

EDUCATION IN LODGE: EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES

BY DAN HRINKO, DDGM

(This essay was developed as a presentation for a group of lodges in San Antonio, Texas presented October, 29, 2016. The specific topic was to explore the various opportunities for presenting quality educational experiences in Lodges and to the Brothers of the craft.)

A 32-year-old has a career, family, home, and is becoming established in his community. He is searching for deeper meaning in his relationships and purpose in his life. He recalls his grandfather was a Mason, as was his father, although neither one of them ever said much about Freemasonry. He begins searching the internet and learns that Freemasonry purports to make good men better. He reads some questionable material but sorts through the dross to focus on the opportunity for enlightenment. So this young man knocks on the West Gate. Not knowing what to expect, he asks himself how

he will be received into the lodge? What will I find that is transformative? What are our responsibilities after completing the formal training?

In Ohio, our charters tell us the primary purpose of a Lodge is to make Masons. In Texas they say to admit, initiate, pass, and raise Masons. It is possible that most, if not all, charters contain the same expressed mandate, to transform a qualified man into a Mason. Just how do we do that?

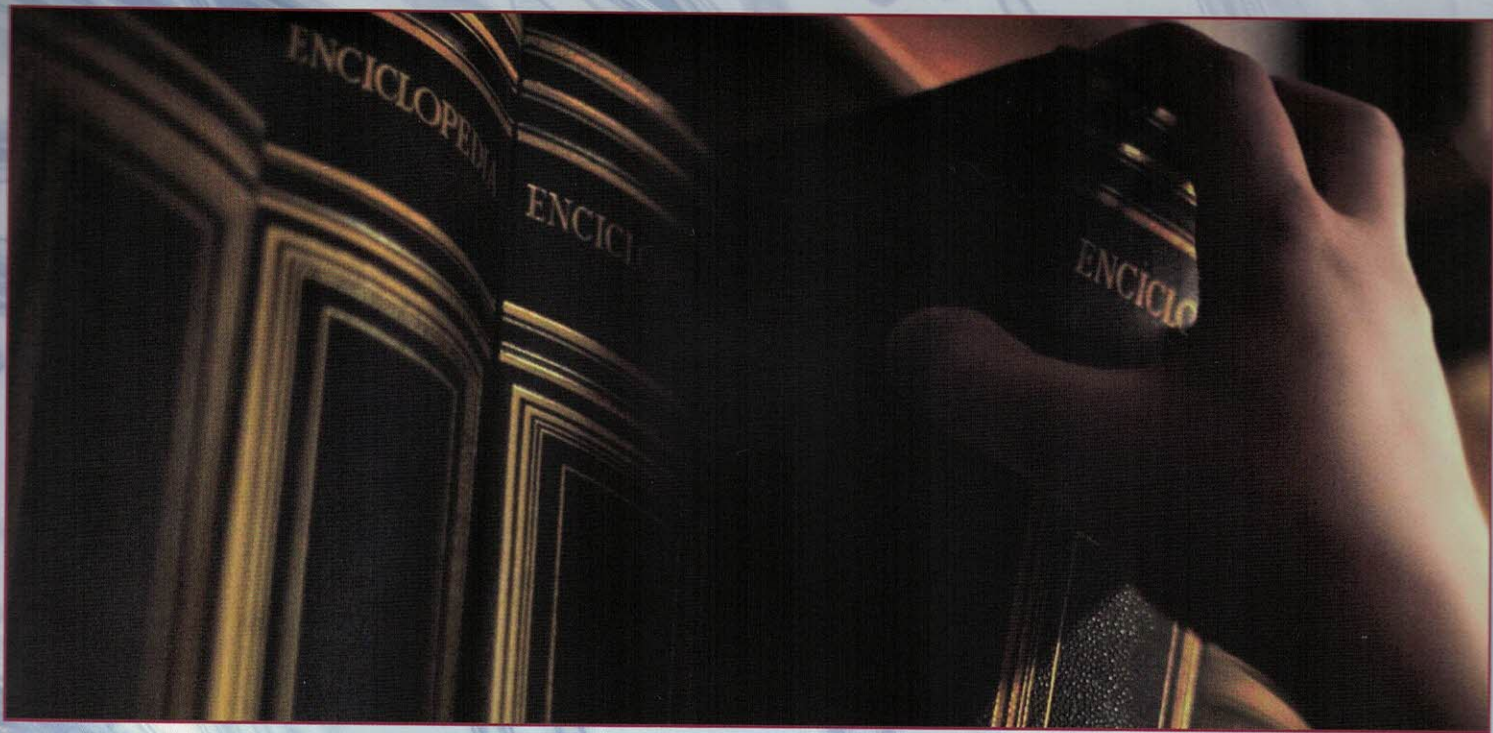
Our ritual is an excellent place to start exploring this question. In the Entered Apprentice Degree we are taught that we come to improve ourselves in Freemasonry. We remind ourselves of this fact every time we open a Lodge of Entered Apprentices. Furthermore, if we follow the admonition of our Middle Chamber lecture, we are encouraged to expand our awareness of the nature of man and our world through the trivium and quadrivium.

