

The Observant Lodge

The proposed Fibonacci Lodge

by Tobin Winters, Appointed W.: M.:

My dear brothers, it should come as no surprise to you that Freemasonry as we know it has been in a steady state of decline for decades. We've all heard this at one point or another and most likely have a theory or two of our own as to the cause. From boring meetings, to lack of Masonic education, to excruciating discussion of bills and minutes... you're probably as tired of hearing about it as I am. You know it is happening and don't want talk or excuses. You want action. You want something to be done about it. You want Freemasonry to be something like you've read about, seen glimpses of, or imagined it would be.



I come to you with a starting point. I come to you with a plan of action that has been successfully used in other jurisdictions within the United States and one that could very well be the tipping point towards a Masonic renaissance in our jurisdiction. It is a way of thinking about Freemasonry that is known contemporarily as traditional observance, T.O., or observant Masonry and is exemplified by a relatively recent creation: The observant Lodge. I would like to take a moment to describe what observance in Masonry is and the first attempt at a Lodge in Vermont to classify itself as "observant" which is the Fibonacci Observant Masonry Club, currently petitioning for dispensation to meet as a Lodge.

Before I get in to what it observance is or what it means to practice observance, I think it is important to realize something about observant Masonry that Worshipful Brother Andrew

Hammer, our guest speaker at last year's Grand Lodge session, points out so eloquently in the very first paragraph of the preface to his book, *Observing the Craft* about observant Masonry: "Everything to be found in these pages has been practiced in Masonic lodges throughout the world at one time or another" and he continues "this book has been written because so many of these things have fallen out of practice in so many of our lodges, if indeed they have ever been practised in some of them." *Realize* that the practices defined by traditional observance are not new, but a Lodge that devotes itself to this practice so *intentionally* and *completely* is. I am talking about a regular blue Lodge in here and nothing that does not conform with Vermont masonic code or ritual.

Realize that the practices defined by an observant Lodge are not new, but a Lodge that devotes itself to this practice so intentionally and completely is.

So what does it mean to practice traditional observance?

Qualities of a traditional observance Lodge

There is a specific focus on initiation and then continuing self-improvement. Our Masonic journey is continuous and great care is taken to make the initiation, degrees and member education a focal point of the Lodge.

There is an overall expectation of striving for perfection and excellence in the way a member

conducts themselves, from the way you present yourself in Lodge to the officers performing perfect ritual. You will often see Lodges that practice traditional observance have a strict dress code that includes officers and even members wearing dark business suits, tuxedos and white gloves.

A traditionally observant Lodge knows a quality meal and socialization is a foundation stone of our organization and works to hold a festive board, often called an agape, after every meeting.

The atmosphere is different than most blue lodges. It is solemn, reflective, and contemplative during the Lodge meeting and festive and interactive after. The members are doing great and important work and treat it as such. Careful attention and preparation are given towards presenting the content for each meeting which will often include a musical presentation and other aspects of the liberal arts and sciences you may not see in the blue lodge meetings you are used to.

Your attendance at a lodge meeting is assumed. Members have to notify the Worshipful Master if they cannot attend.

Business is taken care of as much as possible outside the lodge meeting and minutes are never read from previous meetings but posted for the members to review.

Each member is expected and required to contribute in some way to the overall lodge in the form of a presentation or paper. Candidates and affiliates are expected to adhere to this requirement and present a paper to gain admission to the Lodge.

The application and affiliation process is thorough, making sure the candidate or affiliate knows exactly what the expectations are for them and that they would be a good fit for a Lodge with high standards.

The dues for such a Lodge are higher to provide for the quality of education, atmosphere and agape afterwards. Consider this: a good meal will cost \$20, and paying \$10 for use of the building per member (rent, electricity, etc..) is not unreasonable. That's \$360 for one meeting a month for a year. If you take care of that up front, you don't have to worry about fundraising and can focus on Masonry.

Officers are elected and appointed due to qualifications and proven leadership. A progressive line is not assumed.

If the concept of observance has piqued your interest, I invite you to study it further at the Masonic Restoration Foundation's website. They are an organization dedicated to this concept and in revitalizing Freemasonry be defining a type of observant masonry they call *traditional observance*:

<http://traditionalobservance.com/>

To put it simply, an observant Lodge is a blue Lodge that holds its members to high standards, standards that set the Craft apart from other organizations. In an effort to fight the declining numbers we have made it easier and easier to become a Mason, letting some of these important traditions slide. All this does is cheapen the Craft and lessen its power. We are talking about advertising and other things that DO NOT address *improving the quality* of our Masonic experience. What we should be doing is fighting to keep and reinstate the traditions and high standards that made Freemasonry the unique organization that it is. As we've heard time and again, we "make good men better". This does not mean "make any a Mason". We need to flip the paradigm and focus on quality instead of quantity. How many times have you heard that phrase "quality instead of quantity" thrown around in Freemasonry? What are we actually doing about it?

