

How Can We Keep The Young Mason Interested?

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Brethren, if I had the answer to this perplexing problem, I would be lauded as a genius, and no doubt be immediately asked to take over as Grand Master and dispose more wisdom. Unfortunately, I don't have the answer (and we have a pretty good Grand Master anyway), but I have several comments and suggestions about this dilemma.

A CHANGING WORLD

We as Masons have to realise the world has changed in the past seventy-five, fifty, even twenty-five years. In the good old days, men in their 20s and 30s would leave their job downtown, take a short trek home (say to Mount Pleasant or the East End a few miles away) and after ingesting a meal prepared by their dutiful wife, indulge in the pleasantries offered by their nearby lodge, as there would be little else happening that evening. Today, men of that age have to brave a slow and painful rush hour as they drive home to Maple Ridge, Surrey or Langley. Often, the wife is working, so dinner isn't piping-hot by the time he gets home. And then, despite television, local sports activities, organisations not even thought of when the century began and plain old exhaustion, he's expected to drive back into town to attend lodge. If that's the case, we had better have something to offer him. Far too often, we don't. In fact, we do things that seem designed to discourage that man from even coming back.

MEMORY WORK

Does this sound familiar? A young man has just been put through the degrees of our Order. Now, he's being handed a piece of paper with the instruction of "here, memorize this." How often is the newcomer left to fend for himself? How many times do you hear members take the attitude "oh, it's up to his SPONSOR to teach him and I don't know him anyway." I've seen this happen. The Worshipful Master should ensure someone is assigned to help the new initiate with his ritual work, and at the new member's own speed. Some Lodges like to set up their schedule of degrees, and then expect the newcomer to fit into the scheme. Doesn't this seem backwards to you? Why not let the new member learn his work when it's convenient to him? It'll show a little consideration.

And why is it Lodges feel a new member has to take part in degrees immediately after being raised? Put yourself in the new member's place. You've just finished memory-work for three degrees. And NOW you're being asked to learn something else? So far, the only impression you've given to your new member is all we Freemasons do is an awful lot of memory-work. And that isn't the reason anyone joins an organisation, is it? Don't turn off your new Freemasons by shoving

memory work at them at the beginning. Let them sit and watch for a bit. Give them a bit of a breather.

ATTENDANCE

How often do you tell a prospective member at his investigation that "Freemasonry takes up only a couple of nights a month"? We all know that's not true. Members, new ones especially, are bombarded with meetings. There is a great deal of pressure put on Masons to attend fraternal visitations. And District Deputy visits. And Installations of other Lodges in the District. And the meetings of the Board of General Purposes. And if they don't attend, you'll be sure to hear a few Lodge members grumble that "so-and-so doesn't get out enough." Remember the Lodge isn't, and shouldn't be, the only spare-time activity of a new member. Don't expect him to be out every night at Lodge, like some of our members are.

THE CHAIRS

Do you know of any Lodges where, no sooner do they get a new brother, than they stick him in as Junior Steward and after a few months make unveiled hints that they'd like him to continue through as Worshipful Master in six, seven, eight years? I have. And I've seen young members fall by the wayside because of it. The worst thing a Lodge can possibly do is start putting undue pressure on a new member. If you want to give him a chair, perhaps give him one that isn't hooked up to "the line" that exists in all Lodges. That way, he'll get his feet wet and not feel pressured to "continue on." Remember as well that in today's transient society, people have no idea where they'll be two or three years down the road, let alone eight.

ACTIVITIES

Years ago, a Masonic Lodge would have clearly offered the best after-work activities for a young man. Maybe at home, someone played a piano or a neighbour would come over and sing. But a Lodge could get a whole group of people together for a skit, a band or whatever. Today, that young man can get world-class entertainment in his own home with the flick of a remote control switch. Lodge today have been placed in the uncomfortable position of trying to compete with that 20-inch box in the living room. How well do we do that?

Are Lodge meetings of the variety that motivate young men to attend them? Is ritual performed well (and NOT out of a book)? Is the Worshipful Master in control or is there "dead air" as he whispers to the Secretary, Director of Ceremonies or I.P.M. to find out what to do next? Are discussions short and to the point? If you can answer "no" to any of these questions, you're giving a new member a great excuse to stay home and catch the ballgame on TV. Our Installation ritual tells us "the object of meeting in a Lodge is of a two-fold nature." You know the line. In what way are we giving "moral instruction and

social intercourse" to our new brethren? It's an excellent idea to have some kind of education at a Lodge meeting, but too often, it's someone at a podium reading off a script. While a member may have constructed his talk with the utmost sincerity, very few Masons can stand up before an audience on their own and deliver an effective and informative speech that will hold a crowd's attention for its duration (I'm sure my address today doesn't do that). Think: how often do you turn on a television and see a man staring at a camera with nothing but a script in his hand? You don't. It's too dull. So why should our lodges take this kind of approach? Obviously, you can't have computer graphics in a Lodge room, but you can liven up your education portion. How about a Masonic-related film or video? What about a Masonic quiz, where all the members (not just the Past Masters) are involved? You could even try a baseball format and set up a "baseball diamond" in your Lodge room (after you closed the meeting, of course). Use your imagination. Maybe even ask the younger members if they have any ideas. Avoid a static presentation. Strive for some movement. Make it interesting. What kind of social activities does your Lodge have? Are they something that appeal to people in their 20s and 30s? Many times, they're not, and that gives your new member another excuse to stay home. When you play music at your Lodge dance, is it something younger people will dance to, or something popular when people used ration cards? Try music of the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

Does your Lodge have a sports team, say a baseball team? Probably not, because most of the Lodges have too few young members to put together that kind of thing. But among the Lodges in a District, a team should be able to be put together. Why can't Districts play each other in a sport event? Why can't a District Sports or Social officer be appointed? By the way, if you're worried about older members not taking part in these kinds of events, you can create something for them, perhaps a bowling or backgammon team.

COMMUNICATION

Finally, has anyone in your Lodge taken the time to talk to your younger members? Have you asked THEM what interests them? If they've stopped coming to lodge, has anyone picked up the phone and TALKED TO THEM to find out what's wrong; why they like or DISlike about the lodge? Or is your lodge content to put young men through the degrees with the attitude that "if they really care about the Lodge, they'll show up"? If that's the case, I can guarantee your Lodge is in serious trouble.

We must keep the lines of communication open to our new brethren, especially the rare ones who haven't been privileged to blow out the candles on their 40th birthday cake. Show that you care about them, that you're interested in them, that you won't put undue pressure on them. Above all, remember these younger men are not only the future of your Lodge, but our great Craft as a whole.