

EIGHT QUESTIONS ON OBSERVANT MASONRY: WHAT CAME YE HERE TO DO?

W.: B.: ANDREW HAMMER, PM
ALEXANDRIA-WASHINGTON LODGE N° 22

An earlier document, *Eight Steps To Excellence*, offered eight steps which will help transform any Lodge into an observant Lodge. This document addresses eight frequently asked questions that arise when brethren strike up a discussion about observant Masonry. There will surely be more, but these are the ones that have come up again and again.

1

IS THIS SOME OTHER KIND OF MASONRY?

Quite the contrary. The concept of observant Masonry is based on the principle that brothers must know, study, and communicate the intentions of our historical founders, so that our lodges can do the best Masonry they can manage to do, in accordance with what is permitted in their respective jurisdictions. If it seems different somehow, that's because brothers are re-discovering some things that we once did as a fraternity, but which have been either forgotten about or just lost through time. The meaning of the term 'observant' is to adhere closely to the laws and principles of a given thing; it therefore indicates that enthusiastic, committed Masons are trying to bring out the best practices they can find from our history, and observe those original intentions of the Craft to the best of their ability. Simply put, this is not some other kind of Masonry; it is our own Masonry *as it was intended to be*.

2

I'VE HEARD THAT DUES IN AN OBSERVANT LODGE HAVE TO BE \$365 PER YEAR.

IS THAT TRUE?

No. Trying to attach a particular uniform number to the dues of a Lodge goes against the history of Masonic practice, and risks being seen as gimmicky. Each Lodge must always determine its own dues. BUT— the dues of a Lodge must be at a level that is sufficient to support *everything* that the Lodge wants to do. That is the key point to take away from the question of higher dues.

If your Lodge wants to have simple spaghetti dinners, minimal officer regalia, no concern for dress, and no particular events of interest during the year, then you will probably not need much in the way of dues except for rent, bills and Grand Lodge assessments.

But if your Lodge wants quality dinners, fine regalia and implements, an attractive meeting space, educational materials, and special events for your brethren and their ladies throughout the year, then you will have to pay for that in the same way you would in any other aspect of life. Nothing ever costs what it did in a previous generation, and our fraternity always has to be aware of how inflation might affect us.

Dues should not be contrived to be artificially high to in order to make a point, but they must be high enough to secure the present and future health and activity of the Lodge. It is difficult to do that in this day and age for less than a three-figure amount per brother. The particular number will vary from place to place, but no lodge can expect to survive in the long term by operating on a budget that more closely resembles 'life support' than life itself.

3

WHAT IF I AM NOT A PERFECT RITUALIST?

Ritual is the heart and soul of Freemasonry, and it is what distinguishes us from other fraternal and service organisations. Expert competency in performing the ritual is necessary in any good Lodge.

But certainly not everyone is a ritualist, and not every brother needs to be an officer of his Lodge, who as such, has the perfection of ritual as a prime responsibility of his office. For those brothers who may find ritual difficult to *perform*, this opens up an ideal opportunity for the *study* of that ritual, and more important, the history of the Craft as mentioned above. A brother can develop presentations on Masonry that further the aim of Masonic education in the Lodge. This is essential to an observant Lodge, as well as to Masonry itself.

There are brothers who may have exceptional abilities in research, who do not have the gift of presenting the 'theater' of our Craft well. These things can, if addressed thoughtfully, work hand in hand for the improvement of the Lodge. Our Masonic forefathers took both ritual and education seriously; why should we do any less?

4

WON'T THIS KIND OF LODGE TAKE MEMBERS AWAY FROM MY LODGE?

If your members are not interested in doing Masonry in this way, they will have no interest in this kind of lodge. At the same time, if your lodge is doing what it is supposed to do Masonically to hold the interest of your brethren, then you have no need to ask this question. There always have been, and likely will always be brothers who aren't terribly concerned with any of the points that observant Masons find crucially important. Masonry will survive despite all of us. The bottom line here is that for years, there have been a good number of brothers who have felt that something was missing from their Masonic journey. They may or may not have gone through all kinds of 'appendant' bodies, and still they felt that something was missing. So now, what has happened in some cases, with a very small number of lodges, is that some of those brothers have finally found in an observant Lodge a Masonic experience that fulfils them, and gives them what they wanted to get out of the Craft.

This is not and should not be seen as a threat to any Lodge, but rather as just another way of making sure that Masonry fulfils the promise it makes to its brethren, by providing a rich variety of ways to involve them in the fraternity. Some brothers like fish fries and big cheques, others like tuxedos and incense. If we're smart enough to provide a way for all of them to stay involved, we will not lose them. For that, we need different kinds of lodges and lodge experiences, as is done to this day in Scotland, the place where speculative Masonry began.

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH THE DRESS CODE?

It's a choice. That choice has to be made by the Master, and accepted in some way by the brethren. But here again, if and when a Lodge decides to step up their appearance in Lodge, it's not a mandate to the entire Craft. One could just as easily ask 'what the deal is' with showing up in a Lodge—a solemn space dedicated to the Almighty—dressed like you're ready to go to the beach?

Our earliest documents speak of how a Mason is to dress in Lodge; they don't go into specifics, but what is clear is that when the *Ahiman Rezon* refers to 'clean and decent apparel', that had an understood meaning in the 1700s. It is difficult to see where the harm is in a Lodge choosing to dress their best. [There is also photographic evidence in abundance that it was more common than not, only three generations past, to find an *expectation* of proper gentlemanly dress in North American lodges.]