When we introduce this young man to our principles through ritual experiences, allegories, and symbols, he is constantly admonished to improve himself in Freemasonry. The Entered Apprentice charge says we should converse with well-informed Brothers who will be glad to share what they know; clearly, continuing Masonic education is understood as an expectation. However, even after we have attained proficiency in the degree rituals, we are not absolved of this responsibility. As we study the lessons of Speculative Freemasonry, our lodges have the responsibility to create the fertile soil for transformative lifelong learning processes for our perusal. The challenge for all lodges is to find ways of meeting this responsibility.

My own masonic career began in the late 1970's where education consisted of the Lodge Education Officer providing a brief program presenting some tidbit of history. Other programs would be about some well-known or influential person who happened to be a Brother. We heard about Abe Lincoln's axe, George Washington the Mason, and Red Skelton's Pledge of Allegiance. These short educational experiences were offered at lodge meetings—*only if there was time to do it after the administration of lodge business.*

My experience was that lodge administration was a largely banal affair; when questions were asked the answer was usually "we have always done it this way." Ritual was performed with a high degree of accuracy, but no time was given to the meaning or how what we were doing engaged or inspired a candidate to creatively and philosophically discuss the lessons and meanings. Questions went unanswered, symbols went unexplained. No one ever told me what the word *hele* meant or even where I could turn to find the definition.

Many of us found this to be completely unfulfilling. We became bored, frustrated, and quickly saw Masonic meetings as a waste of time. This was because we were not finding what we were originally seeking when we entered the west gate. We were not being trained as Masons, we were being raised to becoming dues-paying members and officers performing ritual work and conducting business meetings in a perfunctory manner.



To return to my hypothetical candidate, I wonder what would happen to him if his early experiences are like mine? If statistics tell us anything it is that there is a very good chance he will not be active in Lodge after 2 years and there is nearly a fair chance he will stop paying dues within 10 years.

When I read about the transformation that is required for a man to become a Mason, it is impossible for me to understand how any man can truly become a Mason without education. Ritual experiences create an opportunity. Obligations create a bond. However, without education, no man is transformed to being able to apply what is taught inside the Lodge outside the Lodge. So how do we properly educate brothers?

The education of new brothers is the most critical time because 'as the twig is bent, so grows the tree.' However, expectations are often limited to the minimum requirements and these are often lowered for convenience. One common phrase regarding what is expected begins with "all you need to do is" This tells our new brother that doing their best, asking questions, obtaining answers, and expanding his awareness of Freemasonry is not important. He is told that the only thing that matters is meeting the minimum requirements and moving on to the next degree as quickly as possible. This twig will grow into a tree that is weak, unreliable, and incapable of supporting any weight in the future. Imagine the health of the forest after many generations of trees only meeting the minimum expectations. Imagine the health of the Lodges populated by Brothers trained to this extent.

For a thorough education, new brothers should have ample time to not only learn their proficiency but to explore the lessons of that degree. They should explore the meanings and applications of the lessons illustrated by the symbols and summarized in that proficiency. This exploration can occur during individual instruction with his Master Craftsman or Mentor, in group discussions with other candidates and their Masters, and through supplemental readings. These allow each new initiate to learn beyond the words to the meanings and lessons

contained in our traditions. With time, the initiate can develop an understanding of the power of these lessons.

To do this requires time and effort from both the new brother and his mentor. Brothers who follow this system often take nearly a year to complete their training from new initiate to Master Mason. Does this work? A survey of the Lodges that use such a thorough program shows that the retention rate of new Brothers remaining active after 2 years range from 75% to 90%.

Because we are expected to continue our education in Freemasonry throughout our entire Masonic career, education during Lodge meetings is essential to creating Masonic experiences that are seen as a good use of time. These programs can take several forms. For the past 40 years, brief presentations by the Lodge Education Officer have been the norm. In some lodges, they typically fall at the end of the meeting and are often excluded when the hour grows late. We can all see how well this has worked.

