

# THE CONCEPT OF OBSERVANCE

W.: B.: ANDREW HAMMER, PM

ALBA LODGE N<sup>o</sup> 222

*Excerpted in part from 'Observing the Craft'*

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 book I have written, *Observing the Craft*, and the concept behind the idea of observance.

Some have asked, do you mean 'Traditional Observance'? With respect and admiration to the brethren who have laboured under this term, I do not, because we simply cannot claim that traditional Masonry is observant Masonry as we would define it. That is to say, we cannot claim to hold sole ownership of what is merely traditional in the fraternity, because other traditions have existed which we might find odious. The debate between Lodges where philosophy and decorum are the order of the day and Lodges where men get together to socialise 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.

While one can—and will—argue that the traditions of Masonry involve solemn initiatic experiences, reflective discussions, and exceptional ritual, unfortunately one must also concede that the traditional experience of Masonry also includes one-day conferrals, multiple candidates, and drunken revelry. The minute books of many Lodges confirm this, including the admonishments to the brethren regarding such revelry that can be found in those books over time.

This means that both forms of practice can lay claim to being traditional, and that arguably takes the T out of the TO. Tradition is not what we seek. It is not what the founders of speculative Masonry sought. We are interested in much more than those selective practices we enjoy that are established by the passage of time, and we are not interested in merely doing things the way they have always been done. Speculative Masonry originates not in a defence of antiquity, but in the quest for human *progress*.

What we are seeking, and what we can claim, is the observance of the *intent* of our historical founders, and the restoration of Lodges to that intended observance. It is in that intent that we find Freemasonry defined as what Robert Adam, the founding Master of Alexandria Lodge N<sup>o</sup> 39, expressed in 1783 as a 'sacred asylum of temperance, order, and decorum', and 'the rigid school of social virtue.'

Further, in the case of an older Lodge, it can't really *be* 'traditional', because it already is in some sense, whether they like it or not. By the same token, 21st century Lodges who claim that term are reminiscent of those men in the 18th century who called themselves 'Antient', even though they established themselves an entire generation after those brethren they referred to as 'Moderns'. As a result, I prefer to use simply the term 'observant', and have in my book referred to observant Lodges and observant Masons. Using that one word allows us to transcend the philosophical debate over tradition, and focuses brethren on the more concrete question of *doing* what was intended by our forebears. I would fraternally encourage 'traditional observance' Lodges to instead consider themselves simply as *observant*. I sincerely believe that the one word is both stronger in meaning and less ambiguous, which will aid us in our efforts to increase the overall quality of the Masonic art.

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 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 otherwords, 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 fulfilment 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 to knowledge itself.

This concept of the 'better man' was a crucial component of Renaissance thought, and the way to attain that condition was through engaging and challenging our minds, maximizing their potential, seeking a higher level of communion with and understanding of 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 and verifiable origin of Freemasonry in the early 18th century stands perfectly on the cusp of these two significant ages in human development, and finds like-minded men organising themselves into Lodges in order to create a rarified space to do exactly that kind of work. To be sure, they celebrated their endeavours with hearty banquets to unwind from the rigour 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 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 it is possible to better ourselves out into the world. This is not done as a function of Freemasonry itself in the world, as a visible social force, 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 into the Craft?

Not at all. The lessons found in the system of Freemasonry are not and never have been found 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 world's great philosophical ideas, ideas which have existed for millenia.

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 the 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 symbols and 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 in 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 organisation. 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 it has 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 at 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 to avoid such an outcome.



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