

What Makes You A Master Mason?

By

Rt. Wor. Edmund Cohen
Grand Junior Warden

Presented to A. Douglas Smith, Jr. Lodge of Research, #1949

On

July 29. 2006

The opinions presented in this paper are strictly those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Master and Wardens of the A. Douglas Smith Jr., Lodge of Research #1949 or the official views of the Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Virginia.

What Makes You A Master Mason?

by
Rt. Wor. Edmund Cohen
Grand Junior Warden

As you heard, Grand Master Glover Hunter Jones, III, sent a letter to all the Lodges in Virginia asking assistance in identifying what we believe to be the values and standards of conduct of Freemasons, and then seek to capture the core conduct that most clearly define exemplary Masonic behavior in ten clear and concise statements. As a scene setter to that discussion, your Worshipful Master has asked that I prepare some opening remarks.

I would start by suggesting that Freemasonry and its values are grounded in the ideas of the Enlightenment. Much of what was considered to be quite radical when Freemasonry was pushing its way onto the world stage is now accepted in many parts of the world, certainly in Europe and in the US. Thus, the idea of democracy, individual rights and responsibilities, the value of rational inquiry, equality of opportunity, religious freedom, and religious toleration are all part of the fabric of our society.

But it is also true that the 20th century saw two World Wars, and the rise of both Nazism and Communism — political ideologies that rejected all of these values. By using modern technology and modern bureaucracy a new level of repression and cruelty was brought into being. This modern despotism was so much worse and so much more virulent than anything in the past that a new term was coined to describe it — totalitarianism.

Now, in the early part of the 21st century, we see the emergence of jihadism, with its religious and social intolerance, and contempt for all of the values that we Masons hold so dear. And this jihadism has metastasized into self-contained cells of terrorists seeking access to weapons of

mass destruction, and these terrorists would, if they could, destroy our Western civilization.

To confront this new reality, the civilized world needs all of the champions that can be found. Masons have always been the champions of liberty and human dignity, knights in defense of freedom. And today we are once again needed to defend liberty and equality, and to demonstrate a purity of character at a time when these values are being challenged by the rise of tribalism in Africa and the Balkans, repression of religion in Russia, China, and North Korea, and religious intolerance in the Middle East.

In this context, the Grand Lodge needs to be in the forefront of this struggle against the forces of disintegration that pits the builders and conciliators against the destroyers and dividers. Grand Lodge needs to communicate more effectively what we stand for and what we do, attracting men of good character and good will to our ranks.

And also in this context, individual Lodges need to be involved outside the Lodge hall helping to strengthen a sense of community that transcends differences, and builds unity rather than discord.

But it is also at the individual level that we can make a difference, and this brings us to the topic for today — what does it mean to be a Master Mason, and more to the point, what really makes you a Master Mason.

Few of us will be able to change the world, but each of us can make our little corner of it a little bit better. We can show by our daily actions that we are fundamentally decent individuals who support a moral approach to human interaction

that transcends nationality, ethnicity, or religion, and affirms our basic humanity.

Those around us will be influenced by the example we set, and our behavior will influence their view of our Fraternity. Like it or not, each of us is an ambassador for Freemasonry. Most people, certainly our neighbors, colleagues, and acquaintances — the people we meet and deal with in the course of the day who know us as Masons — will form their opinion of the Fraternity by their opinion of us.

If we are likeable, they may be favorably disposed to the Fraternity. If we are discourteous, unpleasant, and mean spirited, they will generalize and impute those characteristics to the Fraternity, and may form a less favorable opinion of Freemasonry.

When I think about what makes us Master Masons, I think of sincerity and humility, and of reverence and fidelity. And, if we as Masons are to set an example of what a good man is, then we must live a life of personal integrity, be a good son, husband, and father; be a good neighbor; and be a good and loyal friend. And it means also to be a caring and concerned citizen of our community and country. In our dealings with others, it means being true to our word, reliable, and dependable. It means being courteous rather than critical, charitable and compassionate rather than indifferent, kind rather than brusque.

None of this is easy, and I do not mean to imply that I or most Masons always meet this high standard. But it is the case that Masons are constantly striving toward moral and spiritual perfection.

And with all of this in mind, let me read two short expositions about what makes us a Master Mason. The first is from the Grand Lodge of New York and is as recent as this year. The other, which I will abridge, comes from the 1933 Prestonian Lecture written and delivered by the Rev. Herbert Poole, Past Master of Quatuor

Coronati Lodge #2076, titled “The Old Charges in 18th Century Masonry”.

The New York selection is titled “Masonic Compact.” And here is what it says in nine core statements:

Because I am a Freemason...

