

**Knight of the East and West**  
**17<sup>th</sup> Degree**  
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Much like the candidate in this degree, "wandering," that is exactly what I feel like I've been doing as I approached my response to the questions in this degree's syllabus. I've struggled with the questions, not satisfied with my own answers, had a computer crash and lost a part of what I had originally written and so on. If someone were to check the record, I've probably kept this assignment longer than any other before responding so many times I had the answers before the questions were asked. I've truly been "wandering" on this assignment, but alas, I've finally been able to capture my thoughts in words.

The question I've elected to respond to is the last one concerning how knowledge creates a change in the individual and how we cannot acquire knowledge and remain the same person we were, that some form of transformation must occur. The question posed is to write an anecdotal essay on how I've given up some deeply-held idea because of how my knowledge was further developed.

This is where I struggled, having selected this question for myself. You see, I could have selected one of the other questions and much more easily (and timely) researched something like the colors of the rainbow and how they relate to the degree or one of those kinds of questions, but I opted to look at myself, again, as I've come to do frequently. That alone is an indication that I have changed as my desire to know about myself as opposed to simply answering a question and filling a square to move to the next assignment is a "change" that I recognize in myself, a piece of the overall ongoing transformation, if you will.

I know, for fact, that I am not the same young kid that left home some 26 years ago to join the Air Force. I grew up in a very small town where people worked in the factory and lived pretty meager lives, frankly, and I wanted to see more of the world and to know more than that. Why? It was probably seeds planted in me by teachers and adults who perhaps unknowingly had been mentoring me my entire life.

Growing up, certainly I was given a set of values by my parents, by the community I lived in, the church I attended and so on. Do I have the same set of values today? I would be a liar if I said I did. I know they have developed over the years. From knowledge gained as well as from simply having an open mind and approach to learning.

It is, however, difficult for me to point back to "an" event, a singular event that caused me to give up my deeply held ideas. That would fall under the heading of an epiphany, and that's not what I've experienced in my life, nor what I will describe. On the contrary, just as knowledge is gained gradually, although sometimes exponentially as one realization helps lead to another, my values and deeply held ideas have evolved gradually as well and I have not taught my daughters exactly the same things that I was taught.

My own experience with epiphany moments have come when problem solving, but not about myself and my beliefs or values.

As already alluded to, I'm like everyone else and growing up, "absorbed" the values of those around me, to include a real good chance that I'm a Christian simply by being born into a Christian family. Had I been born a Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Jew, it is likely that I would be of that faith and subscribe to a set of values compatible with those beliefs. Not only my religious

beliefs, but my moral values come from my family, as well as from the community I grew up in and from those who I conversed with.

For example, my parents were divorced when I was about 6 years old. I grew up in a somewhat dysfunctional family you could say, and my step-father was probably not the best role model I could have hoped for. My father, who is a very good man, did not spend much time with me or my brother and sister because, primarily, he lived in another state but also because he had been told by my mother that we (kids) did not want anything to do with him. Unfortunately, we did not get to have much exposure to him.

I was fortunate though because I actually had good male role models during my younger years. I played Little League baseball and bonded with my teammates. I went on to also run track in the junior high years, and to letter in baseball (twice) and football (thrice), also elected to be the Captain of the football team my senior year. I know these experiences were good for me and helped mold me to be what I am today.

On the contrary, my older brother was not nearly as interested in sports and wandered aimlessly considerably more and got off course considerably further and more frequently than I did, if you know what I mean (think late 70s). But, through his own set of experiences, he has turned out to be a respectable and solid citizen as well, I believe. His road has been, however, much bumpier than the road I took up to this junction at least.

In addition to having had several good coaches who perhaps unknowingly became role models for me, I also had several good teachers in those early years, both male and female. And both were formally teaching me as well as informally. Formally, certainly I mean the teachers in the school setting. But informally, I know there were adults who cared about me and talked with me. I know I owe them a lot of gratitude. For instance, one of my girlfriends' mother used to sit for HOURS and talk with me. I talked with her more than I did my girlfriend! But she was teaching me things whether intentional or not, I do not know. I do know that I learned. I also learned by observation of this very same family how family life really should be, as opposed to how I was growing up. And I have given that family, which is like family to me, credit for the stable life my own nuclear family lives today not how I grew up but how I saw this family interacting that I have used as my own standard as the head of the house.

And these were my very early (up through high school) years of acquiring knowledge. Very gradual and not even certain that it was soaking in or not. But even beyond this, which somehow compiled to give me the urge to do something better with my life than work in a factory and simply live to drink beer on the weekends and so on, my learning never stopped. I enlisted in the Air Force and again acquired knowledge. The military lifestyle was totally foreign to me. Basic training was a shock to me but it was also good for me! People cannot go through basic training without learning about themselves! It was easier than I expected, frankly, and gave me the courage to go on and do more. Within a year, I was a Cadet at the USAF Academy and went through a second basic training. Four years later, graduated with a considerable amount of new knowledge under my belt not knowledge gained from books as well as from invaluable experiences. And those new experiences kept coming and I went on and got a Masters degree as well.

I was already, in a few short years, no longer the same kid that grew up in that small Indiana town. My values were already evolving and had evolved such that even when I went home for holidays, that I was not as comfortable around my old friends as I once was and suspect they were probably not as comfortable as well. My values were not the same as theirs and they could tell it as well as I could. It was not because I was any smarter than them or

anything of the sort, yet the knowledge I had gained from my education as well as my extensive experiences that you just don't get in that environment had literally changed me, over time. I simply saw things through a different lens.

And it continued to change me over the course of my career in the Air Force. Include in this same time frame my Masonic experience (I became a Master Mason while a Cadet at the Academy and joined the Scottish Rite and Shrine while a junior officer stationed at Altus, Oklahoma), and you can see that my beliefs would certainly not be the same ones that I had when I was a kid.

Again, it was nothing that would be categorized as an epiphany, but gradual. Some people are blessed with those sort of "Eureka" moments and some people have to wander in the desert to finally arrive at where they are.

Is one way better than another? No. Each of us, I've learned, has to travel our own paths and learn and grow at our own pace.

For example, I used to wonder why Masonry had such an "odd" restriction on not asking "good men" to join but rather has imposed on us to wait for them to ask us to join. I used to think that was about the most silly thing going about Masonry. I've since learned that not only are there more silly things (!) but that this one really makes a great deal of sense. I liken it to advice. We all know the worst advice is the advice that wasn't asked for. If someone asks for advice, they will usually listen to it. If you give it to them without them asking for it, you cannot be nearly as certain of how it will be received. The same goes for Masonry and what a newly made brother might get out of it - more if he wants it. I believe I'm witnessing that very thing in the Blue Lodge right now - two men petitioned at the same time; one just sort of did it because the other one was doing it and you can tell who's actually getting more from the degree work.

Likewise, if you're ready for that epiphany, it's more likely to happen. If not, you'll have to work harder to gain the same knowledge and grow. We're ALL growing like this. If we're not learning and changing, then like a tree that no longer changes (as it grows), we're essentially dead. I'm still very much alive and learning and still changing. That realization alone is not something I believed as a younger man. I used to live in a very "black and white" world where I distinguished right and wrong very strictly, but with my growth, I've come to have a much more open mind and approach. I now recognize and deal with a lot more gray matters, but still know a spade when I see one.