

Masonic Education Looking to the Future

Thomas W. Jackson



Most Worshipful Grand Master, Grand Lodge Officers, distinguished guests and my brothers; it is a distinct privilege and great pleasure for me to be present with you today and to speak to you on a subject so pertinent to the future of North American Freemasonry.

The paper that I am presenting to you today is one that your Grand Master requested that I present. I want to make it very clear; however, that I speak for no Grand Lodge or any other Masonic body nor do I wish to imply that there may not be alternative solutions. What I express is my opinion based on 49 years of Masonic membership and 40 years as a serious student of the craft.

It is my primary intent when I speak to cause you to think. If I do not accomplish that I waste both my time and yours. It is not as important that you agree with what I have to say as just thinking about it.

The title for my paper is; *Masonic Education-Looking to the Future*. This is an interesting subject for me to speak and to write on. You might expect that one as expressive as I have been concerning the lack of Masonic education in American Freemasonry would be well prepared to speak on it but even though I have been critical on our lack of education and strongly supportive of the need for it and even though I have written many papers for Freemasonry I have written very little relating specifically to the subject of Masonic education in the past.

Around 20 years ago I made the observation at the Northeast Conference of Grand Masters, Deputy Grand Masters and Grand Secretaries that

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Before going further, my brothers, let me clarify and emphasize that ignorance does not mean stupidity; it means a lack of Masonic knowledge. Also, there can be no question but that we sold North American Freemasonry far more cheaply than probably any other grand jurisdiction in the world. Where we in North America deal in dollars or hundreds of dollars, the rest of the Masonic world deals in hundreds of dollars or thousands of dollars.”

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However, my brothers, much water has flowed under the bridge since that conference and many changes have been wrought in North American Freemasonry but I stand here today and make that same observation with no reservation. Indeed, with all my traveling in recent years I've become even more convinced regarding it. With all of the changes that we have made in North America to alter the image of the craft and to change the direction that we have been traveling, we have done precious little to educate our membership and thus we remain the most ignorant Freemasons in the world and we have done little to alter that fact.

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There is no one factor upon which to place the blame for the ongoing decline of the interest in Freemasonry in North America but there can be no question concerning the lack of an educational commitment as being a major contributing factor. How can we possibly expect there to be an interest in an organization in which so few of the membership itself even knows what we are or our purpose?

For the last 25 years very few major programs conducted by the leadership in North American Freemasonry have been for programs other than to increase numbers or to raise monies to give away to charity.

I have had over the past 20 years the great privilege of traveling over much of the world visiting Lodges and Grand Lodges and observing how they operate. I have spoken at meetings, seminars and symposiums in over 30 different countries on Freemasonry. About 10 years ago I was speaking at a symposium in Argentina that was attended by approximately 500 Argentinean brothers. The symposium was being held over a period of five days and I asked my host what these men did for a living that they can take five days of their time to

attend this symposium. Argentina is a large country and it meant traveling for many hundreds and in some cases thousands of miles for some to attend. I can only recall a few of the occupations of the brothers that he pointed out around the room but I do recall two men that he told me were neurosurgeons, one that was a nuclear physicist and one that was the conductor of the Philharmonic Orchestra in Saltzburg, Austria. My friends, he pointed to many brothers

that we can only dream of having men like them in our craft in North America today but they were integral members of the craft in our past.

This past September I spoke in Romania where I serve as honorary president of the cultural organization on the subject of "Freemasonry, Fraternalism, and the Rise of the Idea of Liberty in Central and Eastern Europe." I spoke for the same Grand Lodge the previous year at a symposium that presented a series of intellectual discussions relative to Freemasonry and its involvement in current civil societies. These programs attracted some of the greatest thinking leaders in Eastern Europe. I also was given the privilege of addressing a public forum on the subject of Freemasonry in New Delhi India. These programs were not only for the purpose of educating the membership but also the general public on the value of Freemasonry to their societies.

I do not mean to imply that there is no place in Freemasonry for we ordinary individuals, indeed one of the primary reasons that Freemasonry became as great as it did is because men from all walks of life are accepted as equals but I am certainly cognizant of the fact that another of the primary reasons was because it attracted some of the greatest minds that ever lived and even to this day we continue to point with pride to these great men, but where are they in North American Freemasonry today?

Last November the World Conference of Regular Masonic Grand Lodges was held in Gabon, Africa. Presidents of four countries were present for that conference. At least seven presidents of African countries are members of Freemasonry, two of them serving as Grand Masters. I attended the consecration of the new Grand Lodge in Mozambique also last year where the Prime Minister was installed as the Grand Master.

