



“The Hourglass”

Lodge Presentation:

*The following short article is written with the intention to be read within an open Lodge, or in fellowship, to all the members in attendance. This article is appropriate to be presented to **all Master Masons**.*

***Master Masons** should be invited to attend the meeting where this is presented. Following this article is a list of discussion questions which should be presented following the presentation of the article.*

The Hourglass

“Dost thou love life? Then squander not time, for that is the stuff that life is made of.” – Ben Franklin

“The hourglass is an emblem of human life. Behold! How swiftly the sands run, and how rapidly our lives are drawing to a close.”

The hourglass works on the same principle as the clepsydra, or “water clock”, which has been around since 1500 AD. There are the two vessels, and in the case of the clepsydra, there was a certain amount of water that flowed at a specific rate from the top to bottom. According to the Guinness book of records, the first hourglass, or sand clock, is said to have been invented by a French monk called Liutprand in the 8th century AD.

Water clocks and pendulum clocks couldn’t be used on ships because they needed to be steady to work accurately. Sand clocks, or “hour glasses” could be suspended from a rope or string and would not be as affected by the moving ship. For this reason, “sand clocks” were in fairly high demand in the shipping industry back in the day. Evidence suggests that hourglasses were in abundance in the shipping industry by the 1300s.

As a Masonic emblem, it is fairly recent. It is referred to as “being used in the 3rd degree by Webb”, referring to Thomas Smith Webb, who had a good deal to do with the editing of the American Masonic ritual. Looking back at the tracing boards from Europe and England in the 1700s, I saw no evidence of the hourglass depicted anywhere. The hourglass is, however, a symbol used in the Chamber of Reflection, which is meant for the candidate to reflect upon his own mortality, and the seriousness of what he is about to do. Many of the emblems in the Chamber also have been said to also have been symbols from Alchemy as well (sulfur, salt, bread, etc).

The hourglass has two “vessels” or bulbs, one above and one below. In the Hermetic teaching of the Emerald Tablet, we see that saying, “As above, so below”. In Christianity, we see it as, “On earth as it is in Heaven”. As sand moves from the upper vessel to the lower, that which was above, is now below. Symbolically, then, it is as if we can say that all that is manifest here on this earthly plane, certainly came from the spiritual plane, or God.



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We can think of the lower sphere as being the earthly or physical sphere, and the upper sphere as being the spiritual or celestial sphere. You can do something else with the hourglass. You can turn it on its side, essentially stopping time in that moment (and ironically it will form a sideways figure 8, or a symbol of eternity), or you can turn it on its head, and the flow of sand will now go from what used to be the lower to what was once the upper. This can also reflect the cycles of birth and death, not unlike our seasons.

You can also think of spheres as the future and past. If the sand represents the individual moments that make up our lives, then the tube it passes through from the future to the past must be the present. While turning the hourglass on its side stops the flow of sand, it does not stop the passage of time.

The hour glass is an ever-present reminder of how fleeting and delicate our lives really are. It is a symbol that begