

Feeds, Functions and Fraternity Politics

The Way We've Always Done it?

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ABSTRACT

Surely the founders of Freemasonry and the authors and revisers of our ritual must have given due regard to this basic problem of life when they designed the ceremonies whereby candidates are inducted into our Craft. Certainly, the central theme of all our rituals is the leading of those blinded by the darkness of ignorance, and bound by the cords of superstition, out into the uplifting light of truth and knowledge. Who can justly deny the design of Freemasonry's educational aims and activities; but some may doubt whether we are placing proper emphasis on the fundamental objectives of our Fraternity today? ¹

It does not take long to learn that the phrase, "That's the way we've always done it" is a mindset characterized everywhere it is heard by ineffective leadership, ruts in organizations of all designs, stale products, and a measurement of the low level of awareness one might have about the history of the group, purpose of the organization, and even the society of which one is a part. The insular thinking behind the term suggests a fear of loss of control in some cases, a narrow perspective in others, and almost always limited vision and imagination.

Regardless, the mindset is one of many external things that carries into Freemasonry because Masons are just as infected with the influences of the external world as anyone else and often fail to ask someone who uses that worn phrase, "Why is it the way we've always done it?" The search for reason, cause, and purpose is murdered by the clichéd thinking, "That's the way we've always done it," or its first cousin, "We've always done it that way."

Surprising to some is that if we chop out or just ignore the records of few years or decades here and there in the valid history of Freemasonry, those terms are becoming closer to the truth than not.

We can assume with assurance that when Masonic writers of the past wrote about events or the state of affairs in Freemasonry in their day, they were not reporting what they found or observed only a day before their writing. In fact, paying attention to their work tells us not only what it was like the year they wrote their article, essay, commentary or published their books, but what it was like years before – sometimes decades. In such we find the Masonic writing of Herbert Hungerford. We do not find a great deal of

¹ Portions from Herbert Hungerford's, *Freemasonry and the Progress of Science Series*, *The Builder Magazine*, March 1929, Volume XV, Number 3, the fifth of a series of discussions of Antient Freemasonry and Present-Day Problems.

information on Hungerford, but enough to tell us he was Master of Globe Lodge No. 588 in Manhattan, New York in 1926, a prolific writer for *The Builder Magazine*, and publisher and President of Hungerford Publications, that produced the successful, *The Boy's Own Magazine*.²

In 1929, Hungerford, in his hard hitting, several part series appearing in subsequent volumes of *The Builder*, titled, *Ancient Freemasonry and Present-Day Problems* does not mince words or waste paper. He gets right to the point. The fact that his writings, and this series appears in *The Builder Magazine*, considered by all standards to be the premier American Masonic magazine of the 20th century, speaks to the validity of his comments.

He notes that in his travels, he had met only one Study Club in the lodges he visited, but every lodge had an active and aggressive *Entertainment Committee*. He went on to say he had been asked questions on Masonic matters which were “such a confession of ignorance of the fundamentals of Freemasonry that it would seem to me that the questioners ought to be ashamed to ask them.” He points out what he refers to as “appalling ignorance” that so many disclose regarding the “real fundamentals of Freemasonry,” and asks the question, “Have our lodges shifted their objectives?” His writing then zeros in on observing too many lodges disputes resulting from untrained and injudicious officials assuming responsibilities which they were incapable of undertaking. As mentioned, he minced no words.

Hungerford rails again how Masons profess due reverence and admiration for our old traditions, but in our actual practice in “in most “modern” lodges,” members place their real emphasis upon trivial and incidental matters and devote most of their attention to what he calls, “feeds, functions and fraternity politics.” His criticism was not directed against the essential social activities of the Fraternity but rather to the objection that too few lodges devote any part of their program to anything but social and ritualistic matters, thus making the point that the educational activities of the Order are side-tracked or omitted altogether.

