

TO AWAIT A TIME WITH PATIENCE: EXPLAINING THE CHAMBER OF REFLECTION

W.: B.: ANDREW HAMMER, PM

ALBA LODGE N^o 222

Revised in part from unpublished notes for 'Observing the Craft'

As one observes the increasing interest among Masons in the history and meaning of the various ceremonies of the Craft, one notices that one of the most popular objects of that interest is the *Chamber of Reflection*, a room meant to be used for the placement of a candidate before the commencement of his initiation. The purpose of such a room is to give the candidate a period of time to meditate and reflect on what he is about to undertake. As this idea has recently become more intriguing to brethren, it behooves us to seek some kind of clarification amongst ourselves as to what this procedure is, and why it might be considered important to the initiation of a man into Freemasonry.

This kind of ceremony—of preparation for initiation by means of a period of isolation—has been with us since the beginning of recorded history, in any number of basic initiatic rites. It is not anything strange or alien to the human experience. It is, however, incredibly transformative in the sense that it allows the candidate to put away the everyday world he left behind when he entered the temple, and focus his mind properly for what he is about to experience. That is what we ask of the postulant in any case.

We ask him to reflect on what he is about to do and why, so that he knows he does it of his own free will and accord, and therefore the Lodge can know that as well. Truly, in a world where so many people do things senselessly, without thinking, we need reflection and contemplation before our actions.

But the idea of such a contemplative space is rooted not only in the practices of most initiatic ceremonies; it is also rooted in the earliest days of the Craft.

The Masonic exposé *Jachin and Boaz*, published in London in 1762, describes the use of what clearly appears to be a chamber in those lodges working under the Premier Grand Lodge of England, as follows [bold text added for emphasis]:

*Soon after the Master asks, if the Gentleman proposed last Lodge-Night, is ready to be made; and on being answered in the Affirmative, he orders the Wardens to go out and prepare the Person, who is generally waiting in a Room at some Distance from the Lodge-Room, by himself, being left there by his Friend who proposed him. **He is conducted into another Room, which is totally dark; and then asked, whether he is conscious of having the Vocation necessary to be received?** On answering Yes, he is asked his Name, Surname, and Profession. When he has answered these Questions, whatever he has about him made of Metal is off, as Buckles, Buttons, Rings,*

*Boxes, and even the Money in his Pocket taken away. Then they make him uncover his Right Knee and put his Left Foot with his Shoe on in to a Slipper; hoodwink him with a Handkerchief, and **leave him to his Reflection for about half an Hour. The Chamber is also guarded within and without, by some of the Brethren, who have drawn Swords in their hands, to keep off all Strangers, in case any should dare approach. The Person who proposed the Candidate, stays in the Room with him; but they are not permitted to ask any Questions, or converse together. During this Silence, and while the Candidate is preparing, the Brethren in the Lodge are putting every Thing in Order for his Reception there.....***

This text would seem to indicate that the room is a simply appointed one, 'which is totally dark', and where the brethren 'leave [the candidate] to his reflections for about half an hour'. More important, it indicates that a chamber of this type, employed ceremonially, was likely well-known to the London brethren of William Preston's day, which might have inspired that prime mover of the Craft to write those words so well-known in many jurisdictions:

*Wisdom seeks the secret shade, **the lonely cell designed for contemplation...***

Such a phrase might be obscure to Masons today, its meaning unclear. However, it would not have been so to our Masonic forefathers of the 18th century, brethren who would have known instantly what one form of that 'lonely cell' alluded to.

So if we know that this kind of procedure was with us from the early days of speculative Masonry, what happened to it? How did it disappear from our organisational memory? Where did the room go? Putting aside the usurpation of the procedure by any appendant or concordant bodies, one can find a rather uneventful, if speculative, explanation of the loss. We can find it right within our lodges.

Note that in the description of the chamber above, all of the other aspects of preparation for the initiation take place in that same room. What we are talking about then, is what we now know as the candidate preparation room. It has been lazily degraded over time in both its purpose and appearance, thus making it totally unrecognizable to the brethren as a chamber of reflection, and therefore forgotten entirely for what it was intended to be.

Far from being a mere dressing room, an ancillary storage space, or a chat room for the officers, this space is meant to be for the *candidate*. It exists to literally prepare him in exactly the manner suggested above, and our neglect of this more spiritual and psychological preparation has gone so far off course now that some brethren find themselves looking for other physical spaces in our temples to create this important period of time for the prospective initiate.

But what is in this space? What *should* be in this space? The proper restoration of this practice requires consideration of those questions. In some obediences of European Masonry, whose elements have been imported by a handful of North American lodges, the concept of the chamber has been expanded into an over-worked assemblage which can end up having more cryptic items in it than the Lodge room itself. This is not as it should be.

A chamber of reflection is not just someplace where one puts everything that one thinks is mystical, to the extent that the room is dressed up like a Halloween display. It is meant to be dark, and minimally appointed, so that the candidate may be caused to reflect upon *himself*, not other items in the room. Of course, that is not to say that nothing should be in the room. If we are to be consistent with our ritual, however, then nothing should be placed in a chamber of reflection that is not in some sense explained to the candidate as he receives the degrees.

One method would be to have a simple wooden table and chair, on which is placed a single candle, an hourglass, and an emblem of mortality. The candle symbolises life as well as light, the emblem of mortality death, and the hourglass the interval between them, in both a literal and symbolic sense. All of these things will be explained to the candidate in due time through our rituals, and in one sense, he has before him all of the lessons of Freemasonry, in a way that neither confounds nor reveals, but simply and significantly *educates*.

