

Members Or Masons: *One-Day Classes and the Initiatic Tradition*

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One-Day Classes (ODC's) or Grand Master's Classes have been around for over a decade in the United States, but the increasing number of jurisdictions adopting them and the recent events held in Ohio and New York, which were organized on a particularly large scale, have drawn heated debate from across the Masonic world. The intent of this article is to provide a fair discussion of this issue with an emphasis on accurate information and philosophical perspective founded on the tenets of the initiatic tradition. While there is some limited statistical data on ODC's, no serious scientific analysis has yet taken place. But even without such data it is still possible to discuss the qualitative value of the process, or lack thereof as the case may be, and the reasons for its existence.

It should first be mentioned that not all One-Day Classes are the same and that they vary considerably between jurisdictions. For example the first Grand Master's Classes were held in Washington, DC in 1992, but unlike most of the other jurisdictions that have since adopted similar practices the annual ceremony in Washington has always been held over a two day period with the candidates adopting the proper manner of dress and participating in all necessary ritual elements rather than simply watching the degree conferred on one principal candidate. The Washington ceremonies usually involve 50-100 men.¹ In 1997 Oklahoma held three ODC's that were limited to existing Entered Apprentices and Fellowcrafts that had not progressed during the previous 30 years.² On the other hand, in April of 2002 Ohio raised more than 7,700 Masons in one day.³ The Grand Lodge of New York in 2003 sought to outdo Ohio by raising a record 8,000 in one day, but only managed 2,100.⁴

More Grand Lodges continue to adopt and debate various forms of such one-day events. At the Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of California in 2003 legislation to adopt ODC's was narrowly defeated,⁵ but will be voted on again in October, 2004 when it will likely pass. As of today, over 35 American Grand Lodges and have adopted ODC's in one form or another, with some relying solely on the Grand Master's prerogative to make Masons at sight and others first passing legislation at the Grand Lodge communications.⁶

While there has been much discussion about the effectiveness of the process, proponents have argued that ODC's provide a quick boost of finances and members to the organization with drop out rates for One-Day Class inductees being roughly the same as for those who went through the degrees in the usual manner. In a recent article citing survey data George O. Braatz, the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Ohio, noted that out of the 7,700 inducted in 2002 in Ohio, 8% are currently serving in officer stations in 67% of Ohio lodges.⁷ And while this was a relatively informative article it must be considered that most jurisdictions that have adopted ODC's have only done so in the last 5 years and it is arguably still too early to gauge the qualitative impact on the Craft.

What is easier to measure is the instant effect of ODC's on the fiscal and membership figures of Grand Lodges and appendant bodies, which have often held their own ODC's on the same days as the Grand Lodge or soon after to take advantage of the new prospective members. Combined with the uniquely American circumstance of not incorporating Entered Apprentices as full members, this has created a highly problematic situation. Thus, much of the current phenomenon of Grand Lodge ODC's can be attributed to economic, political and historical factors.

American Grand Lodges have experienced a continuous decline in membership and income for the last 40 years, while the annual expenditure has not significantly decreased, creating serious pressure to generate funds. Political pressure from appendant bodies that have experienced the same membership decline has been mounting.

Garry A. Henningsen, the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of New York, wrote an article last year in *The Empire State Mason* in which he provided a very astute discussion of the problems affecting Freemasonry.⁸ In the article he mentioned that 'the pressures from related organizations for members' were causing many changes in Masonry. In the latest edition of *Freemasonry Today*, it was noted that Bro. Henningsen acknowledged that the 'related organizations' he was referring to were the Scottish Rite and Shrine.⁹

A historical factor related to the problem of ODC's has to do with the results of the Baltimore Convention of 1843, at which American Grand Lodges resolved to allow their lodges to meet only on the Third Degree for business and declared that Masons of the "inferior" First and Second Degrees "are not members of lodges."¹⁰ While such a practice has never been adopted in Europe, even in light of the Nazi persecution, it has come to be considered some kind of landmark in the United States, as it has now been in place from before any living Mason was born. The simple fact, however, is that there is no longer any need for American Grand Lodges to protect themselves from impostors, if there ever really was, and continuing to forbid Entered Apprentices from becoming a part of the lodge is no doubt detrimental to the Craft. One Texas Mason recently wrote the following about the problem:

American Masons are treating the symptoms of an illness (the failure of First and Second Degree Masons to advance) and are ignoring the disease (the institutional rules that exclude First and Second Degree Masons from business and the fellowship present in the Lodge Room).¹¹

The biggest concern raised by critics of the ODC's is the fact that they deprive the candidate of a personal and intimate initiation into a lodge of brothers and the positive transformation of character that is meant to occur during the normal time period of receiving the degrees. In Continental Europe and South America it takes an average of 2 to 3 years before reaching the Third Degree, during which time the brother is considered a full member of the lodge and participates in most of its activities and works actively on himself. In some European countries, the raising ceremony is considered such a

meaningful and intimate experience shared by the new Master Mason and the brothers of his lodge that visitors from other lodges are strongly discouraged.

