



Paper

Learning, Development and Retention

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The rationale behind re-introducing Learning and Development into Lodge life.

Summary

A possible solution to the problem of newer Brethren leaving Lodges because they do not understand the symbolism and it is not explained to them in clear, modern language.

Keywords

Learning and Development, Ritual, Symbolism, Initiate, New-Mason

The role of education in retention

Worshipful Master, Brethren, We are all aware of the problem of retention. The realisation in recent times that we need to create a more formal structure to support, educate and mentor our new Brethren has been a significant improvement. Often a Lodge Mentor will support a candidate, but does he understand enough about the Craft to satisfy the curiosity or concerns of a new Mason?

It is difficult to find suitable Candidates who are willing to put themselves forward for initiation into Freemasonry. When they ask to join, do we know what they are looking for or expecting? How do we retain them, when they think they've seen all we have to offer?

Recently, a Mentoring Co-ordinator of a Lodge was talking to an Entered Apprentice who had been initiated a month earlier. He was somewhat baffled by it all! As a self-employed businessman, he had not had time to sit down and read the publications given to him, not even the Peterborough booklet! Before he joined, he had little idea of what to expect. It had been difficult for him, because he did not know what he could say to his partner when he got home, and she thought it all sounded a bit strange.

Many of us probably felt much the same when we were initiated. We need to start explaining a little earlier. Perhaps each Lodge Tyler or Mentor needs to have in their possession a short talk for Initiates covering some aspects of the mode of preparation? The issue behind this lack of understanding may well be a lack of education in Lodges. If we are to ensure our newer Brethren understand, we need to make sure that all our other Brethren know enough about Freemasonry to talk to the newer Brethren in an informed manner. It is clear at the moment that not all of them can do so!

To explain this approach, let's start with the fundamental question: what is Freemasonry? Every Freemason who has progressed beyond the First-Degree has learned the ritual answer to this: '*a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols*'. However, I suspect that comparatively few of us have ever thought deeply about what this means. So, let's break it down: Freemasonry is 'a peculiar system of morality'. We all have an idea of what morality is, but perhaps not so much the 'system'. We teach our Initiates comparatively little about this. In the Initiation ceremony, we explain the Three Great Lights and the Working Tools; we put the Initiate on the spot in the North-East corner as a lesson about the importance of charity; and we then provide him with some plainly spoken guidance in the Exhortation or Charge. He will need to hear the ceremony a few times before he understands all of this, let alone the other lessons of the First-Degree. These instructions come across as a basic code, no different from the ethics required by most major religions.

Now let's think about the other word, which we have so easily ignored: 'peculiar'. Clearly this does not mean 'odd' or 'strange', but rather, 'distinctive' or 'unique', its older meaning, less familiar to most of us. This is a common problem with Masonic ritual, the vocabulary has changed its meaning! The result is that many Freemasons simply do not fully understand what they hear and read, and some of us have had to refer to a dictionary on many an occasion.

Our '*peculiar system of morality*' certainly has more to it than a few pieces of guidance; the problem is that it is contained in the First-Degree Lectures, which are rarely performed today. Many of us are unaware of them, and have not seen the little green books which contain them. This means that nobody has ever told us about the three distinguishing characteristics of a good Freemason, or the aspirational meaning of Jacob's Ladder, or the subtleties of the 'point within a circle'. So, we shouldn't really be surprised that some of our new members lose interest and drop out. Not only are we veiling our messages in allegory and obscuring our explanations with archaic language, we are also cutting out swathes of accumulated knowledge, advice and instruction, while still expecting them to understand.

Although we are all aware that Freemasonry can be interpreted on a number of different levels, we must accept that this awareness is not shared by all our Brethren. To some, Freemasonry may seem like a social club with a charitable side, to others it is a way of developing and reinforcing their own ethical framework, of examining their inner selves, or even of understanding their relationship with God; it does not have to be all of these things to all of us. Ultimately, we must choose for ourselves how deeply we wish to delve into its mysteries.

It is almost entirely true to say that the more esoteric principles of Freemasonry lie undisturbed by most Freemasons. For those of us looking for deeper meaning in our lives, Freemasonry has an almost endless store of meaning, and we will each seek our own level. However, we can only explore these deeper spiritual meanings if we are aware of them. If a new Brother cannot satisfy his curiosity, he may well become disillusioned and leave. There are a number of solutions to this problem, but let's just examine a couple of them.

