

RESPONSIBILITY OF LODGE OFFICERS TO GUARD WELL OUR PORTALS

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In the charge to a newly elected Worshipful Master at installation the admonition is given—"You should be as careful of the reputation of your Lodge as that of your family; and, as you would admit none to the society whose character is bad, so should you carefully exclude all such from the former". This, and many other injunctions in our rituals and ceremonies clearly indicate that, from time immemorial, Lodge Officers have been charged with the responsibility of guarding our portals. The fact that they are to exercise the same zeal and comparable jealousy in protecting their Lodge as in protecting their families is ample proof of the importance of this duty.

To hear a profane speak slurringly of a member of the Craft, particularly a Lodge Officer, is a "bitter pill". To know that he speaks the truth is doubly painful. It is a well established principle of law, I am told, that the perfect defense against slander or libel is that the statements made are true. When one, not a member of the Craft, can truthfully speak in uncomplimentary terms of one who is a member, it is pretty conclusive evidence that some Lodge was derelict in its duty to guard its doors against unworthy material.

Again we are told in our ritual that men knock at our doors because of a favorable opinion conceived of the institution. If we covet the favorable opinion of others, and who doesn't, then we need to strive to be worthy of that good opinion. It has been a distinctive mark of Freemasonry in all ages that men of honor; of distinction; of ability; of integrity; of position in life, have not deemed it derogatory to level themselves with the fraternity, or to patronize its assemblies. May that always continue to be true.

The primal duty that we as officers and members owe to those admitted to our fellowship is to make Masons of them; not just members. The making of a Mason, other than the preparation in his own heart, begins with the filling out and signing of a petition. If you insist on it being filled out accurately, completely and intelligently, the fact indicates the dignity of the institution. Sloppiness is beneath the dignity of the man worthy of our institution. Insist on adequate and ample references in all points of sojourn in the previous years of the applicant. Ever remember that men only give as references the names of friends. In investigating applicants contact other than the references. Write, see, or telephone references to be sure, but do not

lose sight of the fact that Banks; Credit Bureaus; Police Departments; well known and widely acquainted men, particularly Masons, frequently have pertinent information that may be secured by proper investigation or enquiry.

Let me illustrate—I frequently write enquiries on the stationery of my Bank just as routine business enquiries and ascertain essential facts without revealing the occasion or reason for the enquiry. Often enquiries to other states may be sent to Past Grand Officers with the request that they put you in touch with Masons known to them in the locality you desire to reach. These are written preferably on Lodge stationery and under seal. By the way, make it an unflinching rule to enclose addressed stamped envelope for reply. That is courtesy not to be overlooked. After all stamps cost money. Not many months ago I exposed a wife deserter, embezzler and hot check distributor by writing to a Past Grand Master in another state and asking him to secure information about a former resident of his state. A Lodge was saved a lot of embarrassment by the discovery and rejection of this applicant.

By all means protect the secrecy of the fraternity by carefully wording requests for information unless addressed to known Masons. There is an accepted stigma attached to masonic rejection. It is not our job to embarrass anyone. Intelligent investigation need not reveal that the one being investigated is an applicant for the degrees of Masonry. Common fairness would dictate that we treat applicants as we desire to be treated.

Now, not every man who asks for a petition need get one. A worthy and desirable applicant should get one promptly when he signifies such a desire. By the way, don't be dumb when a worthy friend indicates interest in joining our fraternity. To be sure men must come of their own free will and accord. Certainly we are never to invite men to seek membership in the fraternity; but when a worthy friend expresses interest say to him that you will gladly supply a petition if he desires one and that you will explain the pertinent steps to him. No urging, no over eagerness, but friendly helpful interest. Tactfully avoid giving a petition to one that you know cannot be elected. Bluntly decline a petition to the deadbeat, the libertine, the profligate and similar unworthy characters. Have the fortitude becoming a Mason. Courage is an all too rare attribute.

When the petition is received by the Lodge a committee of investigation is the regular order. Select a committee that will function; instruct them in their duties; insist on their really investigating the applicant. The home life; the social life; the business life are appropriate matters to consider. "Birds of a feather flock together" is a truism to keep in mind. Would you be willing for your wife or daughter

ter to be in the public company of the women folk of the applicant's family. Does he frequent disreputable or unlawful places? These questions suggest many others that committee members and lodge members may well ask themselves. Neither the committee nor the members of the lodge are to "broadcast" their efforts or their purpose in making investigations. The idea is to ascertain the essential facts pertaining to the character of the applicant, yet conceal the purpose as well as the source of their information. The committee report should be honest, thorough, complete and be filed under lock and key for future reference.