Such a profound cementing of brotherly bonds is likely lost in the impersonal nature of the ODC's. And not surprisingly, European Masons, including the Pro Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, Lord Northampton, have come out strongly against the American practice. When mentioned in Europe, the notion of ODC's usually draws complete bewilderment, disgust, or a genuine sympathy comparable to the kind expressed when someone's family member has died. Some American Masons have even drawn up model amendments to lodge by-laws to prohibit participation in ODC's.¹²

This concern, coming from all quarters of the Masonic world, of a tremendous loss taking place due to a process largely motivated by questionable expenditures, outdated historical factors and a misunderstanding of the initiatic tradition of Masonry must be taken seriously. The initiatic tradition is the Craft's core and defining characteristic, without which the organization would become indistinguishable from other fraternal or philanthropic organizations and could no longer accurately be called Freemasonry. If the lives and works of the founders of Freemasonry are seriously studied, it becomes clear that they viewed Masonry foremost as an initiatic institution, charged with the preservation and propagation of a much older initiatic tradition.

Initiation is a slow and sensitive process that requires great effort on behalf of both the candidate and the existing members of the lodge. For initiation and Masonic growth to be meaningful and enriching, great care and attention must be afforded to each individual candidate. He must understand that the organization is highly selective, allowing him to feel self-worth and leading him to respect the high standards of the Order. He must be effectively educated about the history, symbolism and philosophy of the Craft if he is to become a Freemason worthy of the title.

A possible compromise, though still sacrificing the intimacy of the initiation, could be for Grand Lodges to accept Entered Apprentices as full dues paying members and to allow and direct lodges to open for business on the First Degree so that ODC's would only have to initiate the candidates, allowing them to properly bond with their respective lodges in passing and raising. While this would provide the Grand Lodges with the dues paying members they seek, it would not, unfortunately satisfy the appendant bodies that would still have to wait for the new members to become Master Masons. But as Gary A. Henningsen so aptly put it in his article mentioned earlier:

[T]he symbolic lodge's growth and membership strength takes precedence over all other Masonic organizations. Without a strong symbolic lodge, all other bodies will suffer. ... Lodges in this century need to be smaller, with an emphasis on Masonic education.¹³

It is a known fact that European Masonry has been very successful in working as small lodges. And it is known, whether it is welcomed or not, that American lodges are also going to become relatively small in the near future. ODC's and lodge consolidations are only going to work for a limited time and do not address the more fundamental

problem of American Masonry having lost its focus and traditions. If Masonic traditions are to continue to have an impact on the lives of Masons, the focus and resources should shift from ODC's to working out viable models for smaller lodges, even if this means raising dues. Masons after all, should not be afraid to show that Masonry is important to them.

In conclusion, it must be understood that the situation requires a balanced and knowledgeable approach, which must be founded on the understanding that Freemasonry is foremost an initiatic institution and becomes something else when it loses the initiatic element. The approach must also be characterized by an ability to transcend historical, political, and economic factors through innovative solutions that do not severely damage economic structures and diplomatic relations with other bodies. Above all, it must not be forgotten that it is the charge of Grand Lodges, as the supreme Masonic authorities, to preserve the initiatic tradition in their respective jurisdictions.

¹ Bessel, Paul, *1 or 2 Day Craft Degree Conferrals* (Masonic Leadership Center)

<http://www.bessel.org/oneday.org>

² Hutchens and Graystone, *One-Day Classes, Innovation Or Rescue?* (Scottish Rite Journal 1997)

<http://sjarchives.tripod.com/1997-05/hutchens.htm>

³ Grand Lodge of Ohio, *The Beacon*, Vol. 9 Issue 3 (Summer 2002)

http://www.freemason.com/beacon/beacon_sum02.pdf

⁴ Rees, Julian, *United States Grand Master's One-Day Classes* (Freemasonry Today, Issue 25, 2003)

<http://www.freemasonrytoday.co.uk/issue25-article2.shtml>

⁵ Grand Lodge of California 2003 Annual Communication Results

<http://www.freemason.org/2003%20Results%20of%20Grand%20Lodge.pdf>

⁶ Bessel, Paul, *1 or 2 Day Craft Degree Conferrals* (Masonic Leadership Center)

<http://www.bessel.org/oneday.org>

⁷ Braatz, George O., *Ohio's One-Day Class*, (Scottish Rite Journal, Jan/Feb 2004)

<http://www.srmason-sj.org/web/journal-files/Issues/jan-feb04/braatz.htm>

⁸ Henningsen, Gary A., *What Does The Future Hold For Freemasonry In The New Millennium?* (The

Empire State Mason, Winter 2003) <http://www.esmason.com/magpdf/esm%20w2003.pdf>

⁹ In International News (Freemasonry Today, Spring 2004, Issue 28)

¹⁰ Roberts, Allen E., *The Convention That Changed The Face Of Freemasonry*

<http://mastermason.info/education/files/artfeb02/convention%20that%20changed%20freemasonry.htm>

¹¹ Terrel, David, Letters to the Editor (Freemasonry Today, Spring 2004, Issue 28)

¹² <http://web.mit.edu/dryfoo/www/Masonry/One-Day/amendment.html>

¹³ Henningsen, Gary A., *What Does The Future Hold For Freemasonry In The New Millennium?* (The

Empire State Mason, Winter 2003) <http://www.esmason.com/magpdf/esm%20w2003.pdf>