Freemasonry continues to be held in high esteem in most countries of the world even though they have had to struggle far beyond what we in North America have ever known to even exist as a fraternity. One glaring feature about the Freemasonry as it is practiced in most of the rest of the world is that their members are required to learn. The acquisition of knowledge as has been universally professed in our craft has not become a lost art as we have made it in North America. I find nothing in our Freemasonry to compare with the stimulus for intellectual discussion that tends to permeate Freemasonry in most of the world. Sadly, this lack of challenge to our members tends to diminish the intellectual quality for which Freemasonry has been historically known. As a result, we have lost much of our allure to a segment of society that structured and gave Freemasonry its societal image.

Regretfully, today only a relative small percent- age of our members truly understand the significance of the purpose of the craft. They may understand the words but words are simply words. Understanding must transcend the words and today this may be the greatest failure on the part of North American Freemasonry. Unless we understand the meaning of the words how can we possibly understand the purpose for which we exist?

My friends, in the name of political correctness today we live in a society where our leaders feel that everyone should have the same as everyone else regardless of initiative or ability. We live in an environment that rewards mediocrity so well that there is little incentive to rise above it. We live in a society that desperately needs a stimulus to excel beyond the norm. We live in a society that needs an infusion of civility and logic into our civil society.

Unfortunately, Freemasonry has bought into this political correctness concept and as a result we have seriously damaged our image in society and reduced our effectiveness to make future

contributions. Of what value is an organization that made this world what it is if it has lost its capacity to do so? We need more than ever a leadership with a vision to see beyond self-satisfaction and a dedication to rising above the mediocrity of today's social structure. The future of Freemasonry in North America may very well be dependent upon the leadership's realization that Masonic education is a vital component for our survival. After all, how can we possibly convince society of how significant we are if we ourselves do not even know what we are or were? We live in a society that needs the Freemasonry with the characteristics of our past.

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Historians are finally acknowledging the influence that our Craft has had on some of the greatest leaders that the world has ever known at a time when we are failing to educate our own membership of this influence. My friends, Freemasonry is an organization that should always pull others up to meet with us not climb down to meet with them.

Freemasonry played a vital role during the age of the Enlightenment as one of the principal organizations in North America that provided an enclave wherein great thinking minds from different social strata met and created the concept of a democratic society based upon the structure they found in Masonic lodges. My friends, should you ever doubt the significance of these enclaves, consider that both Canada and the United States of America are the result.

I also learned in Argentina, however, that when a man petitions a Lodge in that jurisdiction he will be investigated for a period of a year and if he passes the investigation he may be entered. Upon being entered, during the next year he will have presented a minimum of three learned papers on Freemasonry to the Lodge and then stand examination to qualify to be crafted. Upon being crafted he will go through the same procedure prior to raising. My brothers, the members in Argentina know more about Freemasonry when they are raised than the vast majority of our members will know in a lifetime about our craft.

This is far more characteristic of the Freemasonry of the world than the Freemasonry that we have known in America over the past 25 to 50 years. In that period of time we have excised from the craft most of the intellectual and philosophical qualities for which it has been known to history and for which it continues to be known in most of world today.

Is it not an incomprehensible phenomenon that an organization of the likes of Freemasonry with the avowed purpose of improving the man and in stimulating a desire for him to seek to acquire knowledge should lack any major system for substantial education like we do? Instead of trying to raise our standards and to improve our image in society we continue to reduce our standards and to lower the requirements to become a mason, and to remain a mason. And what have we accomplished? We have not even slowed the rate of loss in our numbers.

I cannot convince myself that the Freemasons of today are any less intelligent or any less capable than were our brothers in the past but we are definitely more ignorant; more ignorant of our past, more ignorant of our present and definitely more ignorant of our purpose. If it be true, that our brothers of the present day are just as intelligent and just as capable as were the brothers of the past then lack of Masonic education must be a root cause of a declining interest and the responsibility for this failure must lie at the feet of the leadership of the craft.

I emphasized in Russia several years ago when addressing the Grand Lodge that it cannot forget that Freemasonry did not impact this world by rolling over it by the vast quantity of the membership. It impacted the world through the influence of the quality of its membership. It also, did not impact this world by massive contributions to charitable organizations will get the credit for spending those contributions. One can never buy admiration and respect. Nor did it impact this world by expounding upon its greatness in public venues. We do not need to expound upon how great we are. If we live the philosophy of the craft, the world will know that.

