

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE LIKE THIS

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Try this and see how it fits. Freemasons belong to an organisation which ought to be dedicated to self-knowledge, the nature of being, love, tolerance, the brotherhood of man, liberty of conscience and, yes, perhaps a brush with the Deity on the way. But we have become bogged down in systems resembling officialdom, obsession with promotion to higher rank, discussions about precedence, confused notions about God, the relative merits of this or that dining venue and the parroting, without meaning, of what is in itself a very meaningful ritual. Perhaps worst of all we call ourselves a charitable organization, when what we are is, primarily, an organisation with all the attributes I have mentioned plus, in addition, some philanthropic ones.

On the evening I was initiated, one of the Past Masters shook my hand with the words "Well, boy, from now on you won't need any other hobbies!" I instantly found that offensive, sensing (correctly) that freemasonry is a profession or a vocation, not a hobby. My impression, so early formed, was shortly after substantiated by visits to lodges in Germany where they take these things very much more seriously than we do in England. Where is the spirituality, the attempt at self-improvement, the journeys into symbolism, the journeys, come to that, into the unexplained, both without and within? If we examine where freemasonry in England is at the moment, to put it bluntly, we are engaged in initiating ever more men into the craft and conferring second and third degrees on them, so that they shall in their turn be Appointed To Office In The Lodge, In Due Time Becoming Worshipful Master. To what end? The end, unfortunately, is so that they can then confer initiation on more men, so that those men can then do the same to other men, usque ad infinitum. We seem to do this under the justification of "a daily advancement in masonic knowledge." Is it too much to ask what advancement? What has happened to them? How has freemasonry shaped their lives, if at all? Have they grown, and if so, in what way? What have they learned? These are not rhetorical questions, because to some of these brethren something has happened; freemasonry has shaped their lives, even if only in a small way; they may indeed have grown, without knowing it; they have almost certainly learned something, even if it is only some ritual learned by default. But for many of us, I suspect, the eternal conferring of degrees very soon becomes an end in itself.

It's easy to forget that freemasonry in the eighteenth century was a radical movement, often standing against abuses of power on the part of the Establishment. Its development and growth were a vital part of the Age of Enlightenment. It was, for many, the route to knowledge denied to them by an oppressive religious or political system. Yet after a recent talk on education in freemasonry, when I asked the speaker whether it would be possible to include talks on historical or philosophical matters as a regular feature of lodge proceedings (such as are commonplace in many continental lodges), the reply was that "this would not suit the majority – after all, people enjoy their freemasonry on many different levels", a knife-and-fork mason's charter if ever I heard one. The good news is, it doesn't have to be like this. As Colin Dyer points out, the proper means of instructing young masons is not by repetition of degree ceremonies, but by the various systems of masonic lectures. In the late 18th. and early 19th centuries lodges of instruction did not teach degree ceremonies, so much more engaged were they in moral and philosophical debate. Masons were often 'made' outside the lodge altogether, and then brought to the lodge where their real work started, in moral, intellectual and spiritual pursuits. Degree ceremonies, by contrast, are only the means (however ornate) of making masons and advancing them to other degrees once they have learned something. Degrees of what? To attain to a higher degree, surely you have first to study, to learn, to gain proficiency.

This is the principle of any academic pursuit, and the time-honoured method employed by any institute worth the name; why should the requirements of freemasonry be any less? The perfunctory questions we require nowadays of our candidates for advancement are merely the rump of an intricate system of morality lectures which, in the 18th. century, had to be imparted verbally (since nothing was written down) and learned by heart before a candidate could advance to a higher degree. Nowadays even the small amount left over from these does not constitute a real test at all, since any amount of prompting by the Deacon at his side is allowable. Compare this with the practice in a German lodge I visited, where at each meeting the Master delegated one of the junior brethren to prepare and then deliver at the next meeting a lecture on a philosophical subject of his choosing, and then be prepared to answer questions on it. Or the French lodge I visited, where a candidate for initiation was not admitted until after months of searching questions about his moral and philosophical attitude.

When I first wrote this, I had in mind the experiences of one or two of our younger brethren, whose second and third degrees came quite a while after their initiation. They expressed surprise that they were not expected to make a more taxing advancement in masonic knowledge, and seemed bored by the lack of activity; in short, they felt abandoned. I have a keen sense that they were right to feel this way. So how about it? What is our daily advancement in masonic knowledge, and how to we go about this business of self-knowledge, inner growth, or is it all just empty words?