

A Little Learning Is A Dangerous Thing

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As time goes on, every Masonic scholar becomes deeply aware of the truth of the poet Pope's discernment that, "A little learning is a dangerous thing."

The quotation is from his "Essay on Criticism." Alexander Pope, an Englishman who was born in 1688 and died in 1744, remained a Catholic throughout his life. We must remember, however, that many Catholics at that particular time, and even for more than a century afterward, were members of the Masonic fraternity.

There was a profound philosophy exhibited in his Essay on Criticism. He seemed to admonish the reader to "know thyself." Pope says:

**"Be sure yourself and your own reach to know,
How far your genius, taste, and learning go;
Launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet,
And mark that point where sense and dullness meet."**

Throughout Masonry, we read of, or hear the phrase, "unerring Nature." The good farmer, for example, knows this full well.

Pope, in his advice, says,

**"First follow nature, and your judgment frame
By her standard, which is still the same;
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang'd, and universal light,**

Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,

At once the source, and end, and test of Art.”

There is really an “art” in the sense of the above lines, to the proper conferment of Masonic degrees, or conducting the business of the Lodge, or practicing parliamentary procedure.

The murdering of the King’s English, so to speak, the mispronouncing of words, the failure of the Master of the Lodge to understand wither the written or spoken word in Masonic exercises and who does not take the trouble to learn; these are the things that prompt this editor to agree with the poet Pope that a “little” learning is indeed a dangerous thing.

It is a source of constant embarrassment to observe the butchering, by the unprepared ritualist, of the pearls of wisdom in every paragraph of Masonic ritual – especially when a minister, or a teacher, or a physician, or a man of learning is a candidate.

Speculative Masonry actually got its start among the thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries. The real awakening of Europe, which manifested itself in Italy, France and England, was followed by a period of increasing intellectual activity, and Speculative Masonry, as a consequence, sprang into flower.

It must be understood then, that the originators of Masonic rituals were indeed scholars, that every word in the ritual was the right word – that each word could not be substituted for one which might seem easier, or sound better to the possessor of the unlearned mind.

This editor, along with others, has always maintained that learning the Masonic work actually can be the means of acquiring a liberal arts education, particularly in grammar, rhetoric and logic; that a man who is willing to try to use a dictionary properly in understanding Masonic degrees cannot help but become an accomplished conversationalist, even if he does not have a college degree.

Demosthenes, that Greek scholar and orator, in his earlier years, was a poor speaker. But in order to learn to enunciate clearly, it is said that he practiced speaking with pebbles in his mouth to overcome speech deficiencies.

The study of Masonry, with her beautiful and philosophic lectures should arouse the earnest student to further search; the more he searches the more

he realizes how much there is to still learn. Just follow Pope, for example, as he builds up his argument:

**“A little learning is a dang’rous thing;
Drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring.
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.
Fir’d at first sight with what the Muse imparts,
In fearless youth we tempt the heights of Arts,
While from the bounded level of our mind
Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind;
But more advanc’d, behold with strange surprise
New distant scenes of endless science rise;
So pleas’d at first the tow’ring Alps we try,
Mount o’er the vales, and seem to tread the sky,
Th’ eternal snows appear already past,
And the first clouds and mountains seem the last;
But, those attain’d, we tremble to survey
The growing labours of the lengthen’d way,
Th’ increasing prospects tires our wand’ring eyes,
Hills peep o’er hills, and Alps on Alps arise.”**

Of course, Pope is really trying to tell us that the more we learn, the more we want to learn – the search, in fact, is endless.

For example, the poet talks, in the second line, of “the Pierian spring.” Well actually, to the Greeks, the Pierian spring was a source of knowledge. The Greeks said that to drink from the Pierian spring was to obtain knowledge. The spring was in Pieria, a region of ancient Macedonia, one of the earliest seats of the worship of the Muses, who were the goddesses of the arts, history, and music.

The earnest scholar, enthused, perhaps, does actually what Pope says her does, as you will discover in the eleventh line above: “So pleased at first, the towering Alps we try.”

If the reader’s enthusiasm wants to carry him a little farther, this editor, in an article some months ago, talked about Music, which has a direct relationship with the Muses. The word “Music” actually had its first source from the Greek “mousike,” from “mousikos,” which can be translated as belonging to the Muses. And the Muses were the Greek goddesses of culture. And the word “museum” was from the Greek “mouseion,” which meant the Temple of the Muses.

Do you see where this enthusiasm can carry you? In Masonry, for example, we speak of the “seven liberal arts and sciences,” but the Greeks had nine goddesses of inspiration who presided over music, lyric poetry, art and the sciences.

This enthusiasm can carry you far. Some weeks ago, we saw a paragraph clipped from a publication called Theological Framework. Enthusiasm, the article said, makes men strong. It wakes them up, brings out their latent powers, keeps up incessant action, impels to tasks requiring strength; and these develop it.

Many are born to be giants, the article goes on to say, yet few grow above common men, from lack of enthusiasm. They need waking up; if set on fire by some eager impulse, inspired by some grand resolve, they would soon rise head and shoulders above their fellows. But they sleep, doze, wait for public sentiment, cling to beaten paths, dread sacrifices, shun hardships and die weaklings.

This editor would tell the Masonic student to keep on. The student would, by doing so, attain an uncommon education. And he would indeed become an uncommon man.

Some contemporary philosopher has truly said that common men do not build a better world, so they cannot build a better future. Only “uncommon” men become top men.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said that, “No man has earned the right to intellectual ambition until he has learned to lay his course by a star which he has never seen, -- to dig by the divining rod for springs which he may never reach.

“... To think great thoughts, you must be heroes as well as idealists. Only when you have worked alone – when you have felt around you a black gulf of solitude more isolating than that which surrounds the dying man, and in hope and in despair have trusted to your own unshaken will – then only will you have achieved.

“Thus only can you gain the secret isolated joy of the thinker, who knows that, a hundred years after he is dead and forgotten, men who never heard of him will be moving to the measure of his thought – the subtle rapture of a postponed power, which the world knows not because it has no external trappings, but which to his prophetic vision is more real than that which commands the army.”

This dissertation has taken a long way to arrive at an observation. If you want men to become better Masons, they have to do it upon their first entrance into Masonry – with ritualistic work that is letter perfect, clearly enunciated and easily communicated. The Masonic lodge is not the place to do things by halves, for Masonry, because of its very nature, is the ideal place for the “uncommon” man.

A “little” learning is a dangerous thing. In the intellectual search for light and truth, there is indeed no room for littleness.

And thus closing, we have marked the point “where sense and dullness meet.”