Other options included formal presentation of research papers where a Brother explores a topic, makes use of written references, and produces a paper that summarizes the material reviewed and offers their thoughts on the topic and its importance to Freemasonry. This could be a treatise on the value of pilasters both architecturally and symbolically or an in-depth presentation of a particular symbol such as the pillars on King Solomon's porch. Many Lodges have adopted this approach. Some find it too formal, others believe it to be too challenging for the typical initiate. However, many initiates find the academic nature of these projects to be particularly attractive and enlightening.

Another method of educating our members is the use of discussions in Lodge. Discussions provide opportunities for everyone in the Lodge to become involved, to share their questions, thoughts, and expertise. These discussions work well when the topic is announced in advance and brothers have an opportunity to collect their thoughts, explore sources of information, and prepare to bring this information to the discussion. This type of experience requires a facilitator who

can ask leading questions rather than an expert who imparts what information he may have.

Lodges that have embraced this model have found attendance at meetings increasing significantly with attendance rising from the low teens to the mid 30's in a matter of a few months.

Some find this education practice intimidating claiming they don't know what to discuss. Successful topics are easy to find when the topics are chosen directly from our ritual. Examples of topics include the three duties identified in the Entered Apprentice charge, the lessons contained in symbols such as the ashlar, the point of transformation from man to Mason during the EA degree, the role of allegory as a method of teaching, and even the lessons of the allegory of the 3rd degree. In fact, one can fill an entire year of educational discussions by merely moving through the Entered Apprentice lecture one paragraph at a time.

Topics can also be more personal such as exploring how the lessons of Freemasonry contributes to our success in our roles as fathers, spouses, sons, and members of extended families. We can explore topics such as leadership and morality with our basis in Masonic symbolism.

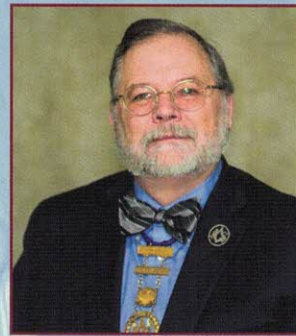
Education can also be included in other Lodge events. During social gatherings, brothers can be invited to ask questions and discuss them with knowledgeable members of the lodge. As we develop a comfortable, trusting relationship with our brothers, we can quickly learn who actively pursues Speculative Freemasonry through reading and who are ready to share what they are learning. We can learn from Brothers around the world as we explore how things occur in different jurisdictions and learn from their successes. Making use of a solid library of writers from the past as well as current days will add to the Light we receive on a local level.

By recognizing that the lessons of Speculative Freemasonry are universal and that they permeate everything we do, we can find examples and applications of Masonic lessons in any topic, situation, or relationship. In teaching our Brothers to explore these possibilities, we are fulfilling our duties as a Lodge to create that fertile ground where Masons can fulfill their obligations from the Entered Apprentice degree to improve themselves in Freemasonry. Through education the primary focus of our meetings and in our time together, we meet the expectations of these new Brothers who come to the West gate to be better men through Freemasonry.



So let us go back and check in on our young inquirer. What do you think will be his reaction after he has experienced the types of education opportunities we have outlined above? Will he be provided with what he is likely seeking? Will he forge a close bond with the brothers of his Lodge and remain active with them? Will he feel Masonry is a good use of his time? What kind of tree will he grow into with the shaping that is available from a Lodge that fulfills its responsibilities to educate their Brothers?

As each of us expands our personal understanding of our Royal Art, we have the obligation to share it with our Brothers to aid in their growth and development. As the saying goes, "as the twig is bent, so grows the trees": we should shape our twigs to grow into strong trees that can sustain the challenges of modern society and stand strong for the future. Reclaiming the mission of making and educating new Mason will guide us in doing just that and pass on to the next generation a practice of Speculative Freemasonry that is better than the practices that were given to us.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bro. Daniel D. Hrinko is a member of Clark Lodge # 101 Springfield, Ohio. He served as its Worshipful Master in 1982 and again in 2004. He was the Worshipful Master of Arts & Sciences Lodge Under Dispensation; served on the Grand Lodge of Ohio Committee on Education and Information and as a District Education Officer. He currently serves as a District Deputy Grand Master for the 9th Masonic District.

Bro. Hrinko is the author of the book, "The Craft Driven Lodge." He has also authored several articles on the psychology of the initiatic experience as well as the formation of a new Lodge. He has delivered presentations in numerous Lodges as well as at the gatherings of the Masonic Restoration Foundation.

Bro. Hrinko lives in Springfield, Ohio with his wife Lisa. He is a Psychologist in private practice specializing in psychological evaluations for the courts.