



UGLE Oration

Obligations

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An exploration of our obligations.

Summary

An exploration of our obligations - the ties that bind.

Keywords

Third-Degree, Questions, Oath, Obligation, Binding

Obligations: The ties that bind

What do you think is the pivotal moment in the ceremony of Initiation? For many of us it has to be when the Candidate takes his obligation. He is told that in order to benefit from and participate in the great and invaluable privileges of Freemasonry, he is expected to give something in return. The ritual perfectly posits this through four explicit questions which the Worshipful Master asks immediately before the obligation commences. These questions confirm the entirely voluntary nature of his presence, his motives for joining, his disposition as a worthy man to help others and his willingness to conform to the rules and customs of the Order. There is nothing ambiguous about this exchange and by the time the Candidate starts to repeat the words dictated by the Master, there should be no doubt in his mind about the meaning and significance of what he about to do. The obligation therefore is an unbending and adamant expression of his personal will, sealed with a kiss. Once it has been made, it ought never be broken.

Obligations have been part of our ritual as far back as records exist and the taking of oaths is as old as the human race. One of the earliest known Masonic manuscripts 'The Regius Poem' reads thus:

*To him that would be under awe;
A good true oath he must there swear
To his master and his fellows that be there;
He must steadfast be and true also
To all this ordinance, wheresoever he go'.*

It is important however to fully understand the subtle difference between an *oath* and an *obligation* as they are distinct. An oath can be defined as a solemn appeal to a deity to witness one's determination to keep a promise. An obligation is a binding moral, legal and even spiritual agreement and the derivation of the word itself is from the Latin '*obligare*', meaning to bind or tie.

There is huge diversity across the Brethren in Freemasonry. We have different backgrounds, different faiths, different jobs and different cultures, but what other organisation or body that houses such diversity has so much in common amongst its members? The obligations are the mortar which binds Freemasonry together. You are accepted as a Brother from the moment that the last words of your obligation are uttered as every Freemason has knelt at the pedestal in the same way; except of course for those Candidates whose faith requires them to stand for the obligation.

Masonry is a progressive science and this is clearly evidenced by the structure of the obligations in the Three Degrees. That of the First-Degree is simple and centres on keeping a promise. As the Candidate progresses, the obligations deepen his connection to the fraternity, establish other required behaviours and duties and culminate with the introduction of the Five Points of Fellowship in the Third-Degree and the true meaning of brotherhood.

The arrangement in which the Candidate takes his obligations before the pedestal in each Degree is significant. The Three Great Lights, namely the Square, the Compasses and the Volume of the Sacred Law each have a part to play, with the Volume of the Sacred Law being central to all three obligations as contained therein are the Candidate's duties to God, his neighbour and himself.

There has been much written about the penalties contained in the obligations. Freemasonry adopted such practices at a time when the use of blood curdling descriptions of punishment were commonplace. Nowadays, the secrets can be found in libraries or on the internet, so there must be something more to it all, some other reason why they are still in our ceremonies.

The penalties are clearly symbolic. They point out how a Mason should feel *in his heart* should he break his word since he has freely promised not to do so. This is described most vividly in the final paragraph of the Initiate's obligation when the penalty is that he will be *'branded as a wilfully perjured individual, void of all moral worth and totally unfit to be received into this worshipful Lodge or any other warranted Lodge, or society of men who prize honour and virtue above the external advantages of rank and fortune'*.

The Candidate is reminded of his duty and his integrity again in the Exhortation in the Third-Degree when he is informed that *'to the just and virtuous man, death has no terrors equal to the stain of falsehood and dishonour'*. The obligations make the candidate reflect upon what his word is worth not only to fellow Freemasons but to all men.

There is some often overlooked Masonic small-print tucked away in the obligations and we should reflect on this briefly. All of us in this room have promised to obey all summonses, if within the length of our cable tow and to plead no excuse for not attending our Lodge. This implies an active participation in and a dedication to our Masonry. The point is that we cannot pick and choose which parts of the obligations we wish to keep and which parts we want to ignore. How many could say that they have not broken their obligation in this respect? The notion of commitment is something that we should not be shy about stressing when talking to potential Candidates. The right men will understand and not be fazed by the concept.

The ritual offers us a beautiful and highly practical moral code which we have all freely and explicitly been bound into through our obligations. It is this that makes Freemasonry unique. But rather than being concerned with what the Masonic secrets are which we are not allowed to disclose, surely the point is that we should focus on the fact that we have given our word and what this means.

This conveniently answers the often-asked question of 'what makes a Mason?' The answer is that we are only true Masons if we have kept to our obligations. A true Mason will embrace the values of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth and live them out with an open heart and an open purse. He will support his Lodge with enthusiasm and ultimately will be someone in society who people will look up to and wish to be associated with. When a Mason's word is his bond, he can present a very positive image of Freemasonry to the outside world which should in turn make us an attractive organisation for men to wish to join.

##END##

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (*in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself*)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary.

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (*in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand*).

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*.
Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

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

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