

## Whence Came You?

Presented to Madison Lodge #221 June 11, 2012

“Whence Came You?” These three words are the first question asked a new entered apprentice when evaluating their proficiency. The answer to this question connects us to the ancient operative tradesmen that are the foundation of our speculative fraternity. It recognizes our commitment to the fraternity which we have petitioned, been found worthy, and initiated thus gaining our first access to the mysteries of Freemasonry.

"What came you here to do?" This question points us to our purpose as masons in our actions and in our gathering in Lodges. In other words, what should be the main focus of our time in Lodge?

Our catechism teaches us the answer to that question which is that we are to learn, to subdue our passions, and improve ourselves in Freemasonry. These three tasks provide us our first and most fundamental directions as individuals as we progress in our life as Masons and are the basis for all Masonic Education. Let us review these one at a time.

The first element of our purpose in Lodge is "we come to learn." Our Masonic ritual teaches us that we are to begin a lifelong journey of learning and to apply those lessons to our daily lives. Through this process we improve ourselves as men and Masons. We start as a rough ashlar. A crude and unfinished piece of work full of potential but of limited use in our current form. As we travel the path of Freemasonry, we are expected to benefit from the lessons presented us, to shift our attentions away from the vices and superfluities of life to focus, instead, on those spiritual elements that are the makings of a truly rewarding life. We are provided with the Common Gavel to remove the undesirable elements of our character and to refine ourselves. Thus we progress toward becoming a finished stone, the perfect ashlar, and useful to the Great Architect of the Universe.

The second element of our purpose is “to subdue our passions.” These passions are the crude and base characteristics of all men that can separate us from the civilized company of others, and lead to destructive results. Greed, impatience, pride, jealousy, and lust all serve the uncivilized qualities of a man and lead to divisions between us interfering with our ability to cooperate, collaborate, and benefit from uniting our mutual talents and efforts. They prevent us from pursuing more admirable goals and accomplishing great things for the benefit of all. As we pursue our own edification, pleasures, and place ourselves above those around us for selfish reasons, we do so at the expense of others.

We are told that subduing our passions is an admirable goal to be actively pursued by all Masons at all times. Temperance, one of our cardinal virtues, cautions us to avoid the excesses that render the man weak. With this admonition, we are given the responsibility of learning to keep our passions within due bounds to avoid them interfering with rational and reasonable thoughts. We are provided with the Compasses, one of our great lights, to assist us with this task. This useful tool has one singular function, that of defining the circle around the point that delineates

the boundaries of appropriate behavior thus assisting us to circumscribe our desires and keep our passions within due bounds with all mankind.

Through the vigilant use of the compasses we learn to moderate our passions and take the time to plan, explore the options available to us, and consider various outcomes. We are then free to refine the course of our actions contributing to our becoming successful, effective, and admirable as individuals.

The third element of our simple answer is that we come "to improve ourselves in Masonry." This admonishes us to focus on those lessons peculiar to the Craft and to the practice and development of Speculative Freemasonry. A survey of the many symbols, tools, allegories, and experiences that lie within the walls of the Lodge provide us with a wide range of opportunities. Each meeting offers innumerable opportunities for us to learn and further develop our skills as speculative Freemasons. These skills improve our ability to face the challenges of life and enable us to make wise and just decisions so we may succeed in keeping our white aprons as free from blemish and stain as is humanly possible.

Lodges in the days of Operative Freemasonry served many functions. One was to assure a practical system of providing skilled tradesmen to perpetuate the trade. Another was to provide formal education to the members of the Lodge educating them with the lessons needed to become successful citizens and craftsmen. And yet another was to provide a system of morality to guide their conduct. In fine, lodges functioned much like a university or school for training the whole person.

Men now come to the door of our Lodges seeking Light through Freemasonry. They are looking for something special that is not available in the education commonly available in the world at large. Our writings and reputation put forth the promise of enlightenment, valuable knowledge, fellowship, and quality relationships. Those that are found worthy begin their journey by being exposed to our values and beliefs through our ritual. Each degree and the related lectures provide lessons, experiences, and the promise of more to come.

