

## OBSERVING THE CRAFT

By: Andrew Hammer

*The concept of traditional Observance Lodges has been much discussed within the fraternity. With a keen insight Bro. Andrew Hammer examines this concept in his new book "Observing the Craft." From that book Bro. Hammer prepared a paper to be presented at the Lodge of Nine Muses in Washington DC and he has given MSA permission to publish that paper.*

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In 1772, William Preston wrote: Were the privileges of Masonry to be common, or indiscriminately bestowed, the design of the institution would be subverted: for being familiar, like many other important matters, they would soon lose their value, and sink into disregard.

Put another way, Masonry is not for everyone, nor should we feel that it should be. But if one is going to pursue it, then there is no way to avoid the fact that one make time to do so, and invest genuine effort in the process.

That brings me to the concept behind the idea of observance.

Some have asked, do you mean traditional Observance? Traditional is a trick word, because we just cannot claim that traditional Masonry is observant Masonry as we would define it. The debate between lodges where philosophy and decorum are the order of the day and lodges where men get together to socialize and drink is not even remotely new. It goes back to the very beginning of speculative Masonry, with men meeting in taverns 300 years ago.

The term *Knife and Fork Degree* goes back to the dispute between the Ancients and the Moderns, which means that both forms can lay claim to being traditional, and arguably takes the T out of the TO.

In our case also, our Lodge goes back to 1783, so we can't be traditional, because we already are in some sense. I prefer to use simply the term *observant*, and have in my book referred to Observant Lodges and Observant Masons.

In the simplest sense, when we use the term *observance* in relation to any discipline or philosophy, we are talking about a careful attention *to* and practice *of* what might be considered the essential tenets of that discipline. Another way to explain it is the effort to

do everything involved with that discipline as correctly as possible, to the best of your ability.

In the Masonic sense, *observance* means seeing to it that certain methods and characteristics of Masonic Labour are carried out to the highest standard that can possibly be attained by a Lodge. I'm not talking about a specific ritual or unified form of practice, but rather to the maximum degree of performance that can be expected from any given Lodge, whatever their ritual or practice may be.

Yet there are common elements of practice that will indicate observance in any Lodge decorum, excellence in ritual, and reverence for the same are indispensable in an observant Lodge. For the moment however, I want to talk about what observance *is* in a more profound sense, and how that concept relates to observing the Craft.

Observance is as much a state of mind as a set of actions. In fact, each helps the other reach their maximum potential. The things we think and the philosophical attitude we cultivate as regards Freemasonry and its associated concerns, will influence and improve our actions in the Lodge.

The actions we perform in Lodge, when done well and to a degree of proficiency, aid the mind in maintaining its disciplined state in ritual and introspection. The goal to be achieved by this activity is a high state of concentration on exactly those things we find in the Craft which enable us to be that 'better man'. It is a deliberately contemplative union between the mind and body, which then enables us to take the result of that union into the soul.

In other words, observance is both a state of mind that manifests itself through a set of actions, and a set of actions which helps cultivate a specific state of mind. The overall experience, when done properly, can create a sense of deep fulfillment and almost other-worldly atmosphere within the Lodge and among the Brethren involved.

If we were to *define* the essential tenets of Freemasonry that we are seeking to observe, we have to go back to certain concepts, notably those ideas from the Enlightenment that form the basis of why we are doing what we are doing. Moreover, we have to examine the source of those ideas as well.

No era is born of a vacuum. Every age is influenced, either positively or negatively, by what has come before it. The men who formulated the ideas which would become known as the Enlightenment were directly inspired and essentially motivated by the philosophical studies of the late Renaissance, specifically the notion that man could truly become more than he had been, in both the spiritual and temporal sense. This notion reached its fruition in the concept of the higher man, closer to God and therefore knowledge itself.

