

The Urgency of Masonic Education

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Virginia Research Lodge

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I have been involved in Masonic Education for nearly forty years. I have had a good impression of Freemasonry since I was nine years old, but that's another story.

As a young man in industry, I decided that the time had come for me to join a Masonic Lodge. My grandfather had been a member of the Maccabees when it was in its glory. My father belonged to the Odd Fellows, and I had an uncle who was in the Eagles. But none of my family had ever been Masons, and that was my desire.

I read everything that I could find in our public library on Masonry. The more I read about it the stronger my desire became. When I met one I knew to be a member, I asked about it. Soon I got the feeling that I was prying and I had better just let it go. How men became members I did not know. So for a number of years I just put it on the back burner. Still I continued to read about it.

I ever received a hate book in the mail from a post office box in Louisiana. I could not find out from the post office who had that box nor was the author's name on the book. I read it carefully, and from what I had read previously I came to my own conclusion that it was probably written by someone who had either been black balled or had been expelled.

One evening, while reading the newspaper, I saw a picture of a man wearing a Masonic apron. He had been installed as Master of Sebring Lodge and, believe it or not, he worked in our sales division. The next morning I went into his office and express a desire to join

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that Lodge. He told me it was expensive. I said I was not concerned about the cost, just tell me how I could join. At 29 years of age I got a petition. It was accepted, and I became a Master Mason in five weeks.

From my previous reading I knew the Master Mason degree was very old. I asked the Worshipful Master where the degree came from. He did not know. All he knew were the words of the ritual. This surprised me. He told me to ask some of the Past Masters. I asked several without result. Then one of them suggested that I ask our District Deputy Grand Master. It was some time before I could find him to ask him the question. What I received was an offhand answer. That made me believe he didn't know either. It seemed that no one knew or ever had any idea of where the degree came from. Most of those I asked didn't seem to care.

Because of my proficiency with the three degree exams, I was appointed a Steward, and I became an instant ritualist. This was a challenge, and occupied my spare time until I served as Master in 1948.

About this time I became a student of the Grand Chapter, Royal Arch Masonry, school on Freemasonry. It took ten nights, three hours a night, once a month. I now had a background of Freemasonry, and I now knew where I could buy good Masonic books. Several local Brothers, knowing of my search for information, gave me old sets of Mackey's they didn't want to throw away.

I was now speaking at Royal Arch Chapters on Royal Arch Masonry with mixed feelings. I realized that it was the Symbolic Lodge candidates and members that should be informed about the basics of Freemasonry. I also recognized the fact that as Master I too had only known the ritual. Now I realized that the purpose of the degrees was to change a Mister to a Brother. If we failed to inform him of what the ritual means and about the background of Freemasonry, he will only become, like many ahead of him, just a Lodge member. I often think that most Masons do not even know the purpose of Freemasonry.

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I went back to Lodge and started a Masonic Study Club. It lasted some six years, and the core group of about twenty Brethren had a lot of fun with it. It created a new spirit in our Lodge. Many of these Brethren had now grown Masonically. New interest was created. Masonry to them now had some real meaning. It was no longer just an organization that met twice a month. Now they read books, wrote some interesting papers, gave some talks in our Lodge, and in some of the local Lodges.

May I ask, what about your Symbolic Lodge? Is it one that has a reasonably good attendance? Does it ever have an interesting Masonic program during its Stated Communications? Do your members attend because of the business and ritual, or because of the Masonic programs?

We established a Masonic program at each Stated Meeting. Within six months the attendance was up 12%. Think with me for a moment. Who brings in the new petitions? Certainly not us old men! But rather the new men who have only been members, one, two, or even three years. And if you are failing to teach them about the Craft, and they only know about the ritual, and sometimes that ritual is not as good as it should be, how many petitions do you expect them to bring to your Lodge?

We have been losing members and attendance in most Lodges for several years. My topic this morning is "The Urgency of Masonic Education." I would remind you that the sands of time wait for no man, nor do they wait for Freemasonry. If we would strengthen Freemasonry, there are many things that must be done — now — if we want our grandsons to have the opportunity to become Master Masons.

Goals must be established. Ideas and thoughts must be exchanged, and faithful efforts made to reach those goals. It makes no difference whether we are a Symbolic Lodge or a Research Lodge, we must move forward or die. The task requires many of us working together to succeed. It is our responsibility now to strengthen the Craft that has been handed down to us by thousands of Brethren who came before us.

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It is now our turn to keep Freemasonry a force for good, right here in Virginia, yes, here in America, also. Remember, we need a continuity of goals and productive efforts to reach those goals. It must be the number one priority for each of us.

The Grand Master of Masons of Prince Edward Island in 1992, Most Worshipful Eldon C. Wright, in his Annual Address to his Grand Lodge, speaking on the need for renewed growth and development of Masonic education said: "We must not be satisfied with ritual work, even if it is letter-perfect. Masonic knowledge is something much more deep and meaningful. Our symbols must be explained, applied to present day conditions, exemplified and integrated into the life of each and every Brother."

All over America today we find Masonic education becoming more important in the Grand Lodges. At least one Grand Lodge has eliminated nearly all of its candidate's memory-work, and made a program of Masonic education and instruction mandatory for all candidates. It is urgent that all of us work toward this end. All new Master Masons must be able to talk to families and friends without the fear of disclosing secrets. I suggest for comparison that if Masonry was the size of a bam that the secrets would be no larger than a golf ball. It is for us to alert our members of this so they too can discuss Masonry without the fear of exceeding proper bounds.

