

Masonic Education: A Subject Too Often Overlooked

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Conrad Hahn, a most distinguished Mason, once observed, "The lack of educational work in the average lodge is the principal reason for the lack of interest and the consequent poor attendance in Masonry over which spokesmen have been wringing their hands for at least a century".

This quote stirs one to think about the importance and value of Masonic education within the Masonic Fraternity. It should further stir us to think about why this important aspect of Freemasonry has been so badly overlooked. We must not kid ourselves into thinking that Masonic education is playing the prominent part in Freemasonry that by right it should.

This leads to the all-important question, "Why has this situation come about?" The real problem in trying to answer this question is that there is no easy answer. We, as a Fraternity, have reached the point where far too few of our members have even the faintest idea of why they are Freemasons, let alone, have any real knowledge about our history and heritage.

To those of you who are "ritual purists" please do not let my next statement shock you. But the real truth of the matter is — we have come to depend on the ritual as the basis for Masonic knowledge. The ritual does not make Masons. It only makes members! We cheat, wrong and defraud any candidate who is left hanging at the end of the 3rd Degree, having heard a lot of words and really not knowing what they mean. Until the Degrees are explained to the candidate, he has no idea of what he has gone through. To suggest

that the explanation is complete with the lectures of each Degree is again burying our head in "Masonic Sand."

Let me stress — no one loves the ritual more than I do. The ritual has an important place in the life of the person who is becoming a Mason. But that place is not the "throne from on high" from which there is no more to learn. In my opinion, it is far easier to memorize and recite the ritual than it is to study the history and meaning of Freemasonry. So, we tend to be far more comfortable in working the Degrees than in working with the candidate to teach him what our beautiful craft is all about.

Has this always been so? The answer, of course, is no. But we have drifted so far away from true knowledge within our Fraternity that now it is very difficult to try to turn the tide. But we are going to have to do that very thing!

What are in fact the origins of Freemasonry? Where did it begin? How did it reach the present state in which we find it today? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could answer these questions in ten words or less? We can not. We can only surmise what in fact may have happened. Historically, of course, Freemasonry did not begin with the forming of a Grand Lodge in London in 1717. Quite obviously, there had to have been Lodges to be formed at that time. So, they must have had some history prior to that date. When did it all begin? We simply don't know.

One thing has always bothered me with the explanation we are usually given. That is: Why did the ancient Guilds of Cathedral builders need such an elaborate method of recognition? Why would they have needed signs and words, if in fact our early origins were with tradesmen plying their skill in building cathedrals? That they would wish to keep secret the method by which they constructed a building might perhaps be possible. But they were out in the open, visible to anyone who wished to come near the building and certainly not in any danger from an outside enemy. So why would they need to have methods of recognition that would not have been known to the casual observer?

This question has always intrigued me. Please let me tell you right now, I do not know the answer. One of the better theories that I have read concerning this matter is in a book by John Robinson entitled, *Born in Blood*. John Robinson will be your guest lecturer later this year. He has much to offer and I hope you will make every effort to attend and hear this very fine man present his theories on the origins of Freemasonry.

Let me just say briefly that his theory is that Freemasonry very likely began with the suppression of the Knights Templar in the year 1307. At that time the Templars were crushed in France, but by the delay of the King in enforcing the edict in England and Scotland many escaped. It is Mr. Robinson's theory that they went underground and had to devise a method of recognition enabling them to travel safely and to establish safe houses where they would have an opportunity to rest and refresh themselves. It also gave them the ability to recognize each other as members of the order! While the suppression of the Knights Templar may or may not have anything to with early Freemasonry, it certainly makes more sense to me that secret signs and words in this type of environment were far more necessary than with the simple workman plying his trade in building a cathedral.

Just one more thought from this particular theory. The suppression of the Knights Templar occurred on October 13, 1307. The particular day of the week was a Friday and ever since that event Friday the 13th has been considered to be the unluckiest day of the year.

Now, the suppression of the Templars was crude and bloody but it was not an unusual event in those times. War, pillage, and confiscation of property were a way of life. There were other orders in existence who had their troubles as well. What was there about the Knights Templar that made them known and recognized and respected? Why do I say respected? Because there wasn't any rejoicing at their suppression. Instead the day is remembered as unlucky! The only conclusion that I can reach is that this order held the respect of the people and their destruction brought about the omen of bad luck.