At the time of our initiation, each of us assumed the responsibility to seek knowledge and fulfill the responsibilities to learn, subdue passions, and improve ourselves in Masonry. It is also the responsibility of the Lodge to offer opportunities for learning, understanding, and to promote this process. Not only is it the responsibility of the Lodge to provide exposure to the teachings of Freemasonry, but is also the Lodge's responsibility to take whatever actions are necessary to assure that learning occurs to truly fulfill the promises set forth to those considering entering through the West Gate.

Our primary mode of teaching these lessons is through our ritual. My own experiences as a speculative Freemason included presentations of the ritual that was bland and routine. I was coached in a catechism of questions and answers with little explanation. During my time studying the catechism, I had many questions. However, when asked, the most common answer I received was 'I don't know. We've always done it that way.' I then recited my catechism in open Lodge and was complimented on my ability to 'learn the work' and moved on to the next degree.

This process repeated itself until I was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason and my examination returned. I was then congratulated on gaining Light in Freemasonry and was left alone while the focus of the Lodge shifted to the other candidates and brothers moving through the process.

I found this experience to be confusing as a young Master Mason in 1977. After being raised, I was left with many unanswered questions. Yet, I was told that I was successful at gaining Light in Freemasonry and was ready for the "next step" of being Junior Steward. I quickly progressed through the line and served as Master of my Lodge in 1983. Each year I was learning more ritual that was little more to me than words on a page with little depth and minimal understanding. To be honest, even after serving as Master of my Lodge, I could recite, but I had truly not learned. It makes me wonder how often others are disappointed in the education and experiences provided by their Lodges.

I have since learned that each answer to a question of the catechism, each phrase of the ritual, and each symbol on the Master's Carpet is just the tip of an iceberg. I have learned that the real knowledge to be gained from Freemasonry lies below the surface. However, it took effort and guidance to probe these depths. I discovered and explored with the assistance of authors such as Carl Claudy, Allen Roberts, and Albert Mackey. Because my Lodge had failed its responsibilities, I was forced to become a self-taught Mason.

So this brings up what I consider to be critical questions. How can we do this better? What can be done in our Lodges to live up to the promises we make to those entering through the West Gate? Let's start at the beginning and look at how a typical Lodge treats its candidates and provide them with education.

The first experience of any candidate for Freemasonry is in the process of the petition and the investigation committee. How does the typical Lodge interact with the applicant to teach them about what to expect and to prepare them for the opportunities that may lie before them? In my experiences, little is said beyond assuring that there is a belief in God and a discussion of the social benefits of Freemasonry and the minimal requirements for completing the work.

The next opportunity is during the candidate coaching process. What does the typical Lodge do to coach candidates to promote learning and understanding? Generally, coaching is designed to help the candidate be able to accurately recite the questions and answers in the catechism. There is no review of meanings, the implications of these lessons, or the background behind them. If that is all we do, then we are not living up to our responsibilities or delivering on the promises made by Freemasonry to its newest members.

What happens when new brother comes to a meeting of the Typical Lodge? Are they held at the Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft levels to allow them to attend on a regular basis? Are brothers at all levels included in everything they possibly can? Are they encouraged to find a way in which they can contribute to the Lodge? Are the meetings informative, inspiring, and seen as a valuable use of time?

My experience in most Lodges is that meetings are generally dominated with introductions, long readings of minutes, a listing and discussion of the bills, communications, and discussions of administrative items. The presentation of the ritual, when it occurs, is dominated by the Officers with other members being relegated to being spectators. For the average member in the seats, it is 2 hours of business with very little of anything of interest or value to them.

Discussions amongst the membership and leadership of our fraternity reveal a near unanimous agreement that the problems stated above plague much of our fraternity. However, there is rarely any agreement as to solutions. Various Grand Lodges have developed and enacted numerous programs designed to promote Lodge functioning. Some programs have value, others are truly misguided. Regardless of the actions of the Grand Lodge, it is clear that each of us as individual brothers have the ability to take matters into our own hands and begin to make changes at the Lodge level.

In 2007, I joined of a group of Masons in the Columbus area who were frustrated with the experiences we were having in our home Lodges. We craved more depth, insight, and a stronger focus on education about our Craft through discussions. We had read of activities in other Lodges around the world and learned that there are different ways of practicing Freemasonry that we found appealing. This group became the Goose and Gridiron Social Club. Our purpose was to engage in monthly social and discussion meetings to expand our understanding of our Craft and satisfy our needs. After meeting monthly for dinners and holding many discussions about topics of interest including ways of making Freemasonry a more powerful experience for candidate and brother alike, it became clear that to truly fulfill our desires, we needed to form a new Lodge. To put to the test many of the ideas about how Freemasonry can be practiced to fulfill the promises made to our candidates and fulfill our duty to our brothers.

