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The Noblest of Instruments

“They are the noblest of instruments for improving the mind and giving it the most distinct idea of any problem or position, as well as enabling it to solve the same” I have repeated this line over and over many times and still don’t know what it means. This line, as any Freemason knows, is from the Stair Lecture. There are at least two pages devoted to the Globes in the lecture. The lecture tells us what the globes represent, but it does not explain what they have to do with Freemasonry and why should I care. In order for us to understand what this really means, we have to look at where this explanation in the lecture came from. This portion of the lecture did not show up until the late-1700s. The exact date is probably not known, what we do know is: William Preston is the most likely author of this portion of our ritual. I use the term “Author” very loosely when dealing with Preston. Like many things in Freemasonry, we tend to borrow from many sources. We are not very good at documenting sources, or giving credit to the original source. This, I believe is the case with the explanation of the Globes in Preston’s Lecture. Now, let’s go back to the explanation of the Globes. They are the noblest instruments for improving the mind. What in the world does this mean? How do they improve the mind? Well, by giving it the most distinct idea of any problem or

proposition as well as enabling it to solve the same. Right, that's like saying a pond is smaller than a lake and a lake is bigger than a pond. Where is the context? What example is there? If we look closer at the lecture we see that there is some explanation given in that they serve as maps to distinguish the outward parts of the Earth and the situation of the fixed stars. We are also told that we should encourage the study of Astronomy, Geography, Navigation and the Arts dependent upon them by which society has been so much benefited. Why, what for? How does any of this relate to Freemasonry? If Freemasons make good men better, how do the Globes fit into this mission?

Just by accident, I think I may have found the answer, and why we struggle with this today. We know we have a problem with our Ritual. We are charged not to write things down. If we do write it down, it is kept under close guard where no one is allowed to see what we have, even our own members. We are not going to get into a discussion about secrecy and ritual here, I just want you to understand this is one of the pitfalls of not keeping accurate records to guard against innovation and change. Have you ever wondered why some ritual flows, and some does not? This is probably due to some well-intentioned Brethren years ago who thought that we should make it easier to understand, and by easier, I mean shorter. In this case, I believe that we are missing significant portions of the original intent in the explanation of the Globes.

It is no accident that one of the working tools in English Lodges is a pencil. The pencil reminds us that all knowledge is passed from one generation to another by keeping written records. Look at the five orders of architecture in our ritual and you will see there is a detailed explanation for each included in Shaver's Monitor, but not in the

ritual. It would be interesting to go back and look at older ciphers to see if, and when, the shorter version came into use.

Masonry is a progressive science. It builds upon what it lays down as the foundation for the Candidate. The Candidate himself should be of high quality. Willing to learn, grow, and prosper in all things which make society great. The Globes are an important part of this learning, but how. Well we need to look where Preston lifted his idea, and most of the text from his explanation of the Globes. Brothers, I submit to you that the explanation of the Globes was written by William Davis in his book: An easy and Comprehensive Description of the Terrestrial and Celestial Globes, with their several usages containing definitions, with a great number of problems. Here is what Davis writes about the Globes:

Hence it appears, that Globes are not only the most proper Contrivances for accounting for all the heavenly Appearances arising from the Apparent Diurnal and Annual Motion of the Sun, or the real Rotation of the Earth about her own Axis, but the noblest Instrument, as well for informing the Mind, and giving it the clearest, and most distinct Idea of the Thing proposed to be done, as for giving Solutions to all Problems resulting from it; and it is from a Contemplation of these Bodies, and their, several Appendages, that Astronomers have discovered so many excellent Methods for the more easy, and exact Solution of the several Astronomical and Geographical Propositions ; whence it must be * allowed, that to have a perfect Knowledge of them, is one of the surest and best Foundations that can be laid by anyone who would understand Astronomy, Geography, Navigation, and their dependent Sciences.

The first edition of this book came out sometime around 1768, however, I can find no copies that have survived. The Second edition in the 1790s, and subsequent editions right up into the middle 1800s. William Davis, as far as I could tell was not a Freemason, but he was a member of the Philosophical Society of London. Did he know Preston? Possibly, but his book would have been very popular at the time and Preston probably had a copy. Preston's Illustrations of Freemasonry came out in 1772.

