

21st CENTURY

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FREEMASONRY

A LITTLE LEARNING CAN BE A DANGEROUS THING

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PART I

In 1709, a proverb written by English poet and satirist, Alexander Pope, summarizes what many earnest-minded Masons, leaders in the Fraternity, and those we consider the most illuminated Masonic scholars have cautioned the Fraternity about since at least the early 1800s.

Once the academic world began to pay attention to the phenomenon of Freemasonry as a part of social history around the mid-20th century, they, too, joined the choir.

Pope's proverb has become the *troubling truth* in our Fraternity, which has been so steadily expressed that it is practically qualified as a Landmark. He wrote, "A little learning is a dangerous thing."¹

In 1732, Pope wrote yet another adage that serves to explain many of the troubles in our Fraternity. Pope's words illustrated how early influences have a permanent effect. He wrote, "Tis education forms the common mind. Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined."²

Planted as a mere twig in the early 1700s, *organized* Freemasonry, was soon "bent," as it were. And as the twig grew into a tree, its growth pattern began to demonstrate how just a *little learning is indeed a dangerous thing*.

¹ Having a precursory or limited amount of knowledge about something can make one overestimate how well they will be able to do something much larger in scope or scale. This maxim, originally a line from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, 1709.

² Proverbial saying, early 18th century; meaning that early influences have a permanent effect. There is a related comment of the mid-16th century, 'a man may bend a wand while it is green and make it straight though it be never so crooked,' but the current form comes originally from Alexander Pope's *Epistles to Several Persons*, 1732; 'Tis education forms the common mind, Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined.'

The unbridled expansion of membership and lodges, and the inconsistent guard on the West Gate bent the twig. The rushing of candidates through degrees led to the notion that making a man a Master Mason is *an event* instead of *a process*, which bent the twig even more. Generations of bidding men to become fruitful Masons, and providing only minimum instruction allowed many to make of Freemasonry what they wished it to be or become. Gradually unmooring ourselves from the worthy idea that the election of leaders should be based on their merit, and then allowing generations to place emphasis on aspects of Masonry rather than the primary business of a Lodge (which is to consistently explore the lessons of Masonry and apply its principles), made the tree continue to grow in a direction that marginalized appropriate instruction and what we call today, *Masonic education* – a term that Shawn Eyer reminds us is of recent provenance and does not appear until 1841.³

The fabric of Masonry today has been likened to a patchwork in which occasional pieces are missing, others have not worn well, and some have been sewed in where they do not exactly fit.⁴ We cannot successfully claim that Masonry, and its historical intent has been *imparted in a manner pure and unimpaired from generation to generation*. In fact, its elements have been stirred at widely separated times and places by the hands of many men of different abilities and purposes - each with a different touch and of minds of varying talents – all of which has made *organized* Freemasonry an accumulation rather than a creation — much of it shaped, packaged, perfumed, and carried forward as though it had great value.

While Masons have ransacked history in the pursuit of the origin of the idea of Masonry, the Fraternity has shown little appetite for looking inward for the reasons that more than half of the men we admit into our ranks are inactive and Freemasonry has become merely peripheral in the eye of the public.

Interestingly, the voices of the ample warnings continue to echo in our own official records.

One of the more blunt warnings was issued in 1859 by a well-known Kentucky Grand Master. He reported the institution of Freemasonry had thus far been sustained by the knowledge of only a few. He scolded the Craft for allowing its ranks to be largely made up of what he described as *semi-manufactured Masons in scores of semi-manufactured Lodges*.⁵

Another Grand Master in 1866 described what had happened by declaring the unbridled, rapid expansion of members and Lodges and absence of vital and adequate instruction another way. He confirmed that rapid expansion of membership produced semi-manufactured Masons and that while more members might looked upon as evidence of

³ Shawn Eyer, "The Integral Nature of Masonic Education," *Philaethes*, 69:3, 2016. During a presentation at the 65th meeting of the National Masonic Research Society in Iowa, Shawn Eyer, *Philaethes* editor, and expert in the ancient texts of Freemasonry, explained that although a fascinating phrase, research shows that prior to the term being used in an 1841 anti-Masonic speech given in Boston, "Masonic education," used as we apply it today, is of recent provenance.

