

MASONIC EDUCATION
2015 Grand Master's Conference Presentation
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First of all, let me say what a pleasure and honor it is for us to be in here today. Your Grand Master's Conference team has really been looking forward to this visit.

I hope you enjoyed the previous video segment as much as I did. What a wonderful collection of testimonials for Freemasonry. Brethren, what you have just witnessed is a great cross section of individuals from many walks of life across Texas, expressing their thoughts, memories and appreciation for this great fraternity.

Now, this is just a wild guess, but I'll bet that each one of you could provide a similar testimonial for Masonry. You love this fraternity, otherwise you would not be here today.

But what about those members of this sweet gentle fraternity that could not do the same? Yes brethren, I'm talking about those Masons that, when presented with questions about Freemasonry, choke up and do anything they can to avoid discussing their association with the fraternity. All they seem to know how to say is "I'm sorry but it's a secret". They just don't know what to say about Masonry.

Now, brethren, I'm not a betting man, but if I were I would put all the money I have in my pocket right now on the hunch that 99.5% of these brethren take this shy attitude toward discussing Freemasonry because of a simple lack on Masonic Education.

Grand Master Wiggins is a staunch supporter and promoter of Masonic Education. The most recent evidence of this is the Grand

Master's Proclamation directing every Lodge in the state of Texas to present a short educational program at each Stated Meeting during the coming Grand Lodge year.

If you would allow me, I would like to take a few minutes to talk about those 60% or so of Masons that just don't know what to say about Masonry.

Let's rewind the Masonic clock back a few years and ask how many of you remember when the Masonic Education and Service Committee of the Grand Lodge of Texas was promoting a handy little wallet sized card titled "What is Masonry" or "This is Masonry" or "Everything you always wanted to know about Masonry but Were Afraid to Ask". I forget the actual name for the card but I'll bet that several of you have one of these little cards on you now.

These cards were developed to assist this latter group of Masons in communicating with non-Masons and contained many of the common questions asked about Masonry along with a simple and clearly stated answer to each of the questions.

Thousands of these little cards were printed and given to the Masons of Texas as an aid in introducing non-Masons to the basic elements of our fraternity.

It was supposed to work like this:

When a non-Masonic friend, or even a total stranger, asked a Texas Mason what Masonry was all about, the Mason could easily pull one of these cards out of his wallet and give it to his friend (or stranger). After the non-Mason had an opportunity to read the card, the Mason could then pursue an opportunity to hand out a petition.

Now, this is all well and good. And it was a reasonably successful program. There are many colorful stories about how this technique was used to gain new members. And for that we should be forever grateful.

But, for those of us who have labored in the Masonic quarries for a number of years this little card tells a slightly different story.

That story goes something like this: “Why, pray tell, is it necessary to have a wallet sized card to explain to non-Masons the basic facts about this wonderful dear sweet fraternity that every Mason should be able to relate, not from his memory, but from his heart?”

Brethren, I would ask you... Where have we, the elders of the fraternity, failed our membership? Why have we not prepared our new members to share the beauties of this gentle fraternity with non-masons? Why are they not prepared to respond to comments like these?...

“I think my grandfather was one, but I’m not sure what it means.”

“Yeah, my dad and uncle both used to go to Masonic meetings—I remember Uncle Fred coming by to pick him up. But I don’t know where they went or what they did.”

“I think they wear those funny hats.”

“I remember when I went away to college, my father showed me his ring and told me, if I ever needed help, I should look for a man with a ring like that and tell him I was the daughter of a Mason, but he never told me much about it.”

Is it possible that we have not thought to teach our new members the basic elements of Freemasonry? Oh, we have taught them the esoteric elements of Masonry through the questions and answers and ritualistic dramas but, brethren, all of that was done in an environment of secrecy.

Should we have not stepped outside of that circle of secrecy and told them that even though Masons are members of the largest and oldest fraternity in the world, and even though almost everyone has a father or grandfather or uncle who was a Mason, many people still aren't quite certain just who Masons are and what they do.

Should we have told them that Masonry is a fraternity of men who join together because:

- There are things they want to do in the world.
- There are things they want to do "inside their own minds."
- They enjoy being together with men they like and respect

Did we fail them in not teaching them of the great influence that Masonry had on the events in the early days of this great nation; that George Washington was a staunch Freemason, and it is said that before the close of the Revolution he placed no one but Freemasons in posts of importance. That he was the first of fourteen Masonic Presidents, and that he served as Worshipful Master of a Masonic Lodge and President of the United States at the same time. What a beautiful story of Masonry in early America.

Did we not remind our new members that Masonry teaches that each person has a responsibility to make things better in the world? That most individuals will not be the ones to find a cure for cancer, or eliminate poverty, or help create world peace, but every man, woman and child can do something to help others and to make things a little

better. That Masonry is deeply involved with helping people—that it spends somewhere in the neighborhood of 2 million dollars *every day* in the United States, just to make life a little easier. And the great majority of that help goes to people who are not Masons.

I feel quite sure that we told them that Masonry is not a religion. But did we, at the same time, tell them that some people will challenge that statement because they have heard we use rituals in our meetings, and there is always a holy book on the altar when the lodge is meeting.

Should we have told them that sometimes people confuse Masonry with a religion because we call some Masonic buildings “temples?” Wouldn’t it be nice if we had told them that we call our meeting places temples in the same sense that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes referred to the Supreme Court a “Temple of Justice”. Neither Masonry nor the Supreme Court is a religion just because its members meet in a “temple.”