This admittedly minimalistic approach is important because the true force of a chamber of reflection is not in what is in the room, but what is in the *individual*. The chamber is intended to confront you with *you*, not to distract you with an array of curious implements, which, while they may have genuine validity at some point in a person's contemplative path, do not necessarily belong in the particular place and time allotted to a chamber of reflection.

Also important is the individual's ability to leave the room of his own free will and accord, in the same way that he would enter the Lodge. The use of a chamber of reflection is perhaps the only accommodation we make to a profane, not only to provide him his full freedom of choice in the situation, but to emphasise the fact that his Masonic journey is in the truest sense, an internal one that ultimately, he alone must control. He is given those few minutes before the initiation to reaffirm—to *himself*—the choice he has made to join the Craft. The decision should not be taken lightly, and therefore, he should have one final chance to privately, silently, and solemnly confirm that decision.

As for the preparation of the room itself, the question arises as to how to recreate such a space in a temple that has totally lost any notion of the practice, and therefore might not have an idea how to implement it. There are two important aspects of creating that space: the space itself, and what is going on outside of it. Finding the actual space is the easy part. Yet a common concern among brethren who are desirous of restoring this ceremony is that they do not have a room that is isolated enough to provide the candidate true silence, as the brethren of the Lodge will be arriving and talking and laughing, and generally clanging about in preparation for the degree. This is perhaps the first obstacle to overcome.

The brethren of the Lodge should observe proper decorum in preparation for an initiation. First, because the behaviour of the brethren is the very first impression that the candidate will have of the Lodge, and secondly, because it is simply courteous to the candidate himself as he readies himself for the experience. The brethren should conduct themselves with a solemnity that makes any part of the temple a contemplative space. With that as the guiding philosophy for the evening, the question of where the candidate will be becomes much easier to answer.

In a practical sense, the modern preparation room as one finds it may not be suitable as a chamber of reflection. In many lodges, it has been designed to be a larger space, to accommodate the practice of initiating multiple candidates, or other purposes, and it doesn't really afford the intimacy that is intended. In such a situation, each Lodge will have to determine for itself if such a space can be found on the premises. Most lodges will have some other suitable room that may be used. If not, it may be possible to build either a permanent or temporary enclosure that can be set up within the existing spaces of the Lodge.

With the history, method, and atmospheric aspects of a chamber of reflection being addressed, this brings us back to the question of why lodges should do this at all.

The Entered Apprentice degree is not an afterthought. It is no mere stepping stone on the way from something to something else. It is the essential foundation on which the symbolic Temple of Solomon is built. It is the place where one learns the first lessons on what it means to be a Mason; it is the cornerstone from which every Mason is built. But in so many American lodges today, the Entered Apprentice degree is almost viewed as an inconvenient but necessary hurdle, hastily arranged and executed, with the dismissive advice given to the new Mason that he doesn't need to 'worry' about anything until he is raised a Master Mason. He doesn't even have to 'worry' about attending Lodge, because the stated communications are only held on the third degree anyway. In some jurisdictions, even the proficiency tests have been abandoned, meaning that the apprentice need do nothing more than wait for time to pass, until the Lodge can confer the next degree.

In no other profession would an apprentice be dismissed from work immediately after being hired. It would be impossible, as he would then be totally unable to learn that profession. But somehow, in too many areas of the Craft, just as in too many areas of our lives today, we have become fixated only on the end rewards of a pursuit, totally disregarding the character and knowledge-building process involved in obtaining those rewards. We have discarded the journey itself, as well as the intrinsic reward of learning on that journey, for the sake of an absurdly rapid ascent to titles and trinkets. We have allowed this situation to continue for too long, and we need to remedy it.

The impact of the Entered Apprentice degree on the initiate must be restored, and this preparation ceremony, restored to its proper place, helps to accomplish that. It instantly conveys a sense of full earnestness to the candidate, in every way consistent with our own teachings about our degrees and our institution. It provides one of the few opportunities in modern life for a man to contemplate his purpose and his intentions, even if only for a few minutes, and in so doing reinforces the idea that Masonry asks him to do this continuously in his own way from this moment on, throughout his Masonic as well as his personal life.

Opposition to a chamber of reflection as an 'innovation' would not only be incorrect, but also somewhat disingenuous, as its existence is not unknown to many Masons today. A chamber of reflection is currently used before the degrees of Templary, a separate fraternal order which is strictly limited to Christian Masons. But this ceremony was taken *from* the Craft at some point and moved to that order. The confusing impression that is given by such an act is that only Christian Masons are worthy of being afforded such reflection. Given that

this ceremony is a preparation for *initiation*, its absence from the Symbolic Lodge sends an equally confusing message throughout the fraternity and beyond, that one is not really initiated, i.e. not a 'true Mason', until and unless one becomes a Christian. Here again, this is not as it should be, as it is clearly not what was intended by an organisation that is not a religion, professes no particular religion, and asks only the universal requirement that a man affirm a belief in deity. If the practice is to be considered valid for those Masons who seek to join an external body, then it cannot be deemed invalid for any man who is to be made a Mason. *The chamber of reflection belongs to the Craft.*

When we consider the meaning of the chamber, its valid place in the history of our Craft ritual, and the profound effect it has on the brethren who experience it, we would be foolish indeed not to restore this practice to our lodges. It has precedent, it helps restore awe to our ceremonies, and it is a missing part of our body of practice that should be received back into our lodges with the same sense of joy we have when finding a long-lost heirloom. At a time when Grand Lodges everywhere are seeking to express why Masonry is and should be meaningful, this simple ceremony of introspection is the ideal precursor to establish that initial meaning and sincerity in everything we do as Masons.



© 2010 - Andrew Hammer, revised 2012

This document may be freely distributed, with proper attribution.

Observing the Craft: The Pursuit of Excellence in Masonic Labour and Observance
is available from observingthecraft.com, and amazon.com