⁴ Henry Coil, *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, Macoy, 1976

⁵ Rob Morris, *The History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*, Louisville – Morris, 1859.

prosperity by many, it would, “in the end prove to be highly deleterious” and become “the canker worm on the rose, that seems outwardly so fair and flourishing, but bearing in its bosom the cause of its decay.”⁶

After another 48 years and dozens of corresponding concerns expressed, another Masonic leader and scholar reported in 1914 that “Masonry has had too many members who are not Masons, because the work of too many Lodges is not Masonry.”⁷ Of course, that is hardly a secret to those who are acquainted with our factual history, which reveals another troubling problem: too few Masons, or their leaders, are familiar with the factual history of the evolution of the Fraternity. We learn too *from our own records* that it *does seem* useless to attempt to teach any more than one wishes to know.⁸

So, unsurprisingly, we find in our literature, too, that well-recognized and revered Masonic luminaries, at the end of the 19th century and into the first half of the 20th century, expressed another concern. They questioned the perpetuity of organized Freemasonry because of the lack of suitable, vital, and appropriate Masonic instruction.⁹

Exceptional growth altered the character of our membership two specific times in the 19th century and twice in the 20th century.¹⁰ Claims of exclusiveness was slowly and inadvertently sacrificed with the rapidity with which members were selected and passed through degrees. Quantity production of membership, *with little accent on quality* became the norm. Exacerbating the consequences, were many men who ascending into the majority of leadership positions from these productions.

We then find reported in 1928, that Masonry, as it was then organized and employed, was not adequate to meet the demands of the current generation, and ... ”to go on making men Masons, as has been done by wholesale, without giving them an intelligent and authentic knowledge of Masonry, or what it means, with no definite objects beyond fellowship and philanthropy, is for Masonry to loose, by ignorance or neglect, what has been distinctive in its history, and invite degeneration, if not disaster.”¹¹

In the same writing, we find this forecast: “If Masonry is to have a future, it will be determined by its historic genius and purpose, not in self-abasing adherence to details, but by loyal and constructive obedience to its peculiar spirit and tenets. Otherwise, our Lodges

⁶ Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, October 1866, Grand Master’s Address.

⁷ A.S. McBride, *Speculative Masonry*, D. Gilfillan & Company Printers, Glasgow, 1914, 21, (all quotations regarding McBride from *Speculative Masonry*).

⁸ William B. Clarke, *The Genius of Freemasonry: William B. Clarke’s Leaves from Georgia Masonry*, ed. Paul Rich, Washington, D.C., Westphalia Press, 2013, 23.

⁹ William H. Upton’s, “A Plea for the Teachings of Freemasonry,” in L.S. Myler’s *Jewels of Masonic Oratory*, 1898, Thomas W. Jackson, *North American Freemasonry: Idealism and Realism*, Cornerstone, 2019.

¹⁰ John W. Bizzack, *Island Freemasonry: The Final Bastion of the Observant Lodge*, Macoy, 2017. (Periods of rapid lodge and membership expansion: 1800-1826, 1849-1888, 1917-1938, 1943-1959)

¹¹ Joseph Fort Newton, “The Future of Masonry,” *Short Talks on Masonry*, Southern Publishers, Kingsport, Tennessee, Masonic Publications Division, 1928.

will become mere Clubs, like many other such organizations, useful and delightful, but far-removed from the original meaning and intent of the Craft.¹²

By 2010 we find that the lack of Masonic knowledge by our membership was more widely believed to pose the greatest threat to the survival of our Fraternity, and *that* along with our chronic obsession with numbers, we had only weakened the quality of one of the most significant organizations created by human thinking.¹³

These are just six examples of multiple dozens of other rebukes over nearly 200 years in our literature and our official Masonic records that fell on inattentive, perhaps even deaf, ears – *if*, that is, they even knew about such writing and warnings or bothered to study in context what had and continued to happen in our Fraternity as it unfolded throughout the United States.