Maybe we should have impressed upon them that in some ways, the relationship between Masonry and religion is like the relationship between the Parent Teacher Organization and education. Members of the PTO believe in the importance of education. They support it. They assert that no man or woman can be a complete and whole individual or live up to his or her full potential without education. They encourage students to stay in school and parents to be involved with the education of their children. They may give scholarships. They encourage their members to get involved with and support their individual schools.

But there are some things that a PTO does not do. They don’t teach. They don’t tell people which school to attend. They don’t try to tell people what they should study of what their major should be.

In much the same way, Masons believe in the importance of religion. Masonry encourages every Mason to be active in the religion and church of his own choice. Masonry teaches that, without religion, a man is alone and lost, and that without religion, he can never reach his full potential.

But Freemasonry does not tell a person which religion he should practice or how he should practice it. That is between the individual and his God. That is the function of his house of worship, not his fraternity. And Masonry is a fraternity, not a religion.

Did we not inform our members that ritual is not unique to a religion? That ritual is used in every aspect of life. It's so much a part of us that we just don't notice it. Ritual simply means that some things are done more or less the same way each time.

- School assemblies start with a call to order, pledge to the flag and the school song. That's a ritual.
- Business meetings of every sort start with a call to order, reading of the minutes of the last meeting and dealing with old and new business. That's a ritual.
- Then there are social rituals...
 - We shake hands when we meet people
 - We join a conversation by waiting for a pause, and then speak

There are literally hundreds of examples like these and they are all rituals.

Masonry uses a ritual because it's an effective way to teach important ideas. And it reminds us of where we are, just as the ritual of a business meeting reminds people where they are and what they are supposed to be doing.

Masonry's ritual is so rich because it is so old. But there's nothing unusual in using ritual. Everyone does it every day.

And finally brethren I would ask you if we have failed to explain to our new members that Masonry teaches some important principles. And there's nothing really very surprising in the following list.

- Masonry teaches that: *Since God is the Creator, all men and women are the children of God.* Because of that, all men and women are brothers and sisters, entitled to dignity, respect for their opinions, and consideration of their feelings.
- Masonry teaches that: *Each person must take responsibility for his/her own life and actions.* Neither wealth nor poverty, education nor ignorance, health nor sickness excuses any person from doing the best he or she can do or being the best person possible under the circumstances.
- Masonry teaches that: *No one has the right to tell another person what he or she must think or believe.* Each man and woman has an absolute right to intellectual, spiritual, economic, and political freedom. This is a right given by God, not by man. All tyranny, in every form, is illegitimate.
- Masonry teaches that: *Each person must learn and practice self-control.* Each person must make sure his spiritual nature triumphs over his animal nature. Another way to say the same thing is that even when we are tempted to anger, we must not be violent. Even when we are tempted to selfishness, we must be charitable. Even when we want to "write someone off," we must remember that he or she is a human being and entitled to our respect. Even when we want to give up, we must go on. Even when we are hated, we must return love, or at a bare minimum, we must not return hate. It isn't easy!

- Masonry teaches that: *Faith must be in the center of our lives.* We find that faith in our houses of worship, not in Freemasonry, but Masonry constantly teaches that a person's faith, whatever it may be, is central to a good life.
- Masonry teaches that: *Each person has a responsibility to be a good citizen, to obey the law.* That doesn't mean we can't try to change things, but change must take place in legal and orderly fashion.
- Masonry teaches that: *It is important to work to make this world better for all who live in it.* Masonry teaches the importance of doing good, not because it assures a person's entrance into heaven—that's a question for a religion, not a fraternity—but because we have a duty to all other men and women to make their lives as fulfilling as they can be.
- Masonry teaches that: *Honor and integrity are essential to life.* Life, without honor and integrity, is life without meaning.

So I would submit to you brethren that in the interest of a solid Masonic education program, we should be a little more attentive to the basic educational needs of our membership so that they are more comfortable in discussing our fraternity with non-Masons. And by so doing, we will be better able to subject our newer members and ourselves to the Genius of Freemasonry.

And just what is "The Genius of Freemasonry?" Brethren, I would submit to you that the genius of Freemasonry is "the daily practice of what Masonry teaches and has stood for over the years". Let's listen to that again; "The genius of Freemasonry is the daily practice of what Masonry teaches and has stood for over the years."

So brethren, I would ask you...How can Freemasons practice what they do not learn? Let me ask that question in a slightly different manner. How can Freemasons practice what is not taught them?

In today's fraternity, we do a reasonably good job of teaching the Rituals and the Catechism of Masonry, but, I fear, that all too often once that is done we believe we are finished with the Masonic educational process; but how can Masonry prosper if we do not teach and learn the meaning and mission of:

- The symbolisms of Masonry
- The allegories of Masonry
- The philosophy of Masonry
- The morality of Masonry
- The history of Masonry
- The traditions of Masonry

So brethren, I would encourage each and every Mason in this room to follow the lead of our Grand Master and make this coming year a year to refuel the fire of Masonic Education. Reflect upon your level of Masonic education and see if you can't find the time to "crank it up a notch" for the benefit of yourself and especially those who are to follow you.

Thank you so much for allowing me to share these moments with you...

God bless each and every one of you...

God bless this sweet gentle fraternity...

And may God bless these United States of America

Presented by Charles McKay, Past Master of Plano Lodge No. 768 at the 2015 Grand Master's Conferences held by the Masonic Grand Lodge of Texas.