It's not about the 'internal versus external' either; everyone is well aware of that important principle of the Craft. Rather, it is about asking more of yourself and expecting more out of Masonry. But just as no observant Mason should ever go to anyone else's Lodge and ask them to wear formal wear, no one should attempt to tell any group of Masons in any Lodge that they cannot.

ISN'T ALL THIS STUFF JUST ELITIST ON ITS FACE?

What term would you use to describe an organisation that does not solicit members, but rather makes individuals ask to join, upon which request they then tell the individual that he will have to submit to an investigation into his character and then a unanimous vote of the entire organisation, before he can be admitted?

Freemasonry has always been in some way exclusive, select, restrictive, and therefore *elitist* in its operation. What we're talking about here is not elitism itself, but how to deal with different ways of being inside one institution. Let's put the formal wear aside for a moment, and look at the fact that there are some lodges that will never put on Hawaiian shirts anymore than they will don white tie and tails. To get along in harmony, we have to accept that some brothers are always going to want to wear those loud shirts at least once a year. The same principle applies when dealing with a lodge that wants to spend their money to buy formal wear that you may not think is necessary in your Lodge.

A second concern, however, is the notion that brothers who do not dress in this way will not be welcome in an observant Lodge. Let's be clear: common courtesy and respect for a brother must win out here. In the same way that an observant Lodge should not turn away a visiting brother who doesn't meet their dress code, a visiting brother should not show up repeatedly at a Lodge where he knows he might be underdressed. No one should need to ask anything of the other. Common sense would seem to dictate that if a brother likes what he finds in an observant Lodge, to the point where he wants to visit frequently, he should probably 'get the drift' and at least try to play by the rules of the game at that Lodge.

WHAT'S WITH THE INCENSE, AND THE DARKNESS, AND THE MUSIC?

That's an easy answer. Each of those things were a common part of the lodges that gave birth to everything we do today as Masonry. As new and eager brothers begin to study everything they can about Masonry, they have come across the presence of these things in regular lodges since 'time immemorial'. We speak of each of them in our rituals. They are not alien to us at all.

It is interesting to observe that the same brothers who will often complain loudly about all of the rules and regulations in modern society which they feel impose upon their individual freedoms, and which they say insult the intelligence and ability of grown men to make their own decisions, will then turn right round and behave in that exact same way if incense, or a candle is lit in a lodge room.

We should bring back those things that once were found in our lodges, and which helped create a very unique, contemplative atmosphere for both the candidate and the Lodge. Among these are the use of music, the manipulation of light and darkness, the full and dignified preparation of the candidate, and the closing charge which so many of our Grand Lodges have in our histories, and which forms what is known among many brothers today as the 'Chain of Union' ceremony.

Consider that the candidate preparation room is not and was never meant to be just a dressing room. In many jurisdictions today, a candidate is still asked questions before the initiation that were originally asked in a 'room of reflection.' The practice goes back at least to the early days of speculative Masonry in England in the 18th century, possibly earlier. The only thing missing today is *the atmosphere in which those questions are supposed to be asked.*

Consider that the notion of a 'sacred band of brothers' might allude to a physical manifestation of that sacredness beyond the words. In many jurisdictions today, brethren meet on the level as they close their meetings. Is it possible that they once joined hands at that moment, because it was a part of routine practice? How many of us are familiar with the still popular custom of joining hands at social gatherings when singing 'Auld Lang Syne'?

Consider that music has *always* been a part of our ceremonies, and that the *Book of Constitutions* [i.e. 'Anderson's Constitutions'] ends with a collection of songs. In many Grand Lodge libraries there may be found hardbound Masonic songbooks published all throughout the 19th century, many of the compositions written by North American Masons.

All these things are part of who *we* are; they are not innovations from later jurisdictions or borrowings from European Masonry. And yes, even the use of incense is ritually alluded to in early exposures of the Craft. The idea is to stimulate and manage the sensory experience of the brethren, in the endeavour to create the sense of uniqueness one expects from a Masonic experience. Here again, there is nothing strange about employing the senses in a Masonic meeting. Our rituals teach the importance of each of those senses extensively; to *not* employ them in our meetings is the greater neglect and error. To refuse the restoration of awe to our rituals is to refuse to acknowledge our own heritage and history, and to deny the proper place and application of the pillar of Beauty to the Lodge.

ARE YOU TRYING TO MAKE ALL LODGES OBSERVANT ONES?

Absolutely not. Remember that observant Masons are not concerned with numbers, or popularity, or proselytising. Most of us prefer the more intimate, personal atmosphere that comes with smaller Lodges. What that equates to is that we tend to take a *laissez-faire* approach to Masonry. We do not seek to preach an 'observant gospel' to other Lodges, and do not expect the majority of Masons in this day and age to do what we do. We accept that in most places, Masonry will continue to be defined as a charitable social organisation, with brothers engaged in community service projects.

What we want is the freedom to have a Lodge here and there, which operates according to our preferred, *entirely legal*, and legitimate way of understanding the Craft, and which conforms to the rules and regulations of our Grand Lodges. We don't want to take another lodge's members. We only want to admit to membership in our lodges those men who *want* to do things in this way. We want to work quietly, with only the best aims for Masonry in mind. It is difficult, if not impossible to understand why that could ever be seen by anyone as a bad thing. To improve ourselves in Masonry is what we came here to do. Observant lodges are merely asking for the freedom, the right, and the responsibility to do just that.



© 2015 - Andrew Hammer

This document may be freely distributed, with proper attribution.

Observing the Craft: The Pursuit of Excellence in Masonic Labour and Observance
is available from observingthecraft.com, and amazon.com