

STUDYING VERSUS LEARNING
WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE
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In his important book entitled, “The Teachings of Freemasonry”, the noted Masonic author wrote, “Knowledge is the greatest thing in the world, and must, therefore, be the one aim of all endeavor”.

Some time ago I read a book entitled, “A Jew in the Lotus”. It was a tale of fifty people of the Jewish faith who made a trek to Dharamsala, India to meet with the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama requested this meeting because he saw a comparison between the people of the Jewish faith in their diaspora and the plight of his followers in their diaspora. The Dalai Lama wanted to know how the Jewish people survived so many centuries in their diaspora and he wanted to apply these lessons to his followers so as to insure their longevity. The answer to this question was the insistence of the Jewish people to educating their children.

There is a similar parallel to the brotherhood of Freemasonry. The history of the Lodge system of Freemasonry has existed for almost 300 years. This makes Freemasonry the single, longest surviving fraternal organization in the world today. The secret of this longevity must, therefore, be the insistence of Freemasonry in educating its children, namely, their newly made brethren.

I participate in a group where we are learning the Old Testament Book of Genesis in the original Hebrew language. Please notice I said that we are learning the Book of Genesis, not studying it. What, then, is the difference between studying and learning?

I recently read an essay that defines this difference. The essay remarked that there is a great deal of wisdom that flows from our teachers, various writings such as books and articles, interpretations and opinions stemming from others’ research, and other items from source materials. You might notice that this wisdom all flows in one direction, from source to student. If the teacher does not know the answer to a question, then that teacher will find the answer and give it to the student. The essay goes on to state that there is a fixed answer to every question. The teacher, book, or other source material is thought to have all answers. All that is necessary is considered to be knowing where to find the response to a student’s query.

This is believed to be the universal way to solve all problems. However, in fact, it is a very poor way to ascertain solutions to the questions that come to the student’s mind. The author of the essay opines that there appears to be more questions than there are answers. How, then do we progress from top down studying, or benefitting from studying the work product of others, to learning, that is actually gaining the knowledge that forms our learning experience.

The author of the essay defines learning as something that emerges out of dialogue. He goes on to state that, “Books are great, but without bouncing ideas back and forth, debating, reiterating yourself, defending your position, hearing the other, and coming back again with a refined argument – there is just no real learning”.

How, then, does one frame and open conversation? The essay states that at every age, whether it be in kindergarten or in a university setting, or, in Freemasonry, a new brother that has just participated in this 1st degree, or a newly raised Master Mason, or a brother who has attained many years of longevity in our brotherhood, there is a need for the study requirements of a top down approach to let you know what is the next best thing to do.

The answer is a system of education that has been around for thousands of years. It started in the school system of the ancient Hebrews, where a student sits with a partner. The function of the partner is to argue with the student. The partner tries to ascertain if there is a different view point to that being discussed and to find alternative points of view. The two participants then try to work out their differences and come to a common position. Sometimes, the discussion becomes so heated that others are drawn into the debate and many differing opinions enter into the argument.

In the religious schools of the Jewish faith, instead of rows of desks, the participants sit around a table, rather than at rows of desks. The instructor starts to speak, and then discussion takes off. Everything discussed is open to question, and every question leads to new dialogue, new insights, and new perspectives. Learning has taken place. Students gain, “an open mind and a listening ear”.

Some questions have a straightforward answer for which a top down approach is the correct one. It is this approach that comes from scholarly research and is the results a myriad of discussions that have come down from generations of debates that have taken place before.

In Freemasonry, it is this approach to “Learning” that has permitted our fraternity to thrive for almost 300 years of longer. As we look at the symbolism in the ritual of the three degrees, it can be readily seen that there is no pat answer to the meaning of the elements taught in each degree. Each brother must determine the meaning of the degrees as they apply to his own life circumstances.

Yes, it is important that one utilize a top down explanation of each of the degrees. For this purpose we can turn to learned Masonic authors such as the books of symbolism written by H. L. Haywood and Albert Gallatin Mackey, and others. But, these books only present a starting point in our Masonic education. This is the “Study” of Freemasonry and its meaning.

To truly “Learn” Freemasonry, brethren should sit around a table and use the written explanation of the symbolism of the degrees as a starting point to a discussion of the symbolic meanings. Each brother has a different perspective on what the degree means to him. It is the amalgam of these perspectives, gained from a free discussion around a table, where a brother truly “Learns” what it means to be a Mason.