PART II

So, here we are today, in a gathering of earnest-minded Masons adding a presentation to an already extraordinarily long list of truths that continue to trouble our Fraternity.

There seems to be two primary ways to become disappointed about organized Freemasonry. One is seeking and attaining membership, then finding that a Lodge offers less than claimed. The second is to consider together with all the factors that relate to our own official records (in context) and find that we face the same troubles today as we have throughout our past.

Those records show us that we have not done very well at guarding the West Gate; and that we have failed to inspire or cultivate the interest of over half of those admitted into our ranks – the over half who do not engage in the life and care of their Lodge or Freemasonry.

It may be difficult for some to understand why so much of the Fraternity continues to believe this approach to Freemasonry is worthy of repetition, unless that is, they study our own records in context.

In such a study we find a background of sanity for future conversations about our uncomfortable truths.

¹² *IBID.*

¹³ Thomas W. Jackson, "Do We Even Care?" *North American Freemasonry: Idealism and Realism*, Plumbstone, 2019.

One of the true Masonic luminaries of the 20th century, Joseph Fort Newton, added his name to the long list of Masons who equally recognized the consequences of our absence of adequate, vital instruction throughout Freemasonry, and, negligence in guarding the Gate.

In 1928, Newton declared that there could be no defensible claim that Masonry had been imparted in a manner “pure and unimpaired from generation to generation.” He not only called more attention to the consequences of the deficiency in adequate Masonic instruction, but offered a sensible solution that had begun to formulate as early as 1915, while he was editor of the increasingly successful *Builder Magazine*.

He wrote that *The Builder Magazine* “had hold of a big idea, but that we had it by the wrong end.” Newton saw that while the magazine was able to assemble a “goodly company of brethren who were students of Freemasonry, as readers of and writers for *The Builder*, yet in comparison with the number of Masons in America, they were very few and ‘hardly a drop in the bucket.’

Newton recognized that the issues surrounding inadequate (or absent) instruction were not going to be resolved by books and journals; and that Research Societies could never do the thing that needed to be done simply because too many members were already insufficiently instructed in the fundamentals of Masonry. And, as previously pointed out and making matters worse, those who were insufficiently instructed held leadership positions at all levels of the Fraternity thus, perpetuating the problem.

He proposed a way out of what had become a routine practice deeply embedded in the Fraternity, and he spent the next several decades (and his influence as one of the most widely read Masonic authors in the first half of the century) encouraging grand jurisdictions and their subordinate Lodges to explore *and* employ the idea.

His solution called simply for a commonsense approach. If there was inadequate instruction about Masonry, instruct it sufficiently as men entered the ranks and passed through the degrees, giving them sufficient time to learn and absorb the meaning of each degree before passing them on to the next – or presuming that once made a Master Mason they would automatically pursue the understanding of the degrees necessary to *become* Freemasons, as opposed to merely being members.

Newton called for a collective agreement between jurisdictions, not to establish a uniform ritual, as many before and after him would do, but to make a concerted and collective effort to establish and use a functional, fundamental course of instruction for each degree of Masonry beyond what was offered by merely being exposed to the ritual. That was something the mass of our culture believed then, in the multiple decades preceding Newton, and still today that is *already* done through the long-standing, customary, practice of advancing men through degrees with a minimum of 30 days between them.

Like other learned Masons of his period, he voiced the folly of presumptuously bestowing upon candidates the title of Master Mason, and then simply bidding them to be fruitful and become Freemasons – pointing out that if that approach worked well, there would have been no recurring calls to address the matter since the middle of the 1800s.

Such an essential instruction process as Newton proposed has worked in businesses, corporate America, the military, and the field of academics for centuries. Although Masonry is none of those categories, no legitimate reason has yet been put forth that indicates the practice would not work for the Institution of Freemasonry. Those who may claim the approach cannot work, demonstrate their lack of awareness of what has been happening in lodges since the 1990s that have adopted even a modest effort to the approach as proposed by Newton.

