

Thoughts on the Entered Apprentice Degree

By Brother Troy Kelley

My brothers, good evening, for the benefit of our two newest brothers, I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Brother Troy Kelley. On behalf of the entire Lodge, I'd like to welcome you to this grand fraternity of ours, who has seen amongst its members leaders, teachers, carpenters, salesmen, entrepreneurs, court reporters and many other good men, all of whom have sought ever to walk uprightly in whatever station in life they may find themselves; and to always practice those three most commendable Masonic tenets; Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth.

I have been asked tonight to say a few words on the Entered Apprentice degree, especially the obligations and the Charge. The first degree ceremony is meant not only to welcome you to Freemasonry but also to impress upon you the duty which you now willfully owe to our Lodge, our Craft and to all those who have gone before us and all those who have yet to join our honourable Fraternity. With the giving of the Charge, you were formally conferred Masonic status and passed from being merely a man to being a Mason, ready to seek out and discover all the secret art or arts, part or parts, point or points of the hidden mysteries of Freemasonry. However, you may ask yourself, what exactly is an Entered Apprentice and what role, if any, does being one play in being a Mason?

It has been said that the Entered Apprentice is the lowest of all of our levels, comparatively obscure, and considered only as a preparatory tool on the path to true Masonic light; the first bringer of light into the darkness of the uninitiated. It has also been said that the Lodge asks very little of the Entered Apprentice save the bonds of his Obligation and the exhibitions of character as were outlined in the Charge. While that may be so in the strictest sense, the statement is mendacious. In fact, the Lodge asks a great many things of the Entered Apprentice, not the least of which is a willingness to submit himself to discipline, to seek knowledge in order to learn the great Art of Life, to take his first Masonic steps on the path to personal liberation and, of course, to humbly serve our Almighty Parent. And while indeed it is the first of our three degrees, in many ways it is the most important degree of all.

What is the longest-serving of all levels of Masonry? Of course, it is the Entered Apprentice. I look around the Lodge tonight and see not two Entered Apprentices, but many, some of which have been so for two weeks, some for two years, some twenty, some fifty years or more. There is a theory of belief in karate that all followers of the art start and end as a white belt. No matter what color belt you may ultimately obtain, green, red, black, etc., that beneath it all, scrape off the paint, and you are a white belt. The same holds true for the Entered Apprentice. There is a saying we Masons sometimes use; once a Mason, always a Mason. That phrase could easily be amended to – once an Entered Apprentice, always an Entered Apprentice. After all, it is not the Fellowcraft, nor even the Master Mason that is awarded the badge of a Mason, the lambskin or white leather apron, it is the Entered Apprentice.

Mark Twain once said, "When some men discharge an obligation, you can hear the report for miles around." Never is that more true than in the practice of Freemasonry. In order to complete our initiation, every candidate must repeat a series of obligations. He must freely give himself to the service of God and our Lodge of Free & Accepted Masons. He must promise to uphold the secrets of Freemasonry secure and inviolate in his chest, binding himself under the ancient penalty of having his throat cut across, his tongue torn out and buried in the sands of the sea. But what exactly does that mean and, more importantly, are we willing to live by this promise, or are they mere words to be repeated and then forgotten once the conference of the degree is over? The Obligation is a debt, not merely to our Craft, our Lodge, our Lord, but it is a debt most importantly to our own self. Only by repeating the words, by understanding them, and by living them, can we obtain that true heart and peaceful consciousness to be ultimately ready to enter the eternal house of Heaven. We must be willing to abide by our new name, to learn the lessons of the working tools, to voluntarily find ourselves entirely destitute in all manner of material and spiritual wealth. Only then will we be ready to be illuminated with true Masonic light, ever remembering, however, that Masonry does not bring its light to man, but man must bring his light to Masonry. The Charge acknowledges that no institution was ever raised upon a better principle or more solid foundation nor were ever more excellent rules and useful maxims laid down than are inculcated in the several Masonic codas. Also, as the historical lecture tells us, by the Rough Ashlar we are reminded of that rude and imperfect state which is ours by nature. In many ways, an Entered Apprentice is analogous to that stone; raw, rough-hewn, unmolded and yet ready to be worked into ever finer and finer lines of perfection as he is shaped through education, his own endeavours and, of course, the blessing of the Deity, until he becomes an honoured member of our Fraternity; that Perfect Ashlar, smooth, eloquent and ready to be laid down per the designs of the Great Architect of the Universe.

The Entered Apprentice stands at the entrance to the Temple of Wisdom, blind, and prevented by cable-tow from being brought to the light just beyond the gates and, once that light is conferred upon him, he must – as the Charge admonishes us – always strive to be a Mason. But just how is that accomplished? Well, one way is to seek out the assistance of his fellow brothers. All brothers, not just the Entered Apprentice, but the Fellowcraft and Master Mason, are encouraged to converse with well-informed Brethren in their desire to obtain true Masonic light. And, of course, those brothers should be as willing to give as you will be to receive. The Entered Apprentice has taken his first steps into our grand Lodge, a Lodge not in the physical sense, a house not built with hands, as succinct as time immemorial in the precepts we all strive to represent; a Lodge as solid as the foundation of Perfect Ashlars upon which our Fraternity is built.

The Entered Apprentice degree reminds us that there are three great duties to which all Masons are charged – to God, your neighbor, and yourself. Also, as we are taught, there are three great lights in Masonry – the Holy Bible, Square and Compasses; three lesser lights – the Sun, the Moon and Master of the Lodge, and the three representatives of the lesser – three burning candles or tapers situated East, West and South. Of all of these, only the Holy Bible alone is given us as a rule and guide for our practice. Within it are found the words and

teachings of God, the divine principles for which all Masons strive, and also those doctrines of morality which lay the foundation for a righteous life. It is no wonder then that it is the greatest light in Masonry. Freemasonry is an eternal quest. All Masons must search for the sacred truths that lie within their own Temple of Wisdom and form the secrets to be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven. How he goes about doing that is mostly left to the individual, yet Masonry entreats one to never forget his many vows. The true brother knows that he is but a builder; an operative mason obligated with the duty, or rather a privilege owed to the King of the Universe to construct a worthy life, and only through His eternal love can we find our way through the darkness. Masonry is the torch we hold to help illuminate our path. Yet, as the Entered Apprentice must realize, even though he has passed through the gates of the Temple of Wisdom, he has only been freed from the blindfold of the uninitiated. It is with this in mind that he strives to improve himself, not only in Masonry, but in all his many avenues of life. To that end, the Entered Apprentice Charge is the first of many charges to help keep him on the path to true Masonic enlightenment. He still must endeavour to reach the life-giving ray of Fellowcraft and finally to be brought to the true glory of Masonry that awaits him only when he is raised to the sublime level of Master Mason.

Before he reaches that lofty position though, he must be willing to travel that road traversed by only those few who are ready to enter upon a new tie to Our Heavenly Father, who posses that strength of character to which ordinary men crave, who are ready to enter upon a new field of labour, with a new sense of duty and bound by a solemn vow ever to walk uprightly, not only as a loyal Mason, a worthy Brother, but most importantly, as a servant of God, to whom all Masons speak reverently and honourable and devoutly bow.