

The Dumbing Down of Freemasonry

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Society, in general, has and continues to be dumbed down. If you don't think so, you may possibly be among those who may be counted as victims.

The Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs commissioned a civic education poll among public school students. A surprising 77% didn't know that George Washington was the first President; couldn't name Thomas Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence, and only 2.8% of the students passed the citizenship test. Along similar lines, the Goldwater Institute of Phoenix did the same survey and only 3.5% of students passed the civics test. ¹

Dumbing down is a term used to explain how we have simplified all we can so as to be intellectually undemanding and accessible to a wide audience. We see it in our education system, books, certainly television, the Internet, vocabulary, communications and clearly in politics. Freemasonry is not immune.

In a sea of junk science and misinformation, coupled with what seems to be an incessant need to be entertained and provided only an *abbreviated version* of just about anything, we seem to have misplaced our enthusiasm for searching for reason, logic, truth, and anything deeper than the ten second sound bite, followed by pundits who then believe they must spin and explain what we heard in those ten seconds.

The absence of a basic understanding and awareness of the rich history of our country and the recognized science governing many things in our world should not be surprising when we learn that no more than 40% of adults under age 44 read books.² So, why is anyone surprised when a man who has been a member of the fraternity for over 20 years steadfastly believes King Solomon's Temple was built "somewhere in England?"



¹ Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason*, Vintage, 2009.

² *Ibid.*

The irony of Freemasonry being dumbed down is bewildering, when considering part of its original intent was founded on the idea of seeking truth, knowledge, a deeper awareness of the world, and made up of many men who stressed emphasis on the arts and sciences. Serious students of the Craft often wring their hands as they consider and study the question of *what's wrong with Freemasonry*. Well, the answer is simple: *nothing is wrong with Freemasonry*. Its principles remain the same; its exceptional tenets, virtues, purposes, aims and relationships have not changed. The real question is *what's wrong with its members*.³ This question is one many ignore and is underscored with the spirit of believing that when a man takes the obligations, he is genuinely a Freemason and that's all there is to it. This is akin to believing that when a person takes the Hippocratic Oath, they need not educate or train further in the medical profession. Nothing could be further than reality.

Frankly, Freemasonry has been dumbed down right along with the rest of society in North America. With little basic, universal education about the true purpose of the fraternity, and decades of a full court press taking "speculation" to a new level of illogicality, a great deal of our gentle collection of what is misconstrued by generations who misunderstand its purpose. Much of society has come to depend on sound bites, accepting those tidbits passed off as hard news and providing the whole story. Sometimes Masons consider the ritual as the sound bite necessary for them to completely understand the Craft.



The growing and disturbing trend of anti-intellectual elitism in American culture has also adversely influenced Freemasonry. For more than a few decades, the dismissal of science, the arts, and humanities and their replacement by entertainment, self-righteousness, ignorance, and easygoing gullibility have been as pervasive in the Craft as it is in the audiences of MTV, the oversaturation of reality shows, Ancient

Aliens on the History Channel, and those who believe most anything that entrenches itself on the Internet, regardless of the lack of evidence and troubled foundations they are based upon.

We find Masons around the nation who are not aware of its origins, and who merely accept wild-eyed speculation. We find Masons who boast that most of their knowledge

³ Norman C. Dutt, *What's Wrong with Freemasonry*, The Philalethes, October 1969.

about the Craft has come from the History Channel and novels by Dan Brown. We find Masons who quickly blame Grand Lodges that their own lodges are boring, cannot retain members, attract small percentages of their membership to meetings, cannot pay their bills or maintain their facilities. We find ritual work inconsistent, jumbled and muddled in too many lodges, sucking the life out of a profound and beautiful philosophy. Our protocols and etiquette continue to slip further toward the casual to the extent we sometimes cannot recognize a particular due guard and penal sign. While we see Freemasonry continue its practice of fish fries, pancake breakfasts, raffles, and lodges that often can't muster enough of an attendance to open lodge or consistently draw a mere ten percent of its membership to lodge functions, is it any wonder that some men question what has happened to Freemasonry?

The over-simplification of critical thought to the degree of undermining the intellectual standards of language and learning shows obvious signs of trivializing the Masonic culture and standards in an alarming number of lodges.