From experience we know that you can get the Brethren involved, more or less, depending on how much they know and understand about Masonry. It has been said that we need more Masonry in men, and not just more men in Masonry. This requires regular instruction and the need to make the principles of Freemasonry a positive guide to a better way of life.

But why do I tell this to a Research Lodge? Because you hold the key! It is you who can make the difference. Right here in Virginia. It is you with your knowledge and ability that can produce dozens upon dozens of interesting, short Masonic programs for your 351 (or so) Lodges. Articles, papers, Masonic plays, audio tapes, slides, video tapes

of special Masonic events. It is you who can be a source of interesting Masonic books and pamphlets, now, as you travel to the Lodges. Not something the Brethren have to order through the mail. It is you who can help make Masonic meetings interesting enough for members to want to attend Lodge.

I challenge you to put it all together for your Lodges here in the Commonwealth of Virginia, so that they and you can be the best . . .

Sometimes, it seems that no matter what, we fail to make a dent in our problems. I would suggest you adopt the motto I have used for years: **I cannot afford the luxury of discouragement!**

Now, I will close with this poem, the author of which is unknown. I copied it some years ago from a Grand Lodge Proceeding. Perhaps it tells each of us our duty. It is titled, **Stay in the Fight:**

You have heard of that house by the side of the road,
Where that whimsical man lives alone;
He says he prefers his humble abode
To a place of granite and stone.

Because, as he says, and his logic is good,
I save many men who would die;
I encourage and help like a true brother should,
As the races of men go by.

This man has his ideals — his love is sincere.
He helps all he can, we will say;
But what of the brothers who fail to appear —
Who have fallen a mile up the way?

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And what of the souls in the great Caravan,
Who moan 'neath their sorrow and load,
Yet, their moans are not heard by this kindly old man
In his house by the side of the road.

No man can be useful and true,
If he waits for a brother to fall;
No man can complete all the work he should do,
If he just sits around and waits for a call.

So, give me a man who is mixed in the fight,
And always about in the fray —
Three cheers for the man with his help and his light,
Who goes more than a mile up the way!

God give me the men who will stay in the strife,
Who will help with the burden and load —
It's better than selfishly living a life,
In a house by the side of the road.

Copied from the *Proceedings* of the Grand Lodge A.F. & A.M. of Prince Edward Island.

(Original) Editor's Note: The Master, Harlan E. Phelps, requested Brother Scofield to relate, briefly what he had told Babcock Lodge the previous evening. What follows is this editor's interpretation of what he said:

My interest in Freemasonry began when I was nine years old. I was living with an uncle who was a workaholic who had no time to play or do the little things children need. But a neighbor did. If we needed a squeaky wheel oiled, Charlie'd oil it. If we needed someone to play left field, he'd play it. Then he died. As my friends and I sat on steps across from

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his home, we saw many men, wearing something funny in front of them, walk down the street and into Charlie's home. When I told them at home about this, they said that must have been the Masons — Charlie was a Mason. Imagine, if you will, the impression that made on the mind of a nine-year-old.

While in high school, I invited my girl to a school dance. She accepted. I wanted her to look real good, so through the snow and ice I walked to the florist's shop over a mile away. I didn't have much money (none of us did — it was during the depression). The florist asked how much I could spend. I told him 20 cents. He told me to wait, and while he was in the back I looked around. On his wall was a plaque with a Square and Compasses. He returned with the finest corsage you ever saw — and all for 20 cents! He was a Mason!

Some of us went around cutting dead trees so we would have fuel for heat. A fellow saw us unloading this wood through the basement window. He asked what we were doing. We told him it was for heat. He said it wouldn't last long, but he had a load of coal arriving in a couple of days. He'd see that we had some. We told him we didn't have any money. He said he hadn't asked for any. On his lapel he wore a Masonic pin! He was a Mason.

My wife and I used to go camping in the wilds of Ontario, Canada. One day, after it had rained for three days, my wife strongly suggested we go into town (about 62 miles away over a gravel, bumpy road). We stopped for gas close by, where we had many times. The owner asked us where we were going. I told him. He asked us to do him a favor. We said we would. A few minutes later he brought out a large money-bag, tied with string. He asked me to take it to the Bank of Nova Scotia and hand it to the "girl in the first cage to the right." I asked him why he was trusting me, a foreigner whom he really didn't know, with his money. He said: "You're wearing a Masonic ring, so you are a Mason." Actually, I wasn't. The ring had been given to me, so I wore it. He wasn't a Mason!

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Into the bank we went. I gave the bag to the right teller. She opened it, read a note, and asked us to wait. A few minutes later she returned with two money bags to take back to the man! We locked them in the trunk. My wife suggested we eat in the local restaurant. Then she wanted to go to a movie. When we got back it was too late to take the money to the fellow. I wondered what he would think.

The next morning I took the money to him, and apologized for worrying him. He said he wasn't the least bit worried — I was a Mason! I decided right then, that's exactly what I was going to be. So, at the age of 29 I petitioned Sebring Lodge.

(Original) Editor's Note: As an aside: After Royal Scofield had told these stories (and more) in Babcock Lodge the previous evening, Brother Phelps, with tears in his eyes, said to me: "If only Masons were as well thought of today as they were then, wouldn't it be wonderful?" I agreed, but I had to think: Wouldn't it be wonderful if all of us deserved it! Fortunately, most Master Masons do!