Myths versus reality

When talking about an observant Lodge and the concept many people immediately have questions and suspect discrimination, elitism or a possible irregular lodge. Why can't we all meet "on the level?" Here is a list of common questions and answers I've come across when talking to brothers and Lodges about this subject. This list started from a flyer put out by Phoenix Lodge #105, the first traditional observant Lodge in New Hampshire:

MYTH: A T.O. Lodge will take away from other lodges.

FACT: We are not looking to steal members. We also do not intend to compete for members; we believe that someone seeking membership in a T.O. Lodge is looking for something different than what they get in other lodges. We are looking to place the right person in the right lodge, not decide for them.

MYTH: There are enough lodges already, we don't need more.

FACT: The number of lodges in Vermont is irrelevant; this lodge will be deliberately small and located centrally to appeal to men from across the state.

MYTH: It's easier to revitalize a troubled or weak lodge and change the culture, don't start a new one.

FACT: This is impossible; you cannot get every Mason in an existing lodge to buy in to a complete change of culture, nor should we force it. Further, we are not looking to take control of an existing structure; our goal is to meet in an existing temple where we can focus our resources where they should be focused, on self-improvement.

MYTH: You are trying to be elitist. This is not "on the level".

FACT: There is nothing elitist about Traditional Observance Masonry. Rather, T.O. is designed to return to Masonry's founding principles and thought. Specific meeting time is devoted to discussion, introspection, research and degrees. The dues and initiation fee are purposely high because we intend to provide more than what is provided in regular lodges, i.e.- educational materials, a formal meal after every meeting, etc. Yes, formal wear is required for officers, but this is no different than many other lodges in our jurisdiction.

MYTH: You'll be following unconstitutional practices and strange ritual.

FACT: Every aspect of every meetings, ritual and degrees will be held with respect to the Vermont Masonic Code and Ritual of the Grand Lodge of Vermont, of whom we will petition to charter. The difference is that we will use ritual and symbols that may be unfamiliar to some Masons to SUPPLEMENT the degrees, NOT SUPPLANT them.

MYTH: Not everyone is welcome in a T.O. Lodge.

FACT: This is not true, any Master Mason may petition to affiliate or join a T.O. Lodge. Any Mason may visit the T.O. Lodge. Any person can petition to be a member of a T.O. Lodge. However, candidates will have a longer, more focused initiatic phase in a T.O. Lodge, be required to 'wait with patience' before progressing, and hopefully enjoy the experience. Not every man will want to be a member of a T.O. Lodge, but any man is always welcome.

Fibonacci Observant Masonry Club

A group of very dedicated brothers have been meeting over the past year as Fibonacci Observant Masonry Club laying the foundation for Vermont's first observant Masonry Lodge. They are following in the footsteps of successful traditional observant Lodges like Estorica in Portland <http://www.esoterika227.com/>, Academia Lodge in Oakland <http://academialodge.org/>, and a recent addition to the T.O. Lodge list, Phoenix Lodge in Tilton, NH <http://nhphoenix105.org/>.

The goal of this group of brothers is to create a Lodge that held the principles and traditions of observant Masonry as our founding concepts and set an example for its members to take back to their home Lodges and elsewhere across this jurisdiction and others.

We decided to meet in Woodstock, VT at the Woodstock Lodge facility, which we rent the second Wednesday of every month, meetings start at 7:30pm. RSVP's are required for the agape afterwards which is considered an integral part of the evening as discussions of the meetings presentations are likely to ensue. We are also discussing the possibility of travelling a couple times a year so that members in other areas of the state might have a chance to see what we do.

My Brothers, we are on the edge of something great. You've seen glimmers of this greatness, in your Lodge, in others, in members, in yourselves.

It is time to focus on restoring the Craft.

It is time for those interested to come together and focus on Masonry in a way we've all dreamed of.

Members joining Masonry join with an expectation. Are we giving them what they expect?

If you are interested or just have questions about our efforts please don't hesitate to contact me and I cordially invite any Freemason to one of our meetings.

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