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My Brother, Are You a Literalist Freemason?

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Let me start at the beginning and with some luck by the time I have finished we will all understand both the question and what it might mean for the future.

Why am I here today? Because I was invited. But perhaps there is more to it than that. You are the third Internet Lodge to be Consecrated. The first was Internet Lodge 9659 in England, the second was Ireland 2000 and the third is here in Calgary. The formation of any new Lodge is always a time for joy and it offers a positive hope for the future! Upon that I congratulate you all, and I and all the members of Internet Lodge wish you well in your journey of discovery.

Freemasonry and the Question of Change

The question that many are asking is what does the future hold for Freemasonry? None of you will be unaware that we have been in decline across the English speaking world for over half a century and that we are part of the decline in civic activity that has been so graphically displayed to us by researchers like Prof. Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*.² Those of you who are coming to the workshop tomorrow morning will get all the gory details, but today I want to examine another aspect of this issue. What is Freemasonry doing to minimise the effect of this change in attitudes within our societies?

The answer is not a lot, and not very effectively, and rather too late. Freemasonry is, by the nature of its long existence, an organisation with a lot of history, a lot of precedent and a legend as old as the written word, and perhaps we are, therefore, not as quick on our feet to adapt to change as we were?

We are resistant to change! As Freemasons whose Masonic inheritance came from the Islands of Britain, it seems that we English, Scots, Irish, Canadians, Americans and

Australasians are perhaps even more resistant to change than Europeans or South Americans. Why might this be so?

There are, as we all know, some figures in the Masonic world who bestride it like a colossus and with whom any student of Masonic history inevitably soon becomes acquainted, George Washington in America, Anderson and his Constitutions, Lawrence Dermott the Grand Secretary of the Antients Grand Lodge and William Preston and his *Illustrations of Freemasonry*.

William Preston and his Legacy

Strangely when I look through my Masonic library for useful information, I find facts and information but very little if anything is said about William Preston's philosophy of Freemasonry, and it is this that I particularly want to examine. Where do I find the information? Strangely from an American author, Roscoe Pound, in his book *Masonic Addresses and Writings*.³ This was published in 1953 and such was its popularity that it was still in print — in the original edition — in the year 2000!

Philosophers are by no means agreed with respect to the scope and subject matter of philosophy. Nor are Masonic scholars at one with respect to the scope and purpose of Freemasonry. The sense in which philosophers of Masonry have used the term, the philosophy is the science of fundamentals. What therefore are the questions that can be called the problems of Masonic philosophy? Roscoe Pound offers three questions:

1. What is the nature and purpose of Masonry as an institution? For what does it exist? What does it seek to do? Of course for the philosopher this involves also and chiefly the questions: What ought Masonry to be? For what ought it to exist? What ought it to seek as its end?
2. What is — and this involves what should be — the relation of Masonry to other human institutions, especially those directed to similar ends? What is its place in a rational scheme of human activities? And
3. What are the fundamental principles by which Masonry is governed in attaining the end it seeks?

Preston and Krause appeal to and are based on reason only. Those of Oliver and Pike take a more spiritual approach. For Preston the key word was knowledge. I am going to stick with Preston and pass on the others.

Let's look at the man — born in 1742 in Edinburgh. His father was a solicitor and ensured he went to the high school in Edinburgh at the age of 6 where he learnt Latin and Greek. His father died and he left school around the age of 12 and was apprenticed to the printer's trade. At the age of 20 he had moved to London and in just over a year was a Mason and was the Master of a Lodge by the age of twenty-five. I will not bore you with all the details of his career — they are in print in many places.

Preston undertook to rewrite or write the Lectures of Craft Freemasonry and had three qualifications for this Masonic work:

1. Indefatigable diligence. He found time to read after working twelve hours a day, six days a week, and read everything Masonic he could lay his hands on.
2. A marvellous memory.
3. The ability to make friends and to get their enthusiastic co-operation.