First, let's consider what happened in the early days of Speculative Freemasonry in the early 17th century. Back then, the Entered Apprentice's catechism consisted of some fifteen questions and answers. By 1730, this had risen to nearly 100, plus more for the Fellow-Crafts! The answers included all the passages of the Ritual, and much more besides. Through repetition (dare we say, '*through repeated trials and approbations*'?) the lessons were drummed into them. Compare this with how little we require our Brethren to learn nowadays as they progress through the three degrees. The catechisms formed part of the Lectures, which expanded on the '*peculiar system of morality*'. After the union of the rival Grand Lodges of England in 1813, the Ritual was rewritten and the Lectures were redrafted. The language is glorious, but it is 19th century language for 19th century people.

A couple of years ago, the author was having a new carpet fitted by a Brother Mason. The fitter explained that he did not understand why some of the symbols were displayed in the Lodge: he could see no relevance in them. He also said he found the language difficult, although he enjoyed hearing it. This led to a discussion about some of the symbolism, and he commented that he wished someone had explained it like that before, that is, in simpler and more modern terms. Most of what he wanted to know was displayed on the First-Degree Tracing Board, which is a sort of syllabus of basic Craft Freemasonry, but which is only rarely explained in Lodges. So, as a result, the author of this paper prepared a short talk (the first of what became a series) and showed it to his father, a distinguished Past Master, who read it straight through and said: 'that's just what we need to do'. He then proceeded to point out a couple of items of poor syntax! He rarely gave praise within the family, so that was precious.

The author then began the practice of delivering similar short pieces to his Lodge in the two-to-five-minute pause in the ritual of the Initiation ceremony while the Candidate is restoring himself. They were well-received, so he persevered and has built up a small library. Examples include: an explanation of the symbolism of the key; the four tassels on the Tracing Board; the meaning of 'the Liberal Arts and Sciences', and why we have the East, North and South entrances. All were designed to provoke thought and interest, and even a little fun, for example the size of the two pillars or a cubit. He also produced a longer piece, using much of the same material, which explains the First-Degree Tracing Board in more modern language; embedded within a worked explanation of the First-Degree, which takes about 45 minutes and is designed to be presented by several people, including a Candidate. The combination of moving around the Lodge and focusing on a Candidate is a tried-and-tested technique to retain the interest of the audience, for it is easier to absorb information by watching a play, rather than listening to a reading. Similar presentations on the Second-Degree Tracing Board and on King Solomon's Temple followed; again receiving a favourable response.

[The author went on to produce almost forty interesting 'Interval talks', all of which are available on 'Solomon'].

In conclusion, what started as identifying a problem, i.e. we do not explain to our new Brethren what our remarkable Order is all about, led to the idea of using the wealth of material that already exists in the three Lectures, but presenting the material in a more acceptable manner, so that Freemasons can use them to learn about the '*peculiar system of morality*' that is Freemasonry. Such short talks are easy to insert into a Lodge meeting during a pause in a degree ceremony. The longer presentations are ideal for Lodge meetings without ceremonies. It is hoped that the result will be better retention, by making Freemasonry more fascinating for our newer Brethren.

##END##

Recommended use of Demonstrations

Demonstrations tend to be more theatrical, being designed as much to entertain as to educate. They come in a variety of forms:

- As a performance of a piece of ritual. For example, an 'Explanation of a Tracing Board' or a 'Demonstration Ceremony', sometimes supported by an explanatory narration.
- As a play or playlet, performed for Masons and/or non-Masons. 'Talking Heads' is an example of a playlet designed to attract new members to the Royal Arch.
- As a precursor to a discussion, debate, or question and answer session.

The key to delivering a good demonstration is:

- The use of entertaining, informative and relevant material, which is well crafted and appropriate to the audience.
- Detailed prior planning, including:

ATTRACTING THE RIGHT AUDIENCE	CHOICE OF VENUE & TIMING	ACCESS & PARKING
PRICING, TICKETING & SEATING	MEETING, GREETING, REFRESHMENTS, MEALS & DRINKS	
- Delivery by a dedicated team, or by a host Lodge or Chapter, supported by vibrant, experienced and knowledgeable actors, narrators or presenters, with the aid of appropriate props, lighting and audio-visual aids.
- Advertising and promotion by way of trailers, flyers and announcements in summonses, letters, emails, notice-boards and via social media

For further demonstrations and other learning materials visit 'Solomon' at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

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