It was Hungerford’s view that it was a tragedy to permit lodge programs to continue the tendency towards “superficialities and frivolities, without serious protest and an earnest endeavor to turn the trend of thought back to the great educational aims and activities on which the solid fame of our Fraternity has been established.” He would be disappointed today to learn that while there has been an earnest endeavor made to turn the “trend of thought back,” it has failed in much of American Freemasonry.

It is evident from Hungerford’s writings that he was not protesting against any wholesome social or entertaining feature of Masonic activity. He strongly believed though that too many lodges in his era were concerned chiefly with the lesser things of Freemasonry, while they permit the greater and more worthy features to be crowded out of their programs. He estimated that not one lodge at the time was placing proper emphasis upon educational matters in its regular programs. He had nothing against a reasonable amount of fun and frivolity in lodge activities and noted that wholesome fun is just as essential to character development as any other activity, but if we operate as a degree mill and attend to purely entertaining affairs, we are missing many of the real benefits and privileges of Freemasonry.

Hungerford concluded there was a “crying need” in American Freemasonry for a better understanding of the real principles and practices of the Craft, and called for, at least, a minimum balance: if there’s an entertainment committee in a lodge, there should be an education committee as well. He adds that members must “delve into the history of our ancient and honorable institution in order to discover its

² NOTE: Globe Lodge, No. 588, Manhattan, New York was Chartered in 1866. One 8 May 1974, Globe Lodge No. 588, Copestone No. 641, and Daniel Carpenter Lodge No. 643 merged forming Daniel Carpenter Lodge No. 588. From *Craft Masonry in Manhattan, New York County, New York Approximately 350 Lodges, Volume IV*, Lodge Nos. 512 thru 698, Compiled by Gary L. Heinmiller, Director, Onondaga & Oswego Masonic Districts Historical Societies, September 2011.

fundamental aims and objectives” since that pursuit will dictate the level of vitalizing factors that connection us between the past, the present and the future of the fraternity.

That was Hungerford paraphrasing Albert Mackey’s 1875 cautionary statement at the end of one of his enduring essays, *Reading Masons and Masons Who Do Not Read*, where he wrote, “The ultimate success of Masonry depends on the intelligence of her disciples.”

Hungerford certainly subscribed to Mackey’s assessment and he too, fifty-four-years later, bemoaned the truth of that sentence since it was clear most Masons of Hungerford’s era did not read much about Freemasonry, which further threatened the ultimate success of the institution.

For the remainder of his writing life, Hungerford was an advocate of Masonic study groups – a rarity in mainstream Freemasonry at the time, but a growing concept. In studying the sequence of his writings, it appears he gave up the notion that the Masonic culture in his era would turn its attention from the distractions of entertainment programs to those that instilled education and character building as a central theme.

It is easy to trace in his tone the change and how he believed what many believe today about the culture: it was then (and is today) too large to be introspective enough to even consider legitimate adjustments on a wide scale. Hungerford became an advocate of focusing on the smaller group of members who did not come to Freemasonry to be entertained, but to be a part of a genuine philosophical and educational institution, with hopes, at some point, that smaller group would morph into a larger one who would more successfully influence the direction of the institution and constructively contribute to ensuring its perpetuity.

Again, he would be disappointed at what has happened over the past 90 years regarding the speed of morphing, but likely he would be quite pleased to see that, although still small in number, there are certainly members who seek to experience Freemasonry as the philosophical and educational fraternity it was designed and intended to be.

CONCLUSION

Hungerford’s writings were not only just about the state of affairs he observed in 1929, the year of his series. He was a member of the fraternity for over twenty-years. It is fair to presume his experiences and observations extend back into the turn of the century, or, at a minimum, he learned from others their observations and experiences prior to his. Regardless, his writings on this specific topic were kinder than some writers of his era, and harsher than others who wrote about the state of Freemasonry.

There is an absence of any justified reason to believe many of the problems we observe today are “the way we’ve *always* done it.” Reading more of the offerings from respected, thoughtful and Masonically literate Masons in the past, however, does make it seem that much of what we do today is indeed *the we’ve always done it*. That makes it even more of a shame to hear someone use the term.