Therefore it is entirely conceivable that he used portions of William Davis's book in his explanations. If we look at the very rare edition of Preston's Illustrations of Masonry we find that he included a section on Astronomy. We don't have that anymore in our present day lecture. He also included within that, the lecture on the Globes. See below:

Astronomy is that art by which we are taught to read the wonderful works of the Almighty Creator in those sacred pages, the celestial hemisphere. Assisted by astronomy, we observe the motions, measure the distances, comprehend the magnitudes, and calculate the periods and eclipses, of the heavenly bodies. By it we learn the use of the globes, the system of the world, and the primary law of nature. While we are employed in the study of this science, we perceive unparalleled instances of wisdom and goodness, and through the whole of creation trace the glorious Author by his works. The doctrine of the spheres, which is included in the science of Astronomy, is also particularly considered in this Section. The globes are two artificial spherical bodies, on the convex surface of which are represented the countries, seas, and various parts of the earth; the face of the heavens, the planetary revolutions, and other important particulars. The sphere, with the parts of the earth delineated upon its surface, is called the

terrestrial globe; and that with the constellations and other heavenly bodies, the celestial globe. Their principal use, besides serving as maps to distinguish the outward parts of the earth, and the situation of the fixed stars, is to illustrate and explain the phenomena arising from the annual revolution, and the diurnal rotation of the earth round its own axis. They are the noblest instruments for giving the most distinct idea of any problem or proposition, as well as for enabling us to solve it. Contemplating these bodies, Masons are inspired with a due reverence for the Deity and his works; and are induced to apply with diligence and attention to astronomy, geography, navigation, and all the arts dependent on them, by which society has been so much benefited.

This explanation is much better than what we now have, however; there is still something missing. Why are we studying the Globes? For this we need to remember the mission of Freemasonry: Making good men better! Let me read to you now the Preface William Davis wrote in his book and the explanation will become clear:

The utility of this Treatise may be greatly increased by a judicious Teacher, who, in pointing out the principal places on the Terrestrial Globe, will have an excellent opportunity of employing his Geographical and Historical Knowledge to the advantage of his pupils. The Latitudes and Longitudes of places; their situations and distances from the nearest places of note; the length of the longest and shortest days; the government, produce, and many other particulars, will occur to an - - - intelligent preceptor, as absolutely necessary to be well explained to his scholars, that they may become men of business, and men of rational

conversation; useful to the community and themselves, and agreeable to their friends.

Well, there you have it. **“That they may become men of business, and men of rational conversation; useful to the community and themselves, and agreeable to their friends”**. Study the globes, understand Astronomy, Navigation, Geography, and make yourself smarter, successful, and a better man. Education is the backbone of the Masonic Mission to make men better. Over the past one hundred years, we have slowly let that slip from our Lodges. The bottom line is that Freemasons don't use astrology, magic, or any other mystical methods on a seventy-year- cycle to become successful. We do it by study, examination, practice, and only initiating the best candidates into our order. We cheat ourselves and the Craft by watering down our ritual, failing to provide mentors, teachers, and coaches to our candidates and Brethren. We should instill a passion for lifelong learning, personal responsibility, and excellence in everything we do. I believe we need to expand our current thinking of Masonic Education to subjects outside of Masonic subjects only. However well intentioned, this rule has stifled the role of Masonic Education in Lodges. We are told in our Ritual to Study Astronomy, Geography, Navigation and the Arts dependent upon them. We understand the importance of the Liberal Arts and Sciences, but if we are not allowed to incorporate them into our Lodges for instruction; that makes no sense. It is very difficult to hold a rational conversation when your instruction consists of the duties of the Lodge Officers. Our current race to get Candidates Initiated, Passed, and Raised, so they can start paying dues has negated the Progressive Science of Freemasonry. We need to take a long hard look at what we really provide to “Make Good Men Better”. At some point we

will have to decide what investment is more important; the intellectual capital of our members, or the cash in their wallet.

Every member of your Lodge has a unique background and expertise. We should draw on this expertise and experience to enhance our Masonic Experience. Masonic Lodges were a place of expanded thought, speech, and Life Lessons. We need to get back to that mentality and show the World we are “The Men of Excellence”. The Gold of society.

References

Davis, William An Easy and comprehensive description of the terrestrial and celestial globes, with their several uses; containing definitions, with a great number of problems.

1798 Reproduction British Library

Preston, William Illustrations of Masonry 1772

Shaver's Masonic Monitor