

# THE ART OF MISSING THE POINT

## WHY DOES THE MASTER WEAR A HAT?

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**T**he true goal of Masonic education should be continuity: preserving what has been learned from one generation to the next rather than neglecting or discounting what has been learned in the past (or from it). There are reports that the Masonic Institution is working on that.

Masons do not need to be accomplished historians. There should, however, be some agreement that if we came to Freemasonry *to learn* (which is one of the things that every man initiated has declared he comes to Freemasonry to do), then is there not some importance too, beyond just finding out there have been men of historical note who were Freemasons, or merely being aware that speculative Masonry is believed to have evolved from operative stonemasons? Accordingly, it follows that a man pursuing membership in anything would naturally want to know about the organization of which he seeks to become a part. As strange as it may seem to some, learning the facts about how Freemasonry unfolded in our country, how and why at times it advanced and other times not, and why we do what we do, and do many things that we too often think we have always done, can be eye opening.

Books, profound and lighter writings, official records, crumbling manuscripts, and websites that cover (some with glaring redundancy) every Masonic topic under the sun that rises in the East, are plentiful. Characterizing this inventory as a *surplus* (more that is created than for which there is use or demand) is not an exaggeration. The small army of Masonic and non-Masonic ink-slingers have, at the very least, contributed to the preservation and archiving of our Masonic record for future generations, many of whom in the past and current generations never bothered to read. The membership ranks, as swollen as they have been at certain times in American Freemasonry, have yet to be proven a massive assembly of men who hold dear and useful the age-old, and continually verified reality, that *to learn* more than you know demands of us a bit of reading about that which we claim we seek to learn.

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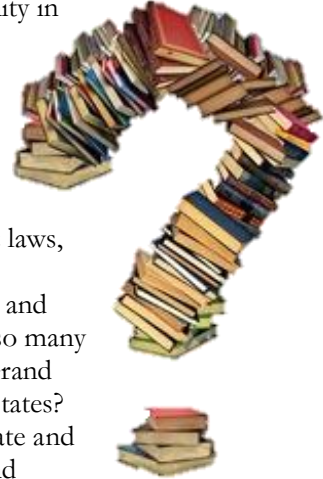
Now, that is not to say that a man cannot learn from observation, and the influence of watching how other men do things, without reading a word. It is wise, however, to consider that what might be learned from merely observing or mimicking often proves only to be nutrition to preserve the status quo, regardless of whether *leaving things as they are* (the cheerleading chant of status quo subscribers) works.

If all Masons, or even just a respectable percentage, were as diligent in devoting themselves to a bit of reading, perhaps the state of Freemasonry today would be full of members who also preserve and pass on the lessons of past generations about what works and what does not work in the efforts to advance the fraternity. Seems that in doing so, we might find reflected a more uniform awareness and understanding of the historical aim and purpose of the fraternity. Moreover, we might carry forward a mindfulness and awareness of the struggles, cause and effect issues, cultural and societal trends that affect and influence the Institution's processes, and our records of poor membership retention, thus giving us a better understanding of why public interest in Freemasonry has faded as it has.

Again, reports tell us that there are members who are working on that.

## IS THERE AN INKLING OTHER THAN SPECULATION OR OPINION?

What was it that most constructively influenced the direction of the small fraternity in America in the early 1700s? What was it that caused our early leaders to take the wrong fork in the road ahead? What social and economic influences were present in each era in which Freemasonry unfolded? In which eras do we find the strongest leadership, the weakest and why? How and why did the Institution rise in prominence, then slowly fade to an almost invisible level? Is there a correlation between wars and over-admission of members into the fraternity, and if so, what is the effects? Where did all these volumes of Masonic laws, rules, regulations, and resolutions come from, and why? Why are there so many different practices, protocols, rituals, standard acceptable attire, low-dues lodges, and differences in what is accepted and suitable degree proficiencies? Why are there so many appendant bodies to Freemasonry, and for that matter, why are there so many Grand Lodges in America? Why is there not one National Grand Lodge in the United States? And what about those Masonic obligations and penalties? Where did they originate and why do they say what they do? What happened to the Chamber of Reflection, and music in lodge? How did the 1843 Baltimore Convention change the direction and understanding of Freemasonry for future generations of Masons in America? Why was there a convention in Baltimore in the first place?



What parts of Freemasonry most compel men to seek admittance, and why? What prevents so many lodges from boasting about their membership retention rates? Why do so many members get suspended for non-payment of annual dues (where on the average, are less than fifty-dollars a year)? Why is it that research lodges do not always perform research? Why are not all lodges research lodges? Why do some lodges seem to endure longer than other lodges, and some even thrive while others fade and die? What makes leadership and members think that the success of the Institution can be accurately measured by the number of names on a membership roster, even when over half of the members have not participated or been involved in their lodges since receiving their last degree?

