

Reflections on the 15th Degree Knights of The East, of The Sword or of The Eagle

by

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The chief obstacles to her (Freemasonry's) success are the apathy and faithlessness of her own selfish children, and the supine indifference of the world. In the roar and crush and hurry of life and business, and the tumult and uproar of politics, the quiet voice of Masonry is unheard and unheeded.

The quotation heading this column sounds like contemporary commentary from a learned observer of current events, and the Masonic situation. It was composed, however, around 1870. That's a mere 153 years after The Grand Lodge of England was formed and about 138 years ago. These words were composed when formal Freemasonry, as we know it, was a little more than half the age that it is today. As you may have surmised, the quotation is from our Illustrious Brother Albert Pike; a learned observer of his world and, I gather from reading his tome "Morals and Dogma, a fairly comprehensive critic of our social, political, and Masonic conditions.

These questions occur to me, when I contemplate the status of Freemasonry and the Scottish Rite in today's world:

- Why are we afraid to practice Freemasonry?
- Why are we afraid to return to the methods that made Freemasonry, and the Scottish Rite the great and forceful organization that we once were?

Let me hasten to say that I am not talking about the post World War II era when our numbers swelled. I truly believe this period marked the beginning of our decline. I am referring to the time when those few men who were Freemasons were men dedicated to the ideas of equality, liberty for all men, and who valued honor and duty above all power, wealth, and fame. This was an era when Freemasons were leaders in bringing Europe, both Continental and British, enlightenment when reason was valued above superstition; an era when both reason and science were respected along with religion. It was a time when the ideals of liberty and equality blossomed to become a new nation led by Freemasons. A time when intellect was respected, not ridiculed.

Memberships in Freemasonry and The Scottish Rite are tumbling downhill and suddenly the bottom of the hill is in sight. Grand Lodges and AASR Valleys are losing money, and I am persuaded that the only true reason is fear. Paralyzing, dissension causing fear. Well, of course we are afraid, one might say, because we are losing left and right. But I am thinking about a much more devastating fear.

I am convinced that we are afraid of the actual practice of Freemasonry. Yes, I am convinced that many of our Lodges and Valleys are afraid to practice the forms of our order. We are afraid to ask our members to learn ritual because we fear that they will do nothing if they are challenged to do something. We put Candidates through “one day classes” and proclaim hundreds, perhaps thousands, of new members to a world that simply does not care. In the Scottish Rite we “put on” the five required degrees for our Candidates and call them “Masters of the Royal Secret” at the end of the day, thus cheating them out of twenty-four beautiful morality plays that are truly enlightening when done reasonably well. But, who are we really “putting on”? Some would say the Candidates. Aren’t we really “putting on” ourselves?

An education program has become a major event in both Blue Lodges and AASR Valleys, rather than a normal, recurring expectation. And when we have these events they are on subjects ranging from ostrich ranching to hurricanes (I have been present for both) having nothing to do with Freemasonry.

How long has it been since you have heard music in your Lodge?

We pompously point to Mozart, Hayden, and other great composers as proud members of our fraternity, yet even their Masonic offerings are seldom heard in Lodge or at a Masonic function. How often do we hear the poetry of Robert Burns, Rudyard Kipling or Edgar Lee Masters read in Lodge? Almost never! Not even their Masonic poetry.

Does the Master of your Lodge demand that the Sacred Space created by the formal opening of the Lodge be revered or is it chitchat time on the sidelines. Should he have to demand it?

Programs on Freemasonry, its history, philosophy, music, and poetry comprise the business of Freemasonry, and yet we most often spend the time in our Stated Communications listening to minutes and reports that could, instead, be posted on a bulletin board or, more often, sent to the members *via* e-mail. We spend valuable time expressing opinions and entertaining motions, then voting on trivia such as whether or not to pay the light bill or to have the lawn mowed.

Illustrious Brother Pike tells us, “It is the motionless and stationary that most frets and impedes the current of progress; the solid rock or stupid dead tree, rested firmly on the bottom, and around which the river whirls and eddies: the Masons that doubt and hesitate and are discouraged; that disbelieve in the capability of man to improve; that are not disposed to toil and labor for the interest and well-being of general humanity; that expect others to do all, even of that which they do not oppose or ridicule; while they sit applauding and doing nothing or perhaps prognosticating failure”.

We should not be asking Candidates and newly made Masons what they want. We should be telling them what Freemasonry requires of them and then

providing them with encouragement, education, and opportunity to meet and vastly exceed those requirements. Our tendency is to say, "Oh, the young people today don't have time for all that. They don't want to study and learn and improve. They want a party. They want family outings."

How many times do young Freemasons have to tell us, in their writings in Masonic publications and in Masonic leadership conferences, that what they need is challenge? "Don't make Freemasonry easier," many have written, "Make us work for the degrees. Charge us more for entry into the order and increase the dues. But make it worth our while!"

In his masterpiece, *Morals and Dogma*, Brother Pike tells us, "Let us still remember that the only question for us to ask, as true men and Masons, is what does duty require...?"

All that I have learned about our Fraternity tells me that duty requires us, as Freemasons, to practice the Arts and Sciences of Freemasonry both within and without the Lodge to the best of our ability. Duty requires us to explore the opportunities that the Fraternity offers in all disciplines. Duty requires that we practice the form of the ritual in our Lodges, revering the Lodge for the Sacred Space that is formed when it is properly tiled. Duty requires that we make our Lodges places of learning, increasing wisdom, strengthened morality, and beauty of thought and spirit. Duty requires that we proceed with our responsibilities without fear, placing our faith in our God, ourselves and our ability to do good, and in our fellow humans. Duty requires us to accept all people as equals. Duty requires us to accept all regularly made Freemasons, tried and true, into our Lodges.

Why are we afraid to boldly do the things that duty requires? I don't have the answer, but the question is there hanging over every one of us who has followed the quest of Freemasonry and it is our duty to answer, each of us for ourselves. Albert Pike ends his commentary on this degree by saying, "We must pass through the darkness, to reach the light."

We must pass through the darkness of our fear, to the light of a new dawn of Freemasonry. If we do not, there will be no dawn.

"Don't waste life in doubts and fears; spend yourself on the work before you, well assured that the right performance of this hour's duties will be the best preparation for the hours and ages that will follow it."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

*Sincerely and Fraternally,
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