

Masonry is Like an Electronic Circuit Board

Many years ago, during my very first term as Division Provost, I was invited to speak in a small, rural Virginia Lodge. The lodge room was packed, and my presentation seemed to be well received. I was invited to give the closing charge at the altar, and even before the Junior deacon could inform the tiler that the Lodge was now closed, I was immediately put on the spot by one annoyed Brother who wanted to know just what I was trying to accomplish with "all this moralizing and philosophical stuff" in my presentation. He said that he was not learning enough about the basic things that Masons do...you know, 'about symbols and stuff'; that's what he wanted to be educated about, and that's what he thought I ought to talk about. To him, Masonry was about actions and symbols, about doing things in a Masonic way...that was Masonry. Masonry, like lots of other things in life has many 'parts' that need to be fully understood before it works just right. Indeed, Masonry has its own 'arts, parts and points'.

In the mid 1960's when I was in radio engineering school in Dallas, Texas, my constant study companion was a 1450 page text book that laid out in print all of the known standards for electronic circuits, along with commentaries on just how RF energy works, and how the signal gets from the studio microphone, through amplifiers and processors, to the transmitter, and then to your radio. Pretty basic but important stuff gleaned from the many years of discovery and experience by the pioneers of the broadcast industry. That's somewhat like the information you find in our Methodical Digest, or the Mentors Manual, or the Manual of Work...they all hold the basic information about our Craft.

The other important part of this engineering class was a series of interesting lectures by a seasoned radio engineer who had learned well the lessons of all those textbooks I was just beginning to use and understand. But he also had a lot of non-technical learning he wanted to share, lessons he had learned the hard way...things like grabbing the wrong end of a high voltage filter capacitor and getting knocked out of your socks...you know, the stuff that's not found in any of the text books! That's the esoteric part of engineering, and perhaps it's like the philosophical Masonic things I bring you in my educational programs. It's really important stuff that you need to think about and digest, and perhaps dig deeper than you would if it was a hard and fast rule that's found in some textbook or the Methodical Digest. Masonry is certainly about symbols and things, but it's also about how you deal with the true meanings of Masonry...the things you think about and mull over in your heart, and how you apply them to your life...the things that you can't necessarily whisper in a Brother's ear.

For a day or two after my visit to that Lodge I wrestled with how to resolve the underlying issues in my Brother's complaint. My take on this issue is that there are things said and done in our Ritual that he probably doesn't really understand. He senses that there is meaning behind the symbols and words used in Lodge and he is disturbed because he doesn't know these things. He really believes that if he is 'told' what these things mean he will 'understand Masonry'; or by analogy, if he is told everything about electronic circuits, he believes he will understand how radio works. Masonry's symbols and words are like the components on an electronic circuit board, but Masonry's 'current', or power, originates in its philosophical, spiritual, and moral content. It's like the current that flows through that circuit board that brings it to life. There's a lot more to it than just the components that you can see and hold in your hand.

This Brother's frustration was my dilemma: when the whole of something is larger than the sum of its parts, how do you approach it? In the time each month the Master has set aside for an educational presentation I can either explain a simple topic, or try to open the door to deeper individual thinking about Masonry. Discussing a topic like the Due Guard and Sign meets the concerns in my Brother's complaint; this is what we do, this is why we do it; but it represents just the pieces-parts on the circuit board.

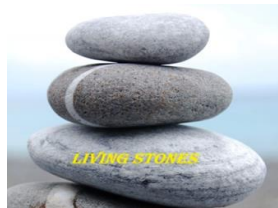
Discussing a deeper moral topic like Brotherly Love is a lot tougher because there is no one clear definition of what it means...that's the 'current' flowing through Masonry. Issues in Masonic morality, ethics, or spirituality are not simple to define, nor are they easy to understand. They are as complex as the individual human soul that perceives them. I tell you, brethren much wiser than I have spent their entire adult lives exploring what this means to a Mason, and they've written thousands of pages about it. To my knowledge, no other fraternal or civic organization has as many written pages devoted to defining its basic symbols, degrees, concepts and ideas. I wonder... would Freemasonry hold our interest or survive very long if the actual practice of Masonry could be reduced to a 10-page manual of simple instructions, which, if followed, would define the universe of Masonry.

I think not.....but then, we don't become Masons just for the ritual any more than engineers learn about radio just to be able to flip a switch and hear something in the air that you can't see.

Masonry is more than a manual of simple instructions; it's a progressive moral science. We are told this in our Ritual, and our digests, and manuals of work. Those books tell us where and how to stand, how to move and what to say, but it goes well beyond that. Its approach to degrees is a progression of basic information for Masons, and its lectures and charges form a strong foundation for discovering Masonry's broader moral science. But, these are only the basic working tools, the 'pieces-parts', or the 'circuit board, if you will. There is more to this progressive moral science than just its tools. These sessions can only point the way toward the work to be done; the Mason must pick up his tools and go do the work.

By now you know how I love to illustrate a point through analogies....so he's a different one....Masonry guides us on our walk through the forest of philosophy, morality, and spirituality. Where we choose to enter the forest, and how far we walk in, is entirely up to us. So, to answer my Brother's original complaint, the objective of my presentation is to point out a path, past the trees and into the forest, but it's up to us to walk the path. And once in a while, an educational session might point out an interesting 'tree in the forest', or maybe fix a little 'hitch in our git-along', but it won't do the walking for us. So, my Brethren, choose your path, enter the forest and continue on your journey of discovery.

Remember, Masonic education is a lifetime process.



Living Stones - Masonic Thoughts for Today's Mason
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