This was the birth of Arts and Sciences Lodge. We applied for our dispensation in early 2009 and received that dispensation at Grand Lodge in Toledo, Ohio in October 2009. I was humbled and honored to be chosen to be the Master under Dispensation and to serve as the Charter Master.

It is my intent to share with you many of the ways we have addressed what we see as the primary ways of fulfilling the primary purpose of a Lodge which is to provide education to the brothers as they progress through the process of the work and for the members of the Lodge on an ongoing basis.

To address the education of the profane and interested parties, Arts and Sciences begins the process of education even before interested parties obtain a petition. At Arts and Sciences, we invite interested individuals to our dinners which are held before every meeting and engage them in conversations. We inquire about their interests in freemasonry and see if their desire for enlightenment and a Lodge experience is consistent with our own. We also explain to them the expectations we hold for our candidates to assure they are willing to put forth the effort needed to work in our manner. Basically, we look for a good match of man to Lodge. If they do not seem to match, we gladly introduce them to brothers from a different Lodge that will more than likely meet their expectations. Once they have cleared the ballot box, they then participate in a School for the Profane where history of the fraternity and the use of allegory and symbols as a

means of teaching are discussed. This is held away from the Lodge building and is the duty of the Secretary of our Lodge.

Our candidate Coaching program is lengthy and extensive. At Arts and Sciences, we have a Master Mason who assumes responsibility as this man's coach and for the overall education of 'his apprentice.' They are formally introduced after the charge in the Entered Apprentice degree. The Master Mason is to sit with his apprentice in the North East of the Lodge and attend to his needs at all times. Their meetings away from the Lodge focus on the catechism and monitoring the other aspects of their education.

In addition to individual coaching, we have monthly 'Schools of Instruction' where a committee of 3 other brothers meets with the candidates as a group to discuss the writings of Carl Claudy, the Grand Lodge of Ohio Mentor Manual, the lecture of the degree, and their own experiences in Lodge. We look for opportunities for Coaches and candidates to see the work and follow that with a discussion of what was seen. The school for Entered Apprentices is run by the Junior Warden, the school for Fellow Crafts by the Senior Warden, and for Master Masons by the Master.

Lastly, we expect each brother to keep a personal journal where they record reflections which is the basis for an essay on their impressions of each degree. This essay is discussed with their coach/mentor but is otherwise private.

In our education, we need to explain what each symbol, due guard, sign, and experience means and how their lessons apply to our daily lives. We need to expose our newest brothers to additional materials so they may read what the great minds of Freemasonry have written to aid us in our exploration of the meaning of the Craft. Yes, I know about Grand Lodge Bulletin 11 prohibiting the use of materials not specified by the Grand Lodge. A careful review of Bulletin 11 allows the use of specified/approved materials including works by Allen Roberts, Carl Claudy, Chris Hodapp, Brent Morris and several others.

To make room for more educational opportunities in Lodge meetings, we have nearly eliminated all administrative actions from the meetings relegating them to committees or discussions between meetings. At Arts and Sciences, we have one 'business' meeting a year where we present and review an annual budget and authorize payment of all bills contained within the budget. We also produce our minutes prior to the meeting and share them at dinner prior to the meeting. Thus, we can vote to 'approve the minutes and file all payments for audit' in one 2 minute motion completing 99% of our business. Other administrative matters are quickly referred to committees to be explored, discussed and addressed between meetings with informal reports spread by e-mail so there is no need for discussion at the meeting proper. When needed, a quick motion to enact what the committee and brothers have explored, questioned, discussed, and resolved is occasionally needed. This system requires easy access to communication between the brothers. We have and use our own e-mail network to facilitate this so proposals, discussions, questions, and comments on issues can be handled outside of Lodge time requiring only that a formal motion be made and approved during stated meetings.

Instead of business, our meetings are dominated by discussions of topics that are announced one month in advance giving each of us time to read, think, and formulate ideas, opinions, and questions to bring to Lodge. The Master serves as facilitator of these discussions using open ended or Socratic questions. We always have a discussion topic even when there is exemplification of degrees. Imaging the impact of completing a degree and its related charge then launching into a discussion of some element of that degree or charge? You just heard it, now you are discussing and exploring more about it.