Officers could and should do some investigating themselves. They presumably have wider experience and better contacts with sources of information. Members should be encouraged to exercise some interest and initiative themselves. It is surprising what folks know about other folks if they are induced to reveal the information. Make use of the members of your lodge whose business it is to know about folks. In our Bank we have to know as nearly as it is humanly possible to find out if a given man's credit is good or bad. You cannot loan money to deadbeats at a profit. Police officers who are members of your lodge know a lot of things that they do not broadcast but which are available to the tiled lodge under the seal of the Master's obligation.

Your lodge will save a lot of embarrassment and a lot of Masonic trials by proper investigation of applicants. A Louisiana lodge conferred the degrees on a convict on parole from a penitentiary and their error was discovered by an alert Police Officer when the candidate appeared to take the Scottish Rite degrees. A proper investigation would have revealed these facts. An applicant living an apparently circumspet life in his new found community was found to have abandoned a wife and several small children in another state. Another had been rejected again and again in another state, declared on his petition that he had never previously applied to the fraternity, but was discovered by a committee that took its duty seriously. Suitable investigation intelligently carried out will reveal most of the bad eggs. Few men can cover up unholy tracks for very long.

The final arbiter guarding our outer portals is the ballot box. There the invisible ballot expresses the innermost thoughts of each brother present. Each one in attendance must vote. Each one should express in silence his firm, honest conviction as to the worthiness of the candidate. Personal pique, or any other unworthy thought has no place at the ballot box. The ballot must be inviolate. We have no sort of right to question the motive or integrity of another. Nor does he have any sort of right to question your motive. No one has the right to reveal how he voted or will vote nor to discuss in anyway any

ballot that has been or will be taken. Our law provides penalties for any violation of the secrecy or sanctity of the ballot.

Each member should have a proper understanding of the ballot; its use; its purpose; its manner of casting and ever remember that he just as solemnly obligated to admit worthy material as he is to reject unworthy material. Bear in mind that one you think is entirely worthy may be rejected. Have faith to believe that he that cast the unfavorable vote knows what he is doing. I have had that happen in my own experience. Revelations of later years confirmed the fidelity of him who cast the unfavorable ballot, when I had felt that a serious mistake had been made.

As for rejected material—that is finished business for the time. What of the elected material? Give him his Entered Apprentice degree as soon as possible; as efficiently as your best degree men can put it on; as cordially as it is possible for you to be in sincerity. Make him welcome. See to it that he is instructed promptly by a qualified instructor. If your lodge doesn't have qualified instructors it's high time you were arranging to get some. A job worth doing is worth doing well. No rushing, no haphazard, half baked system. Plain unadorned efficient procedure in conferring the degree and in instructing the candidate in preparation for the next degree. Remember you are making a Mason. Talk about rushing through to get some of the so called higher degrees should be expressly prohibited until the candidate has received his Master's degree and my personal opinion is—until he has stood examination on it in open lodge.

Another thing, you Officers must respect the dignity of your position if the candidate is to get the right idea, and incidentally if the regular and full members of the lodge are to have the right idea. You are so to act that others will respect your position. Did it ever occur to you that there are things that might be condoned in others that are unthinkable for a lodge officer to do. There are a lot of things that are beneath the dignity of a Master Mason to do. That isn't being high hat. It is simply acting in accordance with your position in life; in reflecting the honor of the proud title you bear. Be circumspet; be like Caesar's wife is reputed to have been—above reproach.

Members must be held to accountability for misdeeds. Seek the wanderer out, show him the lovelier paths of virtue and honor and rectitude. When friendly and kindly admonition fails harsher remedies must be applied. If the evil cannot be corrected and stopped then the offending one must be removed from our membership as a blot upon the Craft. That is guarding the inner door. Did you ever hear of the sign of caution? Listen to me, you do not have to apologize for giving a word of caution to your Brother Mason—you are obligated to do so.

In calling on him to correct the irregularity of his own deportment you are not a busybody attending to someone else's business but a Brother Mason discharging a solemn obligation. Out of my own experience I can recall seeking an errant husband out and bringing him back, saying a home, a fine family that is this day a blessing to Louisiana in the sons that have gone out from it. The glory is not in never having wandered into forbidden paths but in having the courage, the stamina, the fortitude to rise again and attain greater heights. Never forget that it is just as important to guard the portals within as to guard them without. The known member of the fraternity can bring much more disgrace and disrepute on the fraternity than all the outside world put together. Discipline is necessary in any well ordered society. The refractory must be restrained. No one understands more fully how and when it needs to be done than the thoughtful consecrated Lodge officer earnestly seeking to guard well our portals.