Workman's Rules and the symbolic frameworks of the Rough Ashlar, Trowel, and Worshipful Master's Chair used throughout this article.

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## Related Podcast Episodes

- [Work Your Own Stone, Part 1: The Itch to Fix \(link\)](#)
- [Work Your Own Stone, Part 2: Where the Fix-It Impulse Comes From \(link\)](#)
- [Work Your Own Stone, Part 3: Abiding, and What That Actually Means \(link\)](#)
- [Work Your Own Stone, Part 4: The Socratic Question as Disguised Advice \(link\)](#)
- [Work Your Own Stone, Part 5: What the Joy Looks Like When You Get This Right \(link\)](#)

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