

Whither Are We Traveling?

Chapter Two – The Level of Leadership

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The Level of Leadership

Question 1: Can we expect Freemasonry to retain its past glory and prestige unless the level of leadership is raised above its present position?

A teacher in the public schools of a neighboring State cherished a long-standing desire to become a Master Mason. His petition to the Lodge in which he resided was accepted. He presented himself for the Entered Apprentice degree, but never returned. The Brethren of the Lodge concluded, I am sure, that they had made a mistake in electing that Entered Apprentice because of his apparent lack of interest.

But it was not lack of interest that caused him to go out of the door, never to return. It was disappointment and disillusionment. The performance of the Master of that Lodge was such that it constituted an insult to the candidate's intelligence. Because the head of the Masonic Fraternity in that community was careless and sloppy and crude, because he was attempting to do something for which he was not prepared, because he was trying to give "good and wholesome instruction" on subjects he knew nothing about, a good man was lost to Freemasonry.

On first hearing, that story made a profound impression upon me. The more I have thought about it, and the more I have seen it duplicated, the more I am convinced that the Number One responsibility for any tapering off of membership, any lack of interest and attendance, rests squarely upon the shoulders of our Lodge leadership.

Yes, I know the subject is a touchy one. But in introducing it, I am only putting into print what has been whispered in the corridors these last ten years.

Take a long and thoughtful look at the names of the men who served our Lodges as Master 100 years ago – or even 50 years ago. Consider the positions of importance those men occupied in their respective communities. Then let us ask ourselves whether our present day leadership is in the same league.

One unforgettable Lodge meeting stands out in my mind. The Lodge was having trouble maintaining interest; membership was dropping; it had called for help. When the hour came for the meeting to begin, there had been no preparation. I sat around waiting for Lodge to be opened; sat around waiting for dinner to be served; sat around while the candidates were being prepared; sat around while the Junior Warden tried to enlist a craft, actually calling for volunteers, wheedling, cajoling; sat around while the Master, reluctant to close, literally begged those on the sidelines to say a few words. In short, *I sat around*. What was there in that meeting that would make anyone want to come again?

Nor do I exempt myself. Looking back on some of the meetings the year I was Master, it is a wonder to me the Lodge held together. Many of my meetings were such a first class bore that I would do almost anything to avoid getting trapped in such gatherings today.

If we want our Lodges to regain the position they once occupied in the interest and loyalties of men, we had better gain a proper perspective; we had better sort things out in the order of their importance. To open the discussion, permit me to make three pertinent observations:

1. **We must pay more attention to proficiency in the East.** We make a great to-do over proficiency of candidates. We want to devise some method whereby new Master Masons may be forced to memorize a set of questions and answers. But we do little or nothing to insure proficiency where it really counts.

A Master is expected to be Master of his Lodge – not a weakling to be pushed around. Theoretically, he “sets the Craft to work and gives them good and wholesome instruction.” Yet what do we require for election as Master? Simply that a Brother serve as a Warden. That is all. There are no minimum requirements as to ritualistic proficiency; nothing regarding history, symbolism, philosophy, ethics, law, tradition. Only a so-called degree for Past Masters which, in far too many instances, is a farce. We elect a Master and expect him somehow to become a leader. It never occurs to us to require evidence of leadership first.

2. **There is far more to being Master of a Lodge than the mere recitation of a ritual.** We are paying the penalty of years of “mass production” practices, and a bitter penalty it is. When Masters of Lodges are so lacking in imagination and vision that they cannot conceive of a Masonic meeting unless a degree is conferred, then we need not expect a revival of interest and attendance and we need not look for an upswing of membership short of war.

I would a thousand times rather see as Master of a Lodge a man who can provide real leadership, a man who can give “good and wholesome instruction,” a man who comprehends what Freemasonry is all about, even if he cannot confer a single degree. Suppose he can not recite the ritual. So what? There always are those who are eager and willing to do ritualistic work, but there are precious few who can provide inspired leadership.

It is high time we start looking about for the best possible leadership and enlisting the support of men who can lead. But instead, we consider only those who come to Lodge, those who stick it out in the endurance contest. We “start in line” the man who is on hand whenever the door is opened regardless of whether he has even the most elementary qualities of leadership.

If the practice of automatic ladder promotion of officers must be discarded in order to obtain the kind of leadership we should have, then by all means let us discard the foolish custom. There is nothing in the winning of an endurance contest, in itself, that qualifies a man to be Master of his Lodge.

If the so-called “line” of officers must be shortened to enable men of ability to serve their Lodges without devoting six or seven years to minor offices, then what are we waiting for? Why not shorten the line? Is not good leadership for one year more important than keeping a seat warm for six?

3. **If Freemasonry is to command respect in the community, then the man who wears the Master’s hat must be one who can command respect.** The young teacher who did not return for advancement because his entire conception of Freemasonry was colored by what he saw and heard in the East. The Master of a Lodge is the symbol of Freemasonry in his community. If he is not a man upon whom intelligent people may look with admiration, then we need not expect to reap a harvest of petitions from intelligent men.

Make no mistake. Men judge Freemasonry by what they see wearing Masonic emblems. They judge a Lodge by the caliber of its leadership. If we persist, year after year, in putting our worst foot forward, then we can expect to continue getting just what we are getting now.