Newton was committed to the idea and wrote in his work that the plan was “neither impossible nor impractical” if Grand Jurisdictions and their subordinate Lodges would be “wise enough to use it.” Blending early optimism with a hint of doubt, he slyly noted too that, “Surely a Grand Lodge ought to be as eager to have at least an elementary knowledge of what Masonry is imparted to its young men, if they really meant business in the matter of Masonic education.”

Newton found that convincing jurisdictions to adopt such a dramatic diversion from that to which the Masonic culture is accustomed is like bending granite. The opposition to the recommendation and replacing the “all you need is ritual” approach proved unsurmountable – at least collectively.

Although some of the Fraternity made advances using the concept he proposed, until the 1990s, progress was again, in scale, *hardly a drop in the bucket*.

PART III

In the 1990s we began to see the emergence of men and their lodges that quit talking about what they wanted in their Masonic experience and started to actively seek more from their Lodge than that which was offered. We have come to know these lodges as observant and European Concept Lodges, and a hybrid of those models.

While there have always been small pockets, or islands, as it were, of men and groups that sought more than mainstream Masonry offered, these particular Lodges that emerged in the 1990s were going to be different because they were emerging at the dawn of the Internet.

No longer were Masons limited by phone calls, letters, visits, attending conferences, or seminars to learn more about Masonry. By the time chat rooms were introduced, and then

social media platforms similar to what we know today, there was no containing communication between Masons around the world, and ideas spread more rapidly than ever before about Masonry in general, but particularly about Masonic education.

As a result, one such group that came on the scene is The Rubicon Masonic Society (TRMS), based in Lexington, Kentucky. And that group has added significantly to the long-standing evidence that Masons seeking and calling for more instruction and education about Masonry remains largely unanswered in Lodges.

Formed in 2013, membership in TRMS is by invitation only for Master Masons who are *actively engaged* in their Lodges. Now a 501(c)3 organization, TRMS uses, as a guiding principle, the Latin phrase, *Irrevocabilis se Committet* (committing oneself irrevocably) in the pursuit of, and the exploration of, Freemasonry.

TRMS emerged when a small group of Masons formed a dinner club in response to their experience in a Lodge that had long adopted the practice of rushing candidates through degrees with little, if any, instruction beyond ritual; and which had long focused on only the routine mechanics that offer little sustenance to a regularly chartered Masonic Lodge.

In short, a small group of Master Masons, who sought more from the Masonic experience than offered by their lodges, formed the organization for the purpose of *exploring* Freemasonry beyond what they had experienced in their Lodges. Initially, it was just a dinner club that met once a month to enjoy a meal with other like-minded Masons and engage in stimulating and convivial conversations about our Craft.

As the culture of their Lodges slowly changed and began to offer the opportunity and the necessary structure to explore Freemasonry, the fundamental purpose of TRMS changed. A decade after its inception, TRMS continues to meet regularly, and today has become instrumental in, and known for, advancing Masonic education and elevating the Masonic experience.

In 2020 and 2023, to further encourage and advance the exploration of Freemasonry, TRMS published the 3rd Edition of its recommended reading list of nearly 100 Masonic books and publications. This free document has been received by over 2,400 Masons and viewed online an average of 23 times a month – but there is more.

This year, Volume I of *The Transactions of the Rubicon Masonic Society* is expected to be published. That Volume contains 33 essays, commentaries, and research articles. Plans are in progress for Volume II.

Since 2017, TRMS has also sponsored and hosted national Masonic conferences and symposiums, coordinated Festive Boards, Masonic Scholar and Heritage Observance Nights, and produced the increasingly popular film documentary, “The Masonic Table.”

When the pandemic caused Lodges to shutter in early 2020, the men in Rubicon, like many other Masons around the world, recognized that offering *non-tyled* assemblies through a virtual technology platform was a constructive approach to assembling Masons for the express purpose of *exploring Freemasonry*.

