

## **MASONRY IS - - - INVOLVEMENT**

**by  
Bro. J. W. Roberts**

'Involvement' is an 'in' word today. All the way from those in the so called establishment to the 'way-out' protesters within society, all want to be known as the "involved". And whether they are or not doesn't really matter - just as long as they think they are. Let us say immediately that anyone who belongs to any church, fraternal group, service club or any organization must become involved in it, if it is to have any value for him. Today I want to speak about Masonry and involvement, where we find it, and the problems that surround it. I do not expect that you will agree with me in my conclusions, but my intention is to provoke discussion, and if I do that, I have 'involved' you to some extent. If I do that, I have done the job that I have set out to do.

'Involvement' means various things to various groups. For the Service Club member this is easy to define. It means getting behind the projects of a club, in either direction or doing. In the church there are three steps taken to involvement; decision, commitment and involvement, for no matter what we may decide or no matter how we may commit ourselves; without involvement there is nothing done. But in Masonry, or any other fraternal group involvement is not as 'cut and dried' as all that. For the person who joins masonry knows little or nothing about it when he is outside its precincts. Thus the mason has to learn to become involved in a rather unique way.

Let me then, rehearse for you, the way in which a mason becomes involved or where involvement becomes a possibility, along with some of the 'hang-ups' that I see in the system. There are, it seems to me, at least three areas - or should I say, three steps where the possibility of 'involvement' becomes, or could become an actuality. The first step along the way is when a candidate first enters the lodge room. He is blind in two senses - physically, because his is hoodwinked; and psychologically, he is blind, because he is without insight of a masonic nature, and he has no idea of what is going to happen. The first overpowering feeling that a candidate has, therefore, is one of complete and utter dependence. He has to rely on the guiding arm of a brother to conduct him where he does not know where to go, and then, on his knees he confesses that his faith is in God, but knowing as well, he must rely on the hidden brother. None of us will ever forget that the whole feeling in the first degree is one of humility. He is being guided, blind and humble, poor and penniless in both worldly goods and spirit. And all through that first degree, it would seem to me, humility is the lesson being inculcated; it is the first lesson that a mason receives. And it is the one great lesson that we are likely to overlook in the times that lie ahead, for without humility one cannot really learn what it means to become involved. We listen with care, but often without comprehension and ask unconsciously, (at times consciously) - "What would you have me do?" So when I say that we have a unique introduction to 'involvement' in masonry, this is what I mean, - we differ from many other groups for there is no "plunging" into involvement from the moment of admission. The second step in involvement takes place, also, in the first degree, at the time when he has his physical sight restored, but the initiate is 'still in the dark' in terms of masonic

teaching and unfortunately - at least under our present system - is going to remain this way for some time. We know that the reasons are evident to us. The teachings are bound up in symbols, abstraction and a somewhat archaic language, which may have great beauty, but it lacks directness, which is a clear necessity in this day of advanced communication. We know that we will always be 'learning' in masonry but very often it takes months and years for the meaning of even the most elementary teachings to come through, and some members unfortunately, give up trying. Now the reasons are, it seems to me, clear.

At this point I would like to make rather a long aside to grapple with the question "How can it be possible for a Mason to know that in which he is involved, when we have a system that does not dwell long enough on the basic issues right from the start?" You may want to argue with this, but I would think that no one would deny that the object of Masonry, as seen through the eyes of a newly initiated, passed or raised brother is simply to get ready for examination, so that the next degree or 'plateau' may be reached. But as far as the meaning of the work, and the application of the symbols to real life, there just hasn't been sufficient time.

In papers delivered by Ned Rivers and Morley Merner at an Inter-provincial Conference of the four Western Jurisdictions, they registered grave doubts about whether we do, in fact prepare men within masonry with anything like the care we ought to. Now I don't always agree with learned authorities within our craft, but in these papers "The Fellowcraft Degree makes a Mason Think" (portions of which were published in a recent Grand Lodge Bulletin) they make some valid and pertinent observations which bear upon the subject I am tackling. May I, in my own words, say some of the things they said.

First: the basis of much of the work in the lodge is to literally push a man through three hoops to get the 'bag of candy', or 'pot of gold' at the other end: - that the object of the Craft Masonry is to get a man through to the place where he is a Master Mason. But he does these things without really learning what masonry is all about. You may counter with "If a man really does his homework, and is willing to learn, he will have much light shed on the questions that bother him." My contention is that they do not know what questions to ask. It is also my contention that in this busy society of ours, he is not going to find the time. And his sponsor is every bit as busy as he is. How, then, can we ever expect a man to become involved in the real principles of masonry, when he has only a halting glimpse of its symbolism.

Secondly: The whole subject of what an 'apprentice' really does in real life escapes us. We make a man an apprentice for one month, (some may take up to two or even three months) and so the majority of masons experience a very brief apprentice period. But is this a good thing? In the world of skills and tools, we would not dare turn out a man after a thirty day exposure to his trade or calling. What makes us think that it can be done in the world of 'ideas', especially where those ideas are veiled in allegory and symbolism, and where the ideas are often abstract? Even on the practical side of things, as is described in the paper by Ned Rivers, we give new initiates the by-laws of the lodge, without any explanation except for a short bit that is read to every new member of a lodge. The only answer to this is to give the

apprentice more time and better instruction. The question that we must ask, and I hope that you will discuss, is "what should we do about it?" Perhaps we need to get back to an older system where the Entered Apprentice spent several months in that degree before he moved up. Perhaps we should allow at least six months between degrees, during which time, we should go over, very carefully, all of the symbolism and allegory, and relate them to the practical action that a mason is supposed to demonstrate in his own life. We should have "lodges of instruction" where the teachers of the apprentices will be those who know its meaning well. And then when the initiates come to their time of examination, they will not only know the words, but they will also know the meaning.