This concept of the 'better man' was a crucial component of the Renaissance thought, and the way to attain that condition was through engaging and challenging our minds,

maximizing their potential, and seeking a higher level of communion with and understanding the Supreme Being. The generations that followed after this line of thought produced those men who constructed Freemasonry as we know it, enhancing their newfound awareness by seeking to manifest it outwardly through their actions, be they individual or social. This then led to the philosophical canals which would flow into the Enlightenment.

The modern verifiable origin of Freemasonry in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century stands perfectly on the cusp of these two significant ages in human development, and finds like-minded men organizing themselves into Lodges in order to create a rarified space to do exactly that kind of work. To be sure, they celebrated their endeavors with hearty banquets to unwind from the rigor of their intellectual and ritual labour, but in the midst of this, they remained true to the notion that they were engaged in an exercise of personal advancement, for the benefit of self and society.

When one approaches of the Craft in this way, everything one does in a Lodge, from the lights, to regalia, to our physical movements becomes a pursuit of excellence, of that state of 'betterness' that allows us to distinguish the Masonic world of the lodge from the profane world outside.

Having an empirical experience of this higher, more refined state of being confirms that such a state is possible for us, outside of the Lodge as well as inside. We can know that because we will have achieved it, and we then take the inner knowledge that is possible to better ourselves out into the world. That is *not* done as a function of Freemasonry itself in the world, as a visible social source, but as ***the better man in the world***, improved by his Masonic Education, study and discipline.

Does that then mean that non-Masons and society as a whole are to be left without this knowledge unless they are somehow brought to the Craft?

Not at all. The lessons found in the system of Freemasonry are not and never have been exclusively within its doors. To the contrary, one of the most noble deeds of Freemasonry has always been to fashion itself as a repository or magnet for the worlds great philosophical ideas, ideas which have existed for millennia.

Before universities were available to society at large, and indeed before the development of a middle class anywhere in the world, Lodges sought to be universities of the common man, challenging the obscurantism of kings and clergy in the name of free thought for all. The Craft true to its name, is a ***method of instruction*** in these higher things; it is not those higher things themselves. There are many roads to enlightenment; we are concerned only with ours and how we practice it. By selectively introducing seekers of knowledge into our ranks, we do our part in those places we can, to add to the ranks of thinking beings everywhere, with the intention that they will share the benefit of our teaching by way of quality of their minds.

That being said, if we fail to approach the craft in this way, we take the path of least resistance, and soon become unable to tell the difference between the Lodge and any other social club in our community. Absent an interest in observance, that is, in reaching for the light through our study and actions, Lodges risk ceasing to be in any way Masonic. They simply absorb whatever enjoyments and pastimes from the outside world their members enjoy, and mistakenly continue to label such superficial miscellany as Masonry.

If Lodge meetings and functions are no different than any other social function one would normally have in life, save the symbol and the jargon, then in time brothers will have forgotten what Masonry truly is, and abandoned what makes it the treasure it has been for centuries to the best of men in all stations of life. It will become just like everything else, conforming to everything else, and nothing more. The very thing that makes the Craft special will have been sacrificed to what is easy and comfortable, and the quarries then become filled with idlers who want the benefits of being called craftsmen, without actually doing or knowing how to do any work.

This dilemma is exactly what is confusing so many men who are becoming masons today. They have sought something in Freemasonry that they have, for whatever reason, been led to believe holds meaning, or stability, or some kind of nobler order of things. In some cases they have read about it, or heard things which have led them to believe that when they express an interest and submit a petition for membership, they are on the path to joining such an organization. What they find however, in more cases than one should like to admit, is an old boys' club like any other, with nothing distinguishable about it except the fact that is a legal claim to a name and legacy it has no intention of living up to. We can bring these men into the Craft by whatever means and whatever pace one wishes; we will have already lost them before they are raised, because *we have lost ourselves*.

Observing the craft, returning to the pursuit of meaning instead of mediocrity, can help all of us avoid such an outcome.