Since May 2020, TRMS, later joined by The William O. Ware Lodge of Research in Northern Kentucky and Lexington Lodge No. 1, has produced 44 episodes on a virtual platform titled, “21st Century Conversations About Freemasonry.” As a result of the response to these productions, and at the urgings of Masons around the world, the programs continued even when meeting restrictions due to the pandemic began to be lifted, and will continue through 2023.

The virtual education series has become well-known in not only in the Masonic jurisdictions of the United States, but in 12 other countries as well.¹⁴

These live Masonic education productions showcase not only nationally known presenters, but Masons from other countries, speaking on the fundamentals and historical and philosophical topics involving Masonry. Although formal in setting, these meetings are not tyled, of course. Gentlemanly protocol and attire are asked of attendees and expected at every meeting. And, without exception, all meetings are professionally moderated, and discussions are expertly facilitated.

The average attendance to the live monthly meeting is 41, which is more than the average attendance in our Lodges around the nation. Data analysis collected since 2020 speaks for itself.

As of this month the 44 episodes have been viewed 70,000 times on TRMS’s video sharing and social media platform, *YouTube channel*. All episodes are now also available on Rumble.com, a similar media platform that expands exposure to the work.

With a contact list of over 5,000, and more than 2,000 regular subscribers to the free content of the monthly episodes the episodes have logged over 19,000 hours of watch time, thus TRMS has established a consistent audience through these platforms that continue to expand.

Interestingly, the episodes most viewed, and which logged the highest number of hours of watch time, are those programs where the fundamentals of our degrees are explored and discussed at length.¹⁵

The most frequent comments and remarks about the series that explore and discuss the

¹⁴ Google/YouTube Analytics, The Rubicon Masonic Society Channel, February 5, 2023, The Entered Apprentice Degree, the Fellow Craft Degree, The Master Mason Degree, The Path to becoming a Freemasonry, How Freemasonry Made the Modern World, Living as a Freemason.

¹⁵ IBID

fundamentals tell us that the information is not being instructed, discussed, or otherwise presented on a regular basis in most Lodges.

Questions from attendees and subscribers commonly ask *why* such information is not regularly offered or instructed in Lodges. Thirty-five- to forty-four-year-olds make up the majority of the audience making in those 19,000 hours of watch time.¹⁶

Attendees and viewers frequently comment too that they have learned more about Masonry from the series than have from the rest of their Masonic experience, and that the opportunity to learn more about Masonry was what they were looking for from their Lodge when they came to Freemasonry.

While this may not be surprising to any seasoned Mason who is diligent in his involvement, participation, and study of our Order, of course, it does continue to affirm that there remains many members seeking more from their Masonic experience than they are currently receiving in the way of vital instruction, education, discussion, and the overall exploration of the many aspects of Masonry.

CONCLUSION

And now we come to that section of our Masonic World known as the CONCLUSION. To some it will appear the *finest portion* of the presentation.¹⁷

In essence, not much has changed since the early 1800s with regard to the recurring concerns about the lack, or absence, of adequate instruction that we now call *Masonic Education*.

It should be no surprise to those who do commit, read, study, learn, and strive to apply the lessons of Masonry in their lives that the historical intent and purpose of Masonry has been stretched to its margins.

Has the mass of our membership become accustomed to, and comfortable in, emphasizing only particular aspects of Masonry – or the most convenient aspects – to the point that we have forgotten our primary business of exploring *all* of Freemasonry – not just philanthropy and fellowship?

What TRMS has done, and continues to do, is not presented to you today with any claim that it is a panacea. In fact, the range of subjects covered by the episodes is actually an extension and continuation of the attack on the basic problem, as Newton says, *at the wrong end*.

¹⁶ *IBID*: 34–35-year-olds make up over 50% of the audience, 25-34 year olds: 20%, 45-54 year olds: 20%, and 65+: 10%.

¹⁷ Ray V. Denslow, *The Masonic World of Ray V. Denslow*, Missouri Lodge of Research, 1964.

The size of the audience over the past 33 months, however, speaks to the vacuum that has been unintentionally created, and has been, over generations, subsidized by stretching the margins of the historical intent and purpose of the Craft by largely ignoring decades of qualified voices and other persistent calls from within the Craft that have called attention to the vacuum and its consequences - and for effective action to effectively address it.