In 1776, William Preston, the primary author of our current ritual, expressed concerns that the Lodge meetings were being opened and closed in a haphazard manner that failed to recognize the significance of the Lodge meeting as a sacred place. He believed that the opening ceremonies, closing ceremonies, and all actions in between be done with a solemnity and reverence for the opportunities the Lodge meetings provide. He viewed the opening of a Lodge as a transition or separation from the profane world with all of its trials, tribulations, and distractions, to a sacred space where the focus was on the man, morality, and education in the arts and sciences of Freemasonry. This view is affirmed in our own ritual which is disclosed in the second closing prayer when it refers to the Lodge meeting as "a sacred retreat."

In light of this view of Lodge meetings, it is incumbent that the opening, closing, and all aspects of the meeting be conducted with a reverence for the true purpose of this time and place. It is important to remember that we are Master Craftsmen and that every detail of our work requires the best we can offer even if that work seems mundane. The lighthearted and social activities are reserved for other times and other places. Failure to pay due attention to even the smallest part of our work leads to slovenly practices in all that we do and diminishes our value as Masters of our work. If we fail to treat our Lodge meetings with the reverence and respect due them, how can we expect the new brothers to adopt similar attitudes?

The portrayal of the degrees needs to be done in a manner that connects with the candidate on a personal and emotional level. A rapid presentation in a monotone will cause even the most attentive of candidates to be quickly lost. Presentations of the ritual where we are stumbling to find words or are being constantly corrected from the sidelines cause the candidate to empathize with the brother struggling for accuracy and completely miss the lessons being taught. Even an accurate recitation of the words of the work that is done without an understanding of the meaning behind them loses its value. It is incumbent on all brothers to assure that they know what they are saying and what it really means before they can effectively present it to the candidate.

At Arts and Sciences Lodge, our degree lectures are done by groups of people removing the requirement that lectures are 'all or nothing.' To provide opportunities for involvement we have eliminated the progressive line below Junior Warden to make room for people to participate without the expectation of having to move on even if you are not willing or ready. We expect each Warden and the Master to serve in each position for 2 years to grow truly proficient in their positions and actively participate in training of others. Any brother is free to learn any job and pro-tem that job at any time after they have studied with the officer in that position and demonstrated their proficiency in that position. In fine, we create opportunities for everyone to be active at all times and expect participation from all members.

In the Entered Apprentice degree, we are told that never again from mortal hands will any honor be conferred greater than that of Brother. At Arts and Sciences, we forgo all titles with the exception of that of 'Worshipful' for the brother sitting in the East. Our aprons are plain white Lambskins, and there are no officer aprons. In compliance with the Officer's Manual of the Grand Lodge of Ohio, we do afford recognition of all titles and honors due to our visitors.

We go to great lengths to make sure our meetings are a valuable use of time. When members come to believe that attending Lodge is not a good use of their time, they will begin to vote with their feet and choose to be somewhere else. Eventually, they will vote with their wallets and become a statistic being listed as Suspended for Non Payment of Dues.

It is clear that we have responsibilities for the quality of experiences in our meetings both as a Lodge and as members. We have a responsibility to our applicants that we deliver what is promised them that being Light in Freemasonry. A responsibility to our Candidates, that we provide them with ritual experiences that are truly instructive and emotionally moving to forge a close and personal connection with each of them. We also have the additional responsibility to our candidates to provide them with coaches and mentors that can assist them in truly learning not just the catechism but the powerful meanings contained within them. To our Brothers, we have the responsibility to provide meetings where they can learn and find value worth the investment of their time.

Our obligation to learn, subdue our passions, and improve ourselves in Masonry is a fundamental one put forth to us in our first experiences with Freemasonry and everything we do should reflect this. Every Lodge should be constantly promoting these responsibilities. To that end, I would like for each of you to consider several important questions to which there are no right or wrong answers, only your own, honest answers.

What were you seeking when you first knocked at the West Gate? Where have you found Light in Freemasonry? What can you do as an individual brother in Dayton Lodge to pursue Further Light in Freemasonry? What can be done in Madison Lodge to encourage all of us to learn, subdue our passions, and improve ourselves in Freemasonry?