

THE MECHANICAL MASON

CONSTRUCTING THE CULTURE OF "CAN'T"

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If you are currently a regularly made Mason in good standing in a subordinate Lodge of your Grand Jurisdiction, you are invited to imagine the following:

On any given night, within the borders of your jurisdiction, three separate Lodges are holding their stated meetings.

In the first Lodge, the Senior Warden rises to address the Master. After a brief preamble, he proposes that the Lodge begin to set aside fifteen to twenty minutes at each of its meetings for the purpose of Masonic education.

His proposal finds support among the Brothers of the Lodge, and the Master, in turn, appoints a committee to prepare Masonic education subjects for the Lodge to consider. The Master's instructions to the committee direct them to bring to the Lodge information about

- The Constitution of their Grand Jurisdiction;
- How to properly ballot and introduce guests;
- The proper positioning of the stations and chairs of each of the officers; and
- Why only the Master wears a hat in Lodge.

In the second Lodge, the Junior Warden brings a similar proposal in favor of devoting time at each meeting for the purpose of Masonic education. The second Lodge, unlike the first, finds the proposal unattractive, and the Junior Warden is told that Masonic education

- Takes too long;
- Would infringe upon the time needed to read and approve the minutes and the Treasurer's report;
- Is unnecessary since the ritual contains everything that a Mason should know; and
- Isn't really what we came here to do.

In the third Lodge, the Senior Deacon proposes that the coming annual installation of officers be an open installation in the hopes that by inviting non-Masons as guests, more men might be exposed to the Fraternity and perhaps find membership therein to be desirable. The response to the Senior Deacon's proposal is

- An open installation might result in the revelation of some of the secrets of Freemasonry;

- It is really a form of indirect solicitation, and solicitation is illegal;
- Extra costs might be incurred in such an event; and
- The Lodge has never done it that way before.

While each of these scenarios is imaginary, the plausibility of the likely responses to each of the respective proposals must be acknowledged and found to be completely (and nauseatingly) familiar to any Mason who has been consistently active in his Lodge for any prolonged period of time. Each of the above instances illustrates that Freemasonry is set to a default based on its internal rules and regulations, rather than exhibiting a willingness to explore the possible merits of an idea when given the opportunity to do so.

Institutional Freemasonry has adopted the opinion that a “Bright” Mason is one who understands the several constitutions, laws, by-laws and regulations of the respective Grand Lodge(s) and subordinate Lodge(s) to which he may belong. In such instance, the focus of the organization has shifted from Freemasonry to the mechanics of Freemasonry. Inevitably, the Mechanical Mason becomes an authority not on what can be done within the bounds of regular Freemasonry, but, rather, becomes an arbiter of what *cannot* be done. The light of Freemasonry is distorted to illuminate all the things that a Lodge or individual Mason may not do, while ignoring the far greater (perhaps infinite) number of things that may contemplated or accomplished.

Mechanical Masonry invariably becomes a culture of “Can’t.” The Mechanical Mason is an endless source of reasons why any given undertaking is impermissible. The concept of “Can’t” is inimical to the spirit of Freemasonry. The spirit of Freemasonry is, ultimately, directed toward the achievement of that which is possible, and discovering how that which is desired becomes reality. “Can’t” has no tolerance for inquiry; Freemasonry is the essence of inquiry.

How has the attitude of “Can’t” become so prevalent in an institution born the Age of Enlightenment and devoted to free-thinking? There are several possible answers to that question. One answer is that it is simply easier to focus on rules and regulations, which are objective, rather than on philosophy, which is subjective. As western society becomes more removed from the Enlightenment Era, the value placed on critical thinking skills has sharply declined. Mirroring the values of society, the number of men interested in developing the ability to think critically has correspondingly declined, both within and without Freemasonry.

Contemporary Freemasonry simply possesses very few men who either are capable of critical thinking or who are interested in developing the skill of critical thinking. In part because of intellectual laziness, and in part because of a lack of intellectual ability, Freemasons have opted for the path of least resistance, and that path elevates proficiency in rules and regulations over philosophical pursuits.

Let it be immediately conceded that Freemasons, whether assembled in Grand Lodges or subordinate Lodges, have always promulgated rules and regulations with respect to the governance of the Craft. Freemasons unquestionably have a responsibility to learn and understand the rules and regulations governing the Order, and to act in conformity with those rules. Let it be further conceded, however, that there is at least an equal, if not greater, obligation to learn the more abstract teachings that reveal to the individual Mason the path to genuine enlightenment and self-actualization. The rules and regulations of Freemasonry were put in place to promote and defend its philosophical practice, not to crush out its existence.

Any student of politics, and particularly the legislative process, is familiar with the manner in which much proposed legislation disappears through parliamentary maneuver. The annual proceedings of Grand Lodges reveal that, in much the same way, Mechanical Masonry has been used to stifle debate about issues that, while critical to the overall health of the institution, would require significant time and effort to fully explore. It is simply easier to shunt those matters aside, and procedural rules afford the opportunity to do so.

American Freemasonry is overflowing with examples of how the Craft has used its rules and regulations to hobble its own efforts to fulfill its promise as the philosophical and contemplative society that it presents itself to be. Nowhere is that better illustrated than in the legislative acts that swept American Grand Lodges in the mid-19th century, which mandated that all Lodge business be transacted only on the Master Mason Degree. American Freemasonry crippled itself by drastically limiting the participation of Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts in the life of Lodge. That limitation remains in place in roughly half of the jurisdictions in the United States, proving that bad ideas are easier to enact than they are to repeal.