Why were they so respected? Obviously, there is no absolute answer to that question, but one could surmise that if they were indeed practicing the principles of Freemasonry they would certainly have had the respect of the people!

My conclusion is that Freemasonry has existed for a very long time. Not perhaps as we know it today, but as an order of men doing good work where they were permitted to exist.

This observation is not to be taken in the context of the claims of many Masonic writers, such as: Masonry goes back to the times of Solomon or even Noah and the flood. In Masonic writing we must be very careful when making claims like this. Many times, ancient symbols, which have in more recent times been co-opted by Freemasonry, are mistaken as evidence of early Masonic existence.

Let me give you one example. The All-Seeing Eye on the one dollar bill is certainly well known in Masonic circles and, unfortunately, has mistakenly been interpreted as a Masonic symbol. It is in fact an ancient symbol which was taken into Freemasonry in far more recent times.

This lack of understanding of ancient signs and symbols has, in my judgment, misled many Masonic historians into false conclusions. The study of history, particularly, where the written word was not used requires a well-trained person when interpreting its meaning. That is why we need to do a far better job of interpreting early Masonic history than we have done in the past. If Masonic history began in earlier times than we normally talk about, it is obviously going to make a reconstruction of our past difficult because we have very few written records to go by. Remember these were times when few people could read or write. So, we don't have minutes of early Lodge meetings available. Also remember, if their very lives were at stake, that was another strong inducement not to put very much information into written form!

The purpose of my tracing this obscure part of our history is simply to say to you that I very strongly believe that there was a far more significant purpose to the origins of Freemasonry than simply erecting buildings! I do believe that Freemasonry evolved into that stage, during its development, but the Cathedral builders reflected a time in our history and not its beginning!

Let me carry this thinking one step further and bring it into the late 1700's. Benjamin Franklin and Voltaire did not join a workers guild! They joined what they believed to be an educational society which was called, "Freemasonry." These were extremely intelligent men who had no time to waste on things that were not important to them, and yet Franklin was an active Freemason and Voltaire joined only shortly before his death! What was it that they saw in Freemasonry that eludes us today?

Well let's focus our thoughts more on modern Freemasonry and see what we can determine. It has been said that Freemasonry in Europe was for the elite and in America for the masses. With the great numbers of members that we have attracted over the years, there seems to be a certain amount of truth in that statement. Today we tend to overlook the fact that even though our numbers are dwindling we still have in excess of two and one-half million Freemasons in the United States alone.

It would seem that when Freemasonry caught fire it did so in massive numbers. In the 1920's we reached over three million in membership. In the 1950's and early 60's, it was four million; and we have been on a decline ever since. But, if we look at the membership in the 1700's, when by any standard of measurement Freemasonry was certainly at its most influential peak, there were not very many Freemasons! Lodges were small, intimate and every Brother knew every other Brother.

With larger numbers, perhaps also, came the seeds of our own downfall. It is very difficult to have personal knowledge of each Brother when our numbers are so large. One of the most frequent complaints we hear in Freemasonry is a Brother saying that "I was in the

hospital and no one came to see me." The chances are no one even knew he was in the hospital!

We also have an extremely mobile population. It is no exaggeration to say that somewhere in the 30% range of the members of each Grand Lodge live somewhere else, other than the Jurisdiction in which they were raised. How do you keep a personal relationship with a Brother when you don't even know where he is?

It would seem to me that one of the greatest mistakes we have made in Freemasonry is to try to run it as we did in the 1700's. You can't run an organization with a few thousand members the same way as you do one with millions of members. It just can't be done!

We did not develop, through Masonic education, the training programs, the communication, the leadership that was necessary to deal with these vast numbers. When we talk about the "old days" when all of the leading men of the town were in Freemasonry we overlook the fact that the town was very small and everybody knew everyone else. Now we have vast cities where people don't know everyone else. Yet we still think of Masonry in terms of those earlier times. It's impossible not to conclude that we simply have to do a much better job of communicating with and educating our membership!