At some point, much of the Masonic culture stopped educating its members and found it easier to simply make members instead of making Masons. The disturbing part is that we find Masons today who are considered "experts," yet they have not received, nor have they sought out much knowledge about the fraternity except through ritual and what was offered at their lodge, which is usually just what the generation before them knew. Little or just mediocre Masonic education produces few Masons and continues to generate mediocrity.

Why would anyone, much less Freemasonry settle for mediocre when there is a desperate need in today's society for dignity and class, even self-worth? Masonry is not designed, nor was it ever intended to be, an institution for instant gratification, yet as much of society embraces the instant-everything-entitlement view, Masonry has become infected, as well with this shortsighted approach.

In lodge, when the question "Why" is asked we too often hear, "That's the way we have always done it" as a reply. Has anyone ever asked if the way "we have always done it" is the correct way? It only takes one person, be they Past Master, sitting Master, Secretary, the oldest member, or



anyone with the force of personality- to fundamentally change a lodge for generations for better or worse. When we began making members in assembly line style and started leaving out the essential ingredient of Masonic education, we lost the qualities generations before us prized, cherished, and strove to replicate.

Longevity in the Craft through membership alone does not mean a member knows the first thing about being a Mason. To be a Freemason requires careful thought and introspection, study, and application - not decades of merely sitting in a Masonic Hall.

By allowing a man who knocks, but has not been fully investigated to enter, allowing our ritual, our dress and lack of respect for the institution be evident in our casualness and lack of protocol, we teach the same thing to those coming in. When young Masons are seen across states behaving in a manner that would dumbfound our forefathers, it is our fault, for they have been taught to behave, talk, dress, and think in that manner, and in turn, will continue to teach that same behavior to those following them, thus proliferating mediocrity.

Many members in numerous jurisdictions today believe lodges that practice a more formal protocol such as requiring a coat and tie for all lodge functions, are “elitists.” Many also consider Masonic education to be something only found in ritual - that dues should always be at the 1960s level - that in order to be a “real Mason” one has to join immediately as many appendant bodies as possible, and that business meetings should last long into the evening. As some lodges become or slowly evolve toward insolvency, they still wonder why the lodge can’t be operated on dues that barely pay for a night out at the movies with family. Some wonder why men don’t attend lodge anymore when all that is offered is dry business meetings with all committee work performed during those meetings. Some even wonder why relaxing dress codes, ignoring the value of structured degree classes and on-going Masonic education, lessening standards and protocols hasn’t brought a flood of men into the fraternity. That answer too is quite clear: it’s not what men are looking for.

The herd mentality that so often observed in North American Freemasonry – the mentality that this *is* indeed all there is to Freemasonry has become the metaphorical equivalent of an angry lynch mob when anyone challenges the mob’s self-limiting understanding of Freemasonry. In some areas, new members simply accept without questioning, believe without weighing the choices or being aware of the traditions and purpose of the Craft, and join the pack because in a culture where convenience rules, real individualism and further study is too much labor.



Another world of Freemasonry exists. Those who travel only in their respective areas may never see it. Those who don't bother to read may never learn of it. Those who know it exist and have experienced it usually become frustrated as they discover how much of Freemasonry, as the system it is intended to be, is unnoticed, overlooked, and in some cases, snubbed.

There are pockets of the systemic Freemasonry model, as it was intended to be practiced, all over North America. The problem is that these pockets are sequestered in areas where men have stepped out of the typical paradigm that has evolved over the last six to eight decades across the nation, but they can be found in almost every state. These are lodges and Masons who have stuck with or slowly adopted old traditions and returned to the practice of Freemasonry as a system in parts, or in whole, by observing the Craft as it was designed. They have embraced the fundamental and genuine purpose of the Craft: to teach.

Men who have this particular enthusiasm and zeal for the Craft as it was intended to be, know where these pockets are located. They seek them out and find them and absorb more knowledge about the Craft while doing so. They find they are nourished by such practices, which feeds the motivation to introduce them into their own lodge cultures if absent.

These men *are* searching for more light in Masonry and demonstrably commit to improving themselves through such. Tolerance for Masons by these men, of those not motivated to practice Masonry as a complete system, as they do, is certainly Masonic in nature of course, and they recognize the rights of men to practice, within the guidelines of their respective jurisdictions, the style of Freemasonry they believe is Freemasonry. Nonetheless, that does not mean these Masons will or need ever choose to settle for less than adherence to the systematic Freemasonry model.

Learning to be introspective is a vibrant lesson found within the principles of the Craft. Introspection will tell us what kind of Freemason we wish to be.

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