As decades have passed, Grand Lodges have become more entrenched in the mistaken belief that the mechanics of Masonry are synonymous with Masonry. That belief is manifested in the proliferation of constitution quizzes and the disproportionate attention given to jurisprudence committees and by-laws committees. The absence of events and programs focusing on the abstract aspects of Freemasonry evidences the low regard in which such pursuits are held.

The current Masonic culture, the culture of “Can’t,” has been formed slowly, decade after decade, layer after layer, until the mindset of “Can’t” has hardened into an impenetrable mass. Freemasonry, with intellectual inquiry having been removed from its application, is rendered a helpless, pitiable parody of the intended grandeur of its purpose.

Grand Lodge leaders are drawn from the existing dominant culture. Expecting any leadership from these men with respect to redirecting the practice of the Craft toward its original aim and purpose is unrealistic. In reality, observant Freemasonry is as foreign to

these men as would be the language of another planet. Their usual response to anything outside their mechanical point of view ranges from suspicion to outright hostility.

Try performing this easy test: Ask a Grand Lodge official, or any other representative of institution Freemasonry, a question about Freemasonry. The likelihood is that their response will be a summation of constitutional provisions, mixed with a smattering of quotes from our ritual. Nothing in their response will be specifically wrong, nor is it likely to be very helpful.

The culture of “Can’t” provides a smokescreen behind which the intellectually lazy and incapable may easily hide. The mechanics of Freemasonry are frequently used to justify the failure to seek excellence in the practice of the Craft. Conversely, it is extremely rare to ever witness an occasion when the mechanics of Freemasonry are employed to stimulate men to aspire to greater thoughts or more noble deeds.

Mechanical Masonry, ultimately, is a very superficial transaction. The rules and regulations of the Order lie at the surface level, and very little effort is required to master them. (Again, think, “Can’t.”) Freemasonry, of course, was designed to be anything but superficial. Obviously, the mechanical approach to Freemasonry does not lead to the self-fulfillment and self-actualization that is achievable through the practice of its intended tenets. Mechanical Masonry is barren, and incapable of producing any transformation of the inner man.

If institutional Freemasonry valued (or practiced) introspection, it would immediately find that the culture of helplessness is foreign to the basic tenets on which the organization is founded. Freemasonry is very much about the culture of “Can.” Freemasonry, through its emphasis on reason, unleashes the intellect to consider the infinite possibilities that are within man’s reach, and enables man to harness those possibilities for the betterment of the society in which we exist.

Freemasonry, when practiced as intended, causes men to expand their abilities to think critically, thus opening anew the portals for further growth and development as holistic beings. Unfortunately, as we all know, Freemasonry is rarely practiced as it is intended.

In the Entered Apprentice Degree, we are told that our purpose in coming to Freemasonry is, in part, to learn. But what is it that we are to learn? Establishing a consensus on an answer to that question is exceedingly difficult.

As Freemasonry has drifted farther and farther away from its conceptual moorings, its focus on philosophical inquiry, which examines phenomena existing both within and without the organization, has been replaced by an emphasis on rules and regulations, which are almost exclusively directed toward matters internal to the organization.

Yet, establishing the culture of “Can” within contemporary Freemasonry remains a possibility, although one that requires unwavering determination.

The Victorian poet, Christina Rossetti wrote, “Choose love not in the shallows but in the deep.” In similar manner, Freemasonry calls to its votaries to experience the fullness of its promise “in the deep.” It is in the Masonic “deep” that mechanics become an afterthought, and “can’t” is transformed into “can.”

Where is the Masonic “deep” to be found? If you have contemplated this question at any previous time, or if you find that the question intrigues you now, chances are that the “deep” that you seek already exists within you. The exploration of Masonic history, philosophy and purpose will serve to chart those depths, and will further lead the inquisitive to even deeper pools of thought.

The characteristics of contemplation and introspection are commonly found among those who search for the “deep.” Interestingly, rumination is rarely about mechanics, and even more rarely about why something cannot be done. Indeed, those who practice contemplation and introspection are likely engaged in the consideration of that which may be accomplished.

In his excellent book, *Contemplative Masonry*, writer C. R. Dunning, Jr. challenges the reader to describe himself without reference to his family, his geography or his occupation. Bro. Dunning points out that in the period of silence that follows such a challenge, the extent to which many men have not come to terms with their own nature becomes obvious. This simple, straightforward exercise profoundly illustrates that we have a tendency to define ourselves by external influences, and never explore the identity of the inner man.

It is the realization of the identity of the inner man, and his relationship with his Creator, which forms the core aim and purpose of Freemasonry. It should be obvious to point out that there are no mechanics that can affect this process to any degree, nor is it possible to successfully pursue such a path with a mindset of “Can’t.”

At the risk of being repetitive, Freemasonry, when practiced as intended, is very much the culture of “Can.” As Freemasons engaged in the pursuit of self-actualization and daily improvement, it is vital to be able to recognize the instances in which the mechanics of the institution become roadblocks. Our journey is not about what we cannot do. Our journey is about what the lessons of our great fraternity empower us to accomplish and teach us what we can do.

Freemasonry is a transformative experience. An educated and engaged Craft, whose focus is on its principal tenets, as opposed to its mechanics, can transform Institutional Freemasonry from the culture of “Can’t” to the culture of “Can.”