The Rubicon Virtual Education Series is just a 21st Century technological tool that offers a resource for those who seek Masonic education at various levels, and more from their experience than continues to be offered in many Lodges. In the absence of a collective strategy that approaches the problem at the right end (as Newton proposed), respected publications like *the Philaethes Journal*, *The Journal of the Masonic Society*, the works produced by reliable research lodges, books and writings, and valid Masonic web sites that are available for those who devote themselves to the pursuit of Masonry, and efforts by organizations similar to Rubicon *will have to do*.

We can only imagine what might be accomplished for the good of the order though if the work of a small group of Masons with no budget or specific sponsorship from Masonic bodies were to be conducted collectively or individually by jurisdictions and Lodge leaders who mean business about Masonic education.

That is not to say that jurisdictions and certain Lodges have done nothing to advance Masonic education. They have. But it is challenging to argue that what has been done is more than what Newton declared it was in 1927, *hardly a drop in the bucket*.

Whenever the Fraternity decides to really mean business in the matter of Masonic education, and reduces its reliance on only what might be remembered by candidates who are rushed through degrees, the primary business of the lodge has a better chance of coming into balance with the other aspects of Masonry that have been more steadily emphasized over a period twice as long as the age of any living Mason.

So, without a much-improved collective effort throughout our Fraternity to instill regular practice of taking the time to appropriately instruct candidates, why should we expect a different level of retention, a closer guard on the West Gate, a more visionary corps of the majority of leaders, and a more constructive foundation established in the future for our Craft.

The apparent permanence of ignoring the primary business of the Lodge, that is, to appropriately explore Freemasonry as candidates advance through degrees, only ensures the *permanence* of our paltry record of retaining less than half of those admitted into our ranks. It does nothing to ensure the permanence of the Craft. I doubt if there is a man in the room that would make the claim the record is *good enough*.

To say that there are a lot of moving parts that affect the direction and success of Freemasonry is the consummate understatement. But the scope of internal idleness, as it were, as it relates to our Fraternity's need to embrace the lessons of the past and the words of many who have, and continue, to offer practical solutions is now legendary. Worse, is that our own records provide that proof.

There *is* room for improvement, and for Freemasons, that room is in the Lodge that shuns inaction, stirs inspiration, and continues to fuel participation against the enemy: *satisfaction with the status quo, which; at best provides only temporary and short-lived motivation.*

Since idleness implies that nothing is worthy of our time or effort, it seems good advice for the Fraternity, and most beneficial to those seriously pursuing the challenging work of becoming architects of their own character, to start that journey as soon as men enter the Craft, not after they are bequeathed the title Master Mason.

Devoting time to investigating how Freemasonry works as we advance candidates through our degrees remains, as Newton proclaimed almost 100 years ago, a solution we have yet to collectively try.

Judging from the number of years that the Fraternity has not meant business about Masonic instruction and education, however, a doctrinal shift may be required to do that, or, at the minimum, many more pockets or islands of Freemasonry must steadily emerge throughout the Craft.

No matter, futile attempts have been made in each generation to deny the behaviors and consequences created by these troubling and uncomfortable truths, thus validating the truth of another nearly 400-year-old metaphor – the one that tells us that we sometimes cannot see situations as they really are while we are in the midst of them - in other words - *we-can't-see-the-forest-for-the-trees.*¹⁸

The men in this room today can certainly be counted among those Masons making up a particular core of the builders in Masonry today. Builders who understand that when it comes to *meaning business* about Masonic vital instruction and education, there is no finish line.

The core of the builders today also know something else: *a little learning is, indeed, a dangerous thing.*

¹⁸ Reportedly, the phrase is of unknown origin. The first known publication of a form of the term dates back to a Renaissance proverb collection written by John Heywood in 1546. Published in London, it states “from him who sees no wood for trees/ And yet is busie as the bees/ From him that's settled on his lees/ And speaketh not without his fees.”