Why have valid studies, research and the writings of Masons and non-Masons alike, provided answer to these questions but have been largely ignored—even unknown to exist by so many members? Only one of the answers to that particular question is found in the second, third fourth paragraphs of this writing.

One more question: Why *does* the Master wear a hat? There are Masons who may believe such a question does not belong on the list noted in this writing. If they think the answer is widely known by members, however, they



should think again. While the question may understandably prompt wonder from a new initiate, what is the reason that veteran members ask that question? There are only two likely answers. They were either not listening to the answer (if it was ever given to them by their lodge), or they are participants of the of group referred to in the second, third, and fourth paragraphs of this writing. If anyone except the newly admitted asks what those symbols on the Tracing Boards mean, or cannot, or are not proficient enough to explain to a new member the meaning of phrases and words heard in our lectures and rituals, then this should be taken as an alarming standard of Craft awareness. A member who thinks those kinds of questions are never asked has probably not often attended his lodge or traveled much to other lodges.

A new Mason (or veteran for that matter) who seeks nothing more than that to which he is exposed after being rushed through Masonic rituals and advanced through the degrees, cannot be too careful of his reading if he wishes to remain a sound, casual Mason. A tongue-in-cheek joke in the fraternity that has been around since the 1870s is about how easy it is to identify such a member by merely counting the number of Masonic lapels pins he wears. Also, as easily observed is that such a member often ends up viewed as only a mechanical Mason, who is less in touch with the particulars of Masonic lessons, philosophies, and predictably the factual history about the fraternity.

The bankruptcy of ideas and emptiness of perspective is a result of a deficit. The shortfall and lac of functional awareness about the factual history surrounding the unfolding of the Institution in America and in Freemasonry (see above paragraph) regrettably appear to correspond with the axiom, *there are no uninteresting things* [in Freemasonry], *only uninterested people* (see paragraphs two, three, and four of this writing).

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## **BROWSING THEIR WAY THROUGH FREEMASONRY**

Freemasonry has never shown signs of starving for want of wonders in its lessons; but only for want of men who actually and earnestly seek their meaning, and, if they do actively and earnest seek them, then strive to consistently apply them to their daily lives. There is a lot of skimming the surface, as it were, but how could there not be skimming when so many in each generation, with little variance, only skims along the same surface as the generation before them? Logically, it follows that the design and uniqueness of Freemasonry, is diluted. A member who browses through Freemasonry might as well continue to wear the hoodwink.

The whole round of truth and balancing other and older ideas against the ideas to which we might for a moment be prone to accept, is the plight of Freemasonry. The core of the Masonic philosophy of goodness, and the way in which it works for some men to improve themselves, has always been sufficient to be worth our fully understanding it to begin with. Reportedly, that too is being worked on.

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The effective leadership in the fraternity, valid research and studies and those writings about Freemasonry that stem from them, that were and continue to be presented by non-Masons and Masons alike, seem to reveal as much about its commentators as they do about Freemasonry: the journey requires engagement and action. The generational surfing through one decade to another by largely responding to external

influences and unmooring from the basics of its historical intent has yet to produce the grand scale results we would naturally prefer to think that it has. One has to wonder if we are only going to see a fraternity in the future that consistently and constructively influences good men *and* the wider, external society by doing so, or one in which its members are more influenced by the attitude, ideas, and behaviors of the external society that causes Freemasonry to appear to be just another club. If it turns out to be the latter, then *what's the point of Freemasonry?*

There is a fitting allegory, although paraphrased, that serves well as a summary to this writing.

Good intellectual nutrition presupposes “good chewing” to ensure good digestion. The words, tenets, philosophies, and lessons of Freemasonry are like steak, not pudding. Hard work can make our head work, and the work prescribed by Freemasonry to improve oneself is hard head work.

Reading about Freemasonry is like steak. Seeking and eating a good steak, and the good digestion that follows by “good chewing,” will always depends on one’s level of desire to satisfy their appetite.

Hard work, in a culture that steadily marches toward that which appears only to be convenient, is inconvenient. But adventuring through the journey in the laudable pursuit of what Freemasonry can actually provide a man, is worth the rigor. Not enough members embrace that rigor.

Those who may find themselves in disagreement, however, or do not see the value of the hard head work path that was and remains intended to be pursued, make missing the point an art (see paragraphs two, three, and four of this writing).