- I believe that **freedom of religion** is an inalienable human right, and **tolerance** an indispensable trait of human character; therefore, I will stand in my Lodge with Brothers of all faiths, and respect their beliefs as they respect mine, and I will demonstrate the spirit of Brotherhood in all aspects of my life.
- I know that **education** and the rational use of the mind are keys to facing the problems of humanity; therefore, I will bring my questions and my ideas to my Lodge, and strive to advance the growth of my mind alongside my Brothers.
- I know that the rich **tradition of Freemasonry** and its framework of **ritual** are important platforms for growth and learning; therefore, I vow to stand upon these platforms to improve myself as a human being, and I vow to help in the mission of the Craft to provide tools, atmosphere, challenges, and motivation to help each Brother do the same.
- I know that **charity** is the distinguishing human virtue, and that **personal community service** is the best demonstration of one’s commitment to humanity; I acknowledge that words without deeds are meaningless, and I vow to work with my Lodge to provide service to the community, and to promote charity, friendship, morality, harmony, integrity, fidelity, and love.
- I know that my obligation to community extends beyond my local sphere and is partly fulfilled in my **patriotism**, love of my country, obedience to its laws, and celebration of the freedoms and opportunities it symbolizes.

- I know that **leadership** is best demonstrated by **commitment to serving others**; I will therefore participate in, and help work at improving individual leadership skills, and serve the Brothers of my Lodge to the best of my ability.
- I know that **friendship, fidelity and family** are the foundations of a well-lived life; I therefore vow to be a faithful friend to my Brothers, as I expect my Lodge to respect my personal obligations, and to treat my family as though my family were their own.
- I know that the last great lesson of Freemasonry — **the value of personal integrity and the sanctity of one's word** — is a lesson for all people in all times; I therefore vow to be a man of my word.
- I know that Masonry's power is best exercised when its Light is shared with the world at large; I therefore vow to bring the best of myself to my Lodge, in order that my growth might be fostered and nurtured, and to present myself to the world as a working Freemason, on the path to building a more perfect temple.

Because I am a Freemason, these values and aspirations are guideposts for my progress through life.

Now let me move back a couple of centuries to 1740 and read my abridgement of the charges and regulations laid down in eight rules, which were to be observed and strictly fulfilled by every Brother that now is, or may be hereafter admitted a Member of our ancient and honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons.

Rule One: All Masons are strictly enjoined to pay due honor, obedience, and reverence to the great and almighty Architect.... By this Rule it will evidently appear that every Brother is enjoined to be a peaceable subject to the civil powers wherein he resides or works, and never to be concerned in plots, or conspiracies against the peace and welfare of the Nation; or to behave himself undutifully to inferior Magistrates; but in

a loving, courteous, and affable conversation behave himself to all Mankind....

Rule Two: The intent of Masonry is to kit and bind all Brothers into a more close and strict tie of harmony and friendship than the rest of Mankind, hence Brothers are hereby enjoined to live in the strictest ties of friendship with each other at all times, free from all malice, slandering, or backbiting each other; but to the utmost of their power, aid and assist each other, both in their words and actions; to be sober, honest, and industrious in their own respective callings or stations of life; always observing this royal law and rule, of doing to others, as reason and religion direct **we** could be done by in the like circumstances; the sum of which is action upon the square, and living within the compass with all Mankind.

Rule Three: All manner of disputes, or debates about religion, or politics are wholly to be omitted between Brothers, especially within Lodge, for ... the royal art of Masonry teaches us to bear no ill will toward any Brother on account of his own private thoughts in matters of religion provided they be good men and true, or men of honor and honesty, by whatever denomination or persuasion By this way of proceeding Masons ... conciliat(e) true friendship amongst persons that might have remained at a perpetual distance.

Rule Four: The place where Masons assemble and work, for the improvement of each other in arts and sciences ... and every other useful branch of knowledge by which the understanding of any brother may be improved is called a Lodge; in which place every Brother ought to be a useful member, and to communicate such knowledge....

Rule Five: The persons to be admitted members of a Lodge must be good and true Men, free born and of mature and discreet age, no bondman, no woman, no immoral or scandalous men, but of good report and such as in some useful branch of

knowledge excel others in their way.... No Brother shall drink to excess, swear, or talk loosely or profanely of any matter during the time the Lodge is open without being duly censured.

Rule Six: The time of opening and closing the Lodge is fixed to be from 7 o'clock in the evening till 10 and no longer.

Rule Seven: All preferments among Masons (are) to be grounded upon real work, and personal merit only, for if not, the Brethren may be put to shame, and the royal Craft despised. But in Order to prevent such irregularity, no Brother ought to be made, or raised without the consent of the majority of the Brethren belonging to the same Lodge....

Rule Eight: Lastly, ... it is further to be observed that each Brother will be obliged to attend on Lodge night, except extraordinary business prevents his coming. In all such cases he will be obliged to pay his (dues) in the same manner as if (he were) there.

It is interesting to think and consider the points about a majority versus unanimous ballot for membership, the injunction that all brethren should attend all meetings of their Lodge, and the view that the meeting, which then included dinner, should last only from 7-10 in the evening.

But in the context of our topic "What Makes You a Master Mason," I think the takeaway from these two pieces, separated by 266 years, is how closely they agree with respect to the fundamentals.

- First, both speak to freedom of religion and tolerance;
- Second, they both speak to education, not just in a Masonic sense, but in the much broader sense of being a well-educated man;
- Third, they both speak to love of country and obedience to its laws; and,

- Fourth, they both speak of the harmony and friendship that should exist among Masons, but also of a standard of conduct that should be extended toward all Mankind.

And now with this foundation, I leave it to all of you to discuss, as the Grand Master has requested, our view of the ten statements that most clearly frame what Freemasonry really means.