It is no secret that we have thousands upon thousands of books on Masonry and for the most part the one thing they have in common is that they are unread. We have to find a way of developing material that will be used in the Masonic community. Realistically we have to get right down to the Blue Lodge Level and insist that every Lodge must offer a course in Masonic education.

If they don't have the resources within the Lodge to provide that education then it must be done either by another Lodge or at the district level. We can no longer turn out members who do not know anything about our Fraternity.

The price we are paying for that mistake is clearly evident today! Programs can be developed but it does require commitment on the part of the Grand Lodge — but, more importantly, commitment on the part of knowledgeable Masons within each Lodge who will actively accept the responsibility to see that all Masons are taught about the Fraternity. Certainly, Grand Lodges can be of tremendous help in developing a program common to all Lodges within their Jurisdiction — a program that would be at least enough to whet the appetite of the recipient so that he would want to do more on his own — but one that would teach him basic Masonic information!

During a recent study by the Masonic Renewal Task Force one of the issues that kept repeating itself over and over again was the lack of interest by our present members.

The membership of Freemasonry can really be divided into three groups. If you will, imagine three side by side circles or, as I call them, a snowman lying down, the largest circle being the base which is the greatest percentage of our membership and largely inactive, a smaller circle in the middle which would be the body with a somewhat active membership; and the tiniest circle of all, the head, with the smallest group of Masons and the most active.

It is with the large, inactive base that our attention should be directed. The deaths occurring are roughly the same in number as the new members being brought in, so one offsets the other. Where we are losing our members is in the two categories of non-payment of dues and demits. Surveys have shown that of this very large base of membership, when asked why they pay their dues, 33% responded "to maintain membership" and 15% didn't even know why! These are the ones who, through lack of interest, are now leaving Freemasonry. This group I believe represents the residue of the "aura of Freemasonry" that used to say to a man "You Should Belong." Many joined believing this. Now we have a group of men who never quite knew why they joined and over the years have never found out why, have reached that point where, either through lack of interest, or cutting back financially have no incentive to remain in Masonry. They

have been around for years and have never been active and now see no need to stay a member. We are losing that group. We are not replacing them and unless and until we can find a way to communicate intelligently with them and show them a reason why being a Freemason is important, they will continue to drift away. It is inevitable!

But the good news is we can do something about this situation! We can do something about lack of interest and that my Brothers is the challenge facing Freemasonry today! At the very least inactive members should be invited to attend the instructional classes for new members that we have already talked about.

Let me not present Freemasonry as all doom and gloom. It most certainly is not. We have a tremendous amount of good work going for us. Let me share with you some words from our May 1991, Short Talk Bulletin entitled, "And the Greatest of These Is Charity." This quote is from that Short Talk Bulletin which was written by S. Brent Morris, a well-known Masonic author:

"A study of Masonic Charities is a study of the evolving needs of the American society. When food and shelter were immediate and almost daily concerns, Masons responded with firewood and the fruits of their harvests. When care of the aged, widows, and orphans were worries, Masons erected retirement homes and orphanages. When education was needed, Masons built schools, and when these basic needs moved ever farther from common experience, Masons turned their philanthropy to crippled children, burn victims, the speech and language impaired, cancer patients, and others."

It is very clear that when Masons are challenged, they will respond! These are visible challenges of people needing help. Now we must accept the invisible challenge of Masons needing greater understanding of the history and purposes of the Craft!

Perhaps Freemasonry could never be more graphically described than in another quote from a Short Talk Bulletin. This one is entitled, "Ellis Island - The Golden Door" and was written by a man who is not a Mason, Mr. Dennis Hearn. Mr. Hearn worked very closely with members of the Grand Lodge of New York and did a great deal of research into the history of Freemasonry as the Ellis Island project developed. His association with Masons led him to this conclusion:

"The Freemasons among our Founding Fathers brought to their work the ancient Masonic Landmarks of Truth and Brotherly Love, and they fashioned a constitution which, by the depth and strength of its conviction, embedded those principles in the conscience of a nation. While we as a people have not always lived up to them, neither have we been able to ignore them."

Those are very beautiful words to describe Freemasonry. Isn't it time we reintroduced ourselves to the meaning of Freemasonry and got back to living and practicing this beautifully descriptive picture of our order?!