In the degree, a person is exposed to an hour and a half of lectures, perambulations and other detail. For him, he can only say "I was involved in 'something'" - fleeting lectures, hazy symbolism, difficult-to-grasp allegory - and later he will add 'hard-to-learn obligations'. But surely for him to become involved, masonry must be much more than this. and the only way he can become involved in the principles of masonry is when the symbols and veiled teachings become meaningful to him.

Some will suggest that if we lengthen this period between degrees, we will lose a number of good men to masonry. But I would suggest that an examination of most Registers in the Province today would demonstrate that we are not reaching and involving a great many who are joining masonry, and the umbilical cord appears to be their yearly payment of dues. There would be one main benefit from spacing the degrees at wider intervals, especially between the first and the second:- if he learns his work well in the first degree, then he has a 'mind-set' which will enable him to grasp the symbolism of the succeeding degrees with a lot more precision. let me underline again, that if we do not make the initiate understand, then there is no way that its principles can become relevant, and if the principles aren't relevant, then there is no way in which a Mason can become involved as he ought. When a man first comes to light, it is not enough to tell him about the VOSL, the Sq. and the Cs. He must be taught that these symbols, when related to life have significance; that the VOSL is the rule and guide to faith and that we live in a moral universe, but it depends on OUR APPLICATION TO THE PRINCIPLE - that the Sq. is that by which we guide our moral activity IN TERMS OF ACTIVITY IN THE WORLD; and that the Cs. symbolizes our scope of activity, IN A MEANINGFUL WAY TOWARD OUR BROTHER, AND THE REST OF THE WORLD. "To be a good man and true" is the first lesson that a Mason is taught - but often this lesson escapes him because we do not spend nearly enough time making this a FACT that is well and abundantly symbolized.

The third symbolic step taken in masonry involvement takes place when we are raised to "stand on our own two feet". We enter on a brother's arm, - we are raised to stand on our own feet. This is where we begin as independent workers within the Craft. This is the time when our own initiative becomes important. This is the time, when we either, in fact or symbolically become the supporting brother for those who enter into the lodge room for the first time. Here is where meaningful involvement ought to begin - but the question must be asked "does it?" I think that we are all aware of the great numbers of masons who drop away after the first few months, and one of the reasons is that we fail to sustain the interest which has already been built

up. For three months or more, there has been a concentrated interest in them and on their degree work. Then, when they are raised, and having passed the last examination, they find that they are desperately alone in many instances. They have not fully understood all that has gone on in the past, and now that they are, as it were, on their own two feet, they do not know in which direction they ought to be heading. In a large city lodge, the road to the beginning of the chairs is a long one, and in the interim, they do not feel that they can become involved in its life in a meaningful way. In all of the lodges of which I have been a member the most important work was the degree work and the other kinds of education have been largely neglected. This is not true in every lodge perhaps, but I would say that it is probably true in the majority of them. It seems to me that the term 'Masonic Education' must undergo a revival - or to use the 'in' term - a renewal. And we must involve these new members in that kind of education, not only by listening, but by getting them in the act of research and delivery of papers. Work in the lodge in degrees is much more easily delegated to Masters of the past, because they know the work, but it may be more essential for us to involve the novice a lot oftener than we do. For if a new mason does not become involved in the work, he does not become involved, and masonry is not likely to have the stamp of relevance it ought to have for them.

I have always been an 'uneasy' mason. And it stems from the fact that we neglect the area of involvement in the craft more than we do in other areas of life. Yes, we become involved in a meaningful fellowship, which we need, but is this enough? It seems to me we have to become involved in the Craft's meaning and its implications for life. And we can only do this when we best understand what Masonry is all about. It was argued in a previous paper that Masonry is not a religion. But there is a great similarity between the teachings of religion or ideology to the teachings of Masonry. In religion, we simply cannot be content to memorize a creed, we must activate it; we cannot be content to utter a prayer, we must make its fulfilment a possibility by what we do and what we are; it is not enough to know the symbolism or know the correct language form, we have to translate these into meaningful ethical action. And that is precisely what Masonry ought to be doing, for by activating our simple creeds, and being a part of the fulfilment of our desire for the Craft and for society, we are getting involved where it really counts.

In the general charge that follows every installation, we find the summary of what a Mason ought to be, and it states quite flatly that he is one, who without parading his goodness or his charity, is in fact involved in these things in his life. but it must begin right at the very beginning of his pilgrimage through Masonry. And we can fulfil our responsibilities in a better way than we do it now. My object is not to be contentious, but simply have you renew your thinking in an area where we do not do as well as we might. Masonry is involvement - and if we are not involved - every Mason - then we cannot possibly carry forward its great teachings with the intensity it is meant to have.

***Theme Speech #1  
Delivered at  
The Alberta Masonic Spring Workshop, 1969  
held at Banff Alberta.***