

On Minding Our Own Business

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Before embarking on a consideration of this topic, it might be appropriate to define 'the business of Freemasonry.' First and foremost, Freemasonry is an initiatic Order in the business of the development, enhancement, and transformation of the individual Mason through a lifelong process of self-discipline, self-discovery and self-improvement.

Know Thyself.

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;

The proper study of mankind is man.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) – Essay on Man

Just as our ancient operative Brethren used their skill and ability to build lasting monuments in stone, we as Free and Accepted, or Speculative Masons strive to build character. Just as stone is refined, shaped and polished to reveal the inner beauty, so we regard "*the internal and not external qualification of a man.*" We are reminded that the Winding Stair leads upward and inward to the Middle Chamber. To appreciate the meaning of Masonry, we must be able to answer two basic questions, "Where does the Winding Stair lead?" and "Where is the Middle Chamber?"

During the last three hundred years it must be freely admitted that there has been an inevitable cultural and social evolution in Freemasonry. Being comprised of men, although based upon unchanging principles, it is a living entity and therefore subject to ongoing change. Some well-informed observers of the Craft have suggested some, perhaps many lodges have, perhaps unwittingly, gradually moved from being a gentleman's philosophical society, the inheritor and current custodian of an ancient mystical tradition, to a service oriented club, where the main focus is on fundraising projects in the community. Some have gone further to describe the lodge meeting as "a beer and pizza party without the beer."

No one would denigrate or diminish the validity of the projects undertaken in the Cause of Good. Benevolence and Charity are essential components of Masonic practice. In this Grand Jurisdiction the work of the Masonic Foundation of Ontario, the Committee on Blood Donors, and the MasoniCHIP Foundation, together with District projects come to mind. But they are by-products of the true object of Freemasonry: "*the cultivation and improvement of the human mind.*"

From the beginning, when the first Grand Lodges emerged during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the Craft has been subject to attacks by varied and sundry groups, in our own time by the religious right and the political left. The traditional response to these external assaults has been to ignore them, based as they are on misinformation or motivated by malice. It is impossible to have a reasoned discussion with unreasoning and unreasonable people. If we are to 'mind our own business' as this paper suggests, then perhaps these groups should mind theirs.

Have we tried to accommodate these critics: modifying our Ritual, dropping the term 'Masonic Temple' in favour of the bland 'Masonic Centre?' Do we qualify, or in some instances, erase completely the traditional penalties from our Solemn Obligations because they are misunderstood by outsiders? If we are about *minding our own business*, we do not need to explain ourselves, let alone apologize to anyone outside the fraternity.

As Freemasons we are charged to "*preserve sacred and inviolable*" the ancient landmarks of the Order, and "*never suffer an infringement of our customs, or a deviation from established usage.*" We should never 'water down' Freemasonry in a vain attempt to be popular or trendy. At his Installation the Worshipful Master is reminded that, "*It is not in the power of any man or body of men, to make innovation in the body of Masonry.*" It is not for us, however well intentioned, to introduce social programs to remake Freemasonry in our own image. Rather it is the business of Freemasonry to shape and refine the individual to reflect the lofty ideals and profound precepts of Freemasonry – in other words, to remake the man in the image of Freemasonry..

This is an age of 'freedom of information' when anyone and everyone feels that they have a right to know anything and everything. Investigative reporters in the media, purporting to serve 'the public interest,' mine the private and personal lives of public figures hoping to discover skeletons in closets. Freemasonry has been demonized by conspiracy theorists, and is deemed a 'secret society' in the mythology of popular urban culture.

Surely Masonry is more than a curiosity to be explored by or explained to the public. There is a fine line between openness, visibility and awareness on one hand and improper disclosure and solicitation on the other. Responding out of desperation to declining membership, and in an attempt to top up both numbers and coffers, some jurisdiction have abandoned the ancient landmark and mounted advertising campaigns. The end result of this and other 'band-aid' measures may be seen in the escalating numbers of resignations and suspensions.

We are not missionaries trying to convert the masses; we are not like proselytising religious sects or political parties seeking strength in numbers. Our sole concern is the

development of character within ourselves. We ought to recognize the basic fact that Freemasonry is not for everyman – not even for every good man. Admission into Freemasonry is a privilege that must be sincerely sought, honestly earned, and worthily deserved.

Let me be clear. We must always remain open, honest, respectful and forthright in answering the inquiries directed to us by the man sincerely seeking satisfaction in his quest for knowledge, understanding, and truth. This premise is made clear in the words of the Petition which he must sign, and should he be accepted for initiation, to which he must further signify his assent: “*a desire for knowledge.*” In this the importance of role of the Committee of Inquiry cannot be overstated or over emphasized.

All of which may be summed up in the words of advice Polonius gave to his son Laertes:

*“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst then be false to any man.”¹*

These lines encapsulate and embody the essence of Masonic philosophy. If we are to ‘mind our own business’ it is a profound lesson that applies to the individual, the lodge, and the Craft in general.

RSJD 2013

¹ Shakespeare. **Hamlet** Act 1, Scene 3