The old charges had been read to the initiate and the custom had developed of these being explained and commented upon — in effect, he turned these into written texts and gave them a place in the ritual. To spread the work, he organised his friends into a group who met to pass on, criticise and learn the lectures, and to go out and deliver them to Lodges. Seven years after starting this work the first edition of his *Illustrations of Freemasonry* was published. It ran to twenty editions in England, four or five in America and two in Germany.

We must remember that Preston was the first to insist on the minute verbal accuracy which is now a feature of our Masonic ritual.

This fits in with the style of the times for the eighteenth century was a period of over-refinement, in all sorts of human activity, of formal verse, of a classical school of art that lost sight of the spirit in just reproducing the forms of antiquity, of elaborate etiquette. This is age in which the phrase “red tape” arose! This, therefore, was the background to which Preston fastened upon the idea of making our work letter-perfect and with precise reproduction.

Knowledge was regarded as the universal solvent. Education for many was brief and Preston’s lectures covered those “Liberal Arts and Sciences” that were essential for every gentleman. While William Preston’s lectures may have passed out of normal usage, the requirement of learning and recitation certainly has not in English speaking Masonry!

There are many jurisdictions where the ability to learn is not a requirement, and by all accounts the quality and experience is no less.

William Morgan and The Baltimore Convention

However, let us move on. The William Morgan affair of 1826 had wide repercussions in North America, and many Lodges closed or went underground. Anti-Masonic fervour climbed to previously unknown heights and lasted through the 1830s.

This gap in the Masonic continuum meant that older and skilled members had died and the dearth of new members meant that the ritual skills had not been passed on. Even worse, the exposures meant that the risk, whether real or apparent, of ‘cowans and eavesdroppers’ gate-crashing Masonic meetings was increased. There was a further complication — there was no uniform ritual and thus it was hard to prove and be sure of who really was a Mason and who had merely studied the exposures. Lodges were justifiably cautious! What was to be done?

In 1842, eleven Grand Lodges sent representatives to a meeting at Washington, DC, “for the purpose of determining upon a uniform mode of work throughout all the Lodges in the United States, and to make other lawful regulations for the interest and security of the Craft.”

The results appeared as the “Baltimore Convention” of 1843 and their recommendations are interesting and relevant to my thesis.

- A They amended the signs of the first and third degrees
- B They changed Immovable Jewels from the Rough and Perfect Ashlars and Tracing Boards to the Square, Level and Plumb.
- C Decided that all members of Lodges must be Master Masons and that the business of the Lodge must be done in the third degree.
- D That visitors must show a Grand Lodge Certificate — today’s Dues Card.

Thus, on top of the background of Preston and his insistence upon memorisation and word perfect reproduction, and the lectures as taught by Thomas Webb, we have cautious Lodges seeking to prove every visiting Brother in all three degrees.

This insistence upon ritual competence is with us to this day, it must be delivered word for word today as it was then. Change is **not** acceptable in any shape or form, whether in ritual or other aspects of our Lodges — or maybe only under the strongest pressure.

Maybe now some of the resistance to change in the Craft can be better understood. Although it does not apply in Alberta where Entered Apprentices are considered members of the Lodge, I have to watch the fights over trying to revert to doing business in the first degree with amusement, and back again with some sadness. Those against change claim this to be a ‘landmark’ of the order; clearly not logical because it was an expedient action in a crisis, but verbal blood is spilt on the floor over the subject year after year.

You may all very well ask what relevance all of this has to you and to this Internet Lodge? Simply that I thought you might be interested to understand a little bit of the forces that have shaped us over the centuries and of part of the legacy we have been bequeathed. I ask you to consider just how relevant some of these practices are to the practice of Masonry in the 21st century. Have they diverted us from what is the real essence of Freemasonry?

The Essence of Freemasonry

One of my friends, John Acaster, has recently spoken on the subject of “Does freemasonry have a Soul?”⁴ I quote:

I believe this analytical approach offers a very helpful tool by which to assess FM. Why does FM have its curious appeal? It is an appeal which varies between individuals. Individuals like some aspects more than others. We can begin to examine this meaningfully. Those of us who belong to different Orders can begin to quantify what it is they get from each. What is it, for instance, that draws some brethren to

prefer the Royal Arch above Mark masonry, or vice versa? How strong is the impact of any Order, or ceremony, in these terms? Can we mark them on a 1-7 scale?