Freemasonry impacted this world by improving good men, by taking one good man at a time and making him a better man and we made him better by infusing into him the realization that he was far more capable than he himself considered possible. We stimulated him to want to be better and incited his intellect to want to become more knowledgeable, to want to become more capable and to want to participate in improving the society in which he lived.

It was then the better man, the more knowledgeable man, the more competent man that impacted the evolution of civil society. Freemasonry became the educational tool that provided an environment wherein men like Washington, Matheson, Franklin, William Mercer Wilson, Wren, Newton, Voltaire (even though he was a member for a short while) and many others like them crafted the ideas that created the ideals of a democratic society. God knows this world needs men like them today and Freemasonry should play a vital role in crafting these men. Fortunately, it continues to do so in many countries.

My brothers, this world is as it is today because Freemasonry lived and Freemasonry lived because it undertook the responsibility of taking the good man and making him a better man by teaching him the precepts and philosophies of Freemasonry through a process of Masonic education. These better men then became the leaders that created modern-day civil society. It has lived when hundreds of other fraternal organizations have long ago ceased to exist.

We can no longer choose to live in the glory of our past. We can no longer have our survival depend upon the claims of how great we were and point with pride to the greatness of our past brothers. We must now decide what we want to be. If we wish to be an organization that will be remembered in history as one that contributed to the greatness of our countries but one that slipped away worthy of little note, then we continue the path we are walking today. If we wish to continue the heritage that was granted to us by our past brothers, then we must make the decision that our current membership deserves that heritage and develop programs whereby we educate them concerning that heritage.

In my travels representing the world conference, I have been received by presidents, prime ministers, members of the royal families and even African chiefs. I have had serving as my "caretaker" a pulmonary surgeon and chief of pulmonary medicine at University of São Paulo, Brazil, a man regarded as the greatest surgeon in Greece, members of parliament, the military and other government officials. I have been seated next to the chief justice of the Supreme Court in Italy and the Romanian astronaut that flew on the Russian spacecraft. I have participated along with the president in placing a wreath at O'Higgins tomb in Chile, on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris and along with the president on the grave of the past president of Gabon. I have helped dedicate a Masonic monument on the national Mall in Valpariso, Chili. I have addressed senates and military leaderships. I have been interviewed by the press and appeared on numerous television programs in a number of countries.

My brothers, you must realize that none of this was done for me, it was done for what I represented to their society; the Masonic fraternity. That is the type of image we carry in the world outside of North America.

Even as the age of the Renaissance lifted the veil of ignorance from the European world, Freemasonry needs an age of Renaissance in America today to lift the veil of ignorance of our membership. These young men that are showing an interest in Freemasonry today are seeking much more than we are providing. They are on a quest searching for something that society is not providing to them. They are searching for a quality organization far above the mediocrity of present-day society. They are searching for knowledge and a system that will provide it for what Freemasonry must be.

Freemasonry is being given an opportunity that it may never see again. The writings of Dan Brown along with a couple of movies and television programs have stimulated an interest in Freemasonry that has not been seen for decades, even perhaps for a hundred years or more. This interest has created a potential to re-create an image of Freemasonry that has been lost to us. It will, however, require that the leadership uses it as a potential to improve the quality of the craft and not simply as a recruitment tool to improve the quantity of the Craft. History has proven time and again that when quantity is lost it may be regained but if quality is lost it is extremely difficult to ever regain. This regenerated interest in Freemasonry is giving us that opportunity.

I have probably expressed quite clearly my opinion on the topic of this presentation: *Masonic Education: Looking to the Future*. This world truly needs an organization based upon a foundation of the philosophical purposes of Freemasonry. If we are deserving of our heritage then we must undertake a program of educating ourselves and our membership. The legacy of our past brethren deserves that respect and respect given to the Craft will be proportional to the educational requirements of the Craft.

It is up to us to provide much more than we have been providing in the way of Masonic Education and for the newly initiated, passed and raised. It is also essential to offer the same Masonic Education to many existing members who show less of an understanding about Freemasonry than the many generations before them.

About the Author

Thomas W. Jackson is the Executive Secretary of the World Conference of Masonic Grand Masters and Past Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, (1979-1999), RW Bro. Thomas W. Jackson presented this paper at the Conference of Grand Secretaries in North America, held February 19-21, 2012 in Atlanta, Georgia.

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