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By Stan Shapiro MD, Grand Lodge Education Officer G.L. of MN
#209

“Clear thinking requires courage rather than intelligence.” Thomas S. Szasz

The following well written and thought provoking article was sent Hans Wang, Worshipful Master of Plymouth Lodge #160, is a new member of the Minnesota Grand Lodge Writers Guild.

Masonry as a Political Act

When Ole O. Moen retired from his position as Professor of North American Studies at the University of Oslo this year, after teaching Norwegian students about the United States for 32 years, he was asked what he thought of current trends in America in general. His answer was simply that “for the first time in history, [we have] a generation of Americans [that] are dumber than their parents.”

Moen is hardly the first person to hold that opinion. In his 1985 book “Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business”, Neil Postman discusses the fact that Americans who were around during the Lincoln-Douglas debates were fairly sophisticated in terms of their ability to understand subtle nuances of argument. Postman points out that the two “consistently drew upon more complex rhetorical resources – sarcasm, irony, paradox, elaborated metaphors, fine distinctions and the exposure of contradiction.”

Neil Postman spends most of his book discussing how we have become lulled into a state of apathy by the televised news media, that our future is Huxleyan rather than Orwellian because, with a placated populace, there is no need for a Big Brother Government. In later interviews, Postman spoke of an endless sea of information where individuals become “preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.” Postman was worried that television brought with it “misleading information – misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information – information that creates the illusion of knowing something, but which in fact leads one away from knowing.”

As Freemasons, we have a continuous duty to educate ourselves. That duty is emphasized, in particular, during the second degree. Yet education is not simply knowledge; it also includes knowing how to evaluate the credibility of various positions and the soundness of the arguments made. Some have argued that Thomas Young (1773-1829) was the last man to know everything. When invited to contribute to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Young offered to assist with the following subjects: “Alphabet, Annuities, Attraction, Capillary Action, Cohesion, Color, Dew, Egypt, Eye, Focus, Friction, Halo, Hieroglyphic, Hydraulics, Motion, Resistance, Ship, Sound, Strength, Tides, Waves, and anything of a medical nature.” In terms of our duty to educate ourselves, Young is an example of what we as Masons should aspire to.

The growth of the internet in the years since Postman’s death in 2003 has brought with it yet another layer of complexity; the idea that every argument, no matter how illogical, untested or contradictory, somehow has merit. The problem is that not every argument has merit. During the middle chamber lecture, Fellowcrafts are informed that “[l]ogic teaches us to guide our reason discretionally in the general knowledge of things . . . and in it are employed the faculties of conceiving, judging, reasoning, and disposing [until] the point in question is finally determined.” If there is one thing that the internet is particularly good at, it is continuing and evolving arguments that have no merit yet persistently refuse to die: zombie arguments.

In a recent issue of the NY Times Sunday Magazine, Stephen Marche reviewed the film “Anonymous” – a movie that argues, in true Da Vinci Code fashion, that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare. Marche observes that “[t]he Shakespeare controversy” is “one of the origins of the willful ignorance and insidious false balance that is now rotting away our capacity to have meaningful discussions. The wider public . . . assumes that if there are arguments, there must be reasons for those arguments. Along with a right-wing anti-elitism, an unthinking left-wing open-mindedness and relativism have also given lunatic ideas soil to grow in. Our politeness has actually led us to believe that everybody deserves a say.”

Our duty to educate ourselves is broad, and clearly extends to the political sphere. Politics with a small “p” has no place in a Masonic Lodge – and rightfully so, but the act of being a Freemason is itself a Political Act. We rarely reflect on this because we live in a society where Government does not overtly oppress us, but we do not need to look that far out across our borders or into the history books to find those who believe that the Masons pose a significant threat. Candidates for Freemasonry, in our own State, used to be asked whether they espoused Communist leanings as part of the interview process.

Tolerance, truth, justice and equality are terms frequently used during our degree work, but how many of us stop to reflect on whether our own political views actually embody those tenets? How many of us reiterate arguments we have heard on television without knowing whether there are facts to back those arguments up? The current economic downturn has ushered in a sense of powerlessness that Americans have not felt for a long time and there is enough blame to go around. People on the right blame politicians, people on the left blame corporations, each only focused on half of the problem. I am surprised that Freemasons have not been blamed yet.

In the interview with the Norwegian newspaper Finansavisen, that the above quote is taken from, Ole O. Moen discusses the fact that today’s students do not bother to memorize anything since it is easy to look up the answer to just about any question online: “[a]ctual knowledge has become a hurdle to novel thinking. Instead everyone wants to reinvent the wheel.” Novel thinking, in Moen’s view, requires knowing what others have done beforehand.

To navigate the sea of information Postman warned us about requires education and intellectual sophistication. In the end, it does not matter if you lean to the left or right politically. What does matter is that the same healthy anti-authoritarian distrust displayed the degrees of Scottish Rite Masonry also is applied to politics in general – that we as Masons question those who deal in absolutes the same way we question authority in general. Sometimes authority comes in the form of a leader who “flings his corsair into the scales” to quote from the ninth degree, other times it comes in the form of oceans of disinformation intended to pacify and placate. Regardless of how authority manifests itself, our duty to educate ourselves about it endures: a Political Act.

Hans Wang, Worshipful Master – Plymouth Lodge #160 2011

Words to Live By: “Thinking is the hardest and most exhausting of all labor; and hence many people shrink from it.” *Wallace D. Wattles*

If you have any comments, suggestions, or questions, please send them to shapiro.stanley@gmail.com

The Education Videos by our education committee can be viewed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/glmned>

The latest Masonic Monday Question, and some of the past questions, can be viewed at www.Lodgebuilder.org and at www.mn-masons.org