Indeed in the Lodge to which we both belong we have asked the Brethren to rank the things they like or dislike, would like to see changed or not. To our surprise we found the desire for updating ourselves was stronger than we might have expected

...But we should never neglect the very powerful cultural (should I say, psychological?) effect of shared language, shared secrets, and an accepted mode of procedure and expression, which tend to glue brethren together within the individual branches of the movement. There are spiritual episodes in the first degree, moments of apprehension, contemplation, being led blindfolded and penniless, and of release and acceptance into the light. But the second degree is almost devoid of spirituality; social, cultural and moral messages predominate. The third degree is climactic in terms of impact, with very strong infusions in all four categories, and can rightly still be termed sublime. The methods by which this is [sic] end is achieved well deserve study and include repetition of form, subtly varied, building power. The three Craft ceremonies, as received from the nineteenth century, combine to make an impressive expression of the philosophy of Ethical Naturalism with some Stoicism added.

*...It is my contention that Freemasonry is almost unique in its ability to combine man's most fundamental truths and aspirations intimately together. Amongst them are moral truth and beauty, as represented in our homely symbols. These are a 'here below', mirroring imperfectly the 'so above' divine order and ideal justice meted (measured) out by the Great Architect of the Universe in a warp without beginning or end. By participating in the celebration of orderly rituals we are drawn in: the drama is our own, not performed by priests, and the frequency of its reminders conduces towards our individual self-improvement. Bro Neville Cryer has recently, in a talk for Internet Lodge⁵ in Leicester, emphasised the cardinal importance of ritual practice in freemasonry; not to be set in stone, but above all to be intelligible and meaningful to all brethren present. It is, or should be, a powerful experience. Hence, from this fusion of shared values and ideals, within a powerful setting which touches our deepest roots, derives the enduring quality of the Order. Our good works of brotherly love and charity are an outward and visible sign, **not a token, of the integral moral, social, cultural, spiritual and mystical grace that freemasonry imparts.** [Emphasis mine]*

...It is our responsibility to enhance those facets by which Freemasonry's inner effectiveness is achieved, discarding those accretions or weak points lessening its impact.

As we are all aware Freemasonry, in common with many other organisations in our world, is suffering from decay, from a lack of popularity. Does this suggest that it is worth re-searching for the soul of Freemasonry? Will we be more fulfilled as individuals, or as a body for doing that?

Indeed who should start on that voyage of exploration, that bringing of us into the 21st century? As members of the Internet Lodge of Research I suggest to you that, in the material sense of being online, you are all movers and shakers in the process of change

and modernisation. Maybe you would like to consider this other aspect as being another area worthy of your discussion and thought?

Are we forever to be driven by the philosophy and style of the eighteenth century? Was there something more of the essence before that? Should there be anything else afterwards and in this century? Are those jurisdictions which place more emphasis upon the philosophical aspect of the Craft closer to the things that cause the active Mason to keep coming to Lodge?

I don't have any answers, but I know the question should be asked and that it is worth asking.

I will finish with some lines of poetry, also from the end of Bro Acaster's paper, for I can find nothing better to conclude with; they are from T S Elliot's "Little Gidding":⁶

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time...*

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*

(Endnotes)

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² Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

³ Pound, Roscoe. *Masonic Addresses and Writings*. New York: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Company, 1953.

⁴ Bro Acaster is Editor of the Manchester Association for Masonic Research. The paper was presented at the Cornerstone Conference held in Manchester, 10 November 2001, and may be found at <http://www.workingtools.org/Insight/Articles/soul.html>.

⁵ The text may be downloaded and audio-streamed from http://internet.lodge.org.uk/library/research_papers/Cryer/future_of_ritual.htm

⁶ "Little Gidding" was written by T.S. Elliot in 1942. Its inspiration was a village of that name in Cambridgeshire visited by Eliot in 1936, the home of a religious community established in 1626. The two snippets used here are in reverse order in the complete poem. See <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/gidding.html>.