

“Square, Level, and Plumb . . . Plumb, Square, and Level”:
the Order and Meaning of the Working Tools

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Order is important. We do not put on our shoes before our socks. Order is not just important in the way we act, but also in the way we speak and use words. “The king bit the dog” and “The dog bit the king” mean two, very different things. Describing the United States flag’s colors as “white, red, and blue,” although correct, seems a little odd. It stands to reason, then, that I was surprised when, as a Fellow Craft, I heard the working tools mentioned as the “Plumb, Square, and Level.”

I first heard these tools mentioned as the Immoveable Jewels given in the order “Square, Level, and Plumb,” worn by “The Worshipful Master, Senior and Junior Wardens.” The order in the EA Lecture is a descending one, from the highest to the lowest of the Principal Officers. It struck me that the FC Working Tools were “out of order”; in other words, that they were in an unusual order, given the order of the EA Lecture.

Englishman William Preston wrote a series of lectures on the degrees in the late 1700s which Thomas Smith Webb revised and rewrote for American use in the early 1800s. Almost all Grand Lodges in the United States work a ritual derived from Preston and Webb’s work. When Preston and Webb put together the rituals, they put things together just so, often with the big picture in mind, in the sure hope that if they worked straight and square, the wisdom of the GAOTU imparted to them might be reflected in their Work. In the Preston-Webb rituals, even the littlest details, like order, are deliberate.

So, I thought, why this order for the Fellow Craft working tools? One possible interpretation involves the life cycle. The Plumb represents youth and generation: it is like the seedling shooting out of the ground, or the baby who has pulled himself up for the first time. The Square is linked to our actions, which should be square, and corresponds to the FC degree, which is so closely aligned with effort, work, and learning, all active pursuits. Finally, the Level is the horizontal tool, which is also our orientation in death. As Freemasons, we, of course, believe we do not stay dead levels, but will be raised to living perpendiculars, bringing the cycle truly full circle.

On the other hand, this order indicates which of the virtues shown by these tools is hardest to gain. First we conduct ourselves uprightly; this is easiest, as all we have to do is focus on ourselves. Our prejudices and others’ actions do not directly factor into our upright conduct. The next step, which is harder, is to act with all others upon the square and we must work against our prejudices and despite others unsquare work to accomplish this. Finally, the hardest, and therefore last virtue, is equality. We must recognize the difficulty of practicing true equality —of meeting on the level— and urge ourselves, our Brother Masons, and all humanity to walk uprightly, act on the square, and meet on the level.

The Fellow Craft is the most often neglected degree: the initiatory nature of the Entered Apprentice degree and the dramatic and mystic teachings of the Master Mason are more spectacular. But we are all Fellow Crafts in a sense: we have left youth, and hopefully it will be long before we must be leveled by the setting maul, laid into our coffins, with the sweet-smelling acacia at the heads of our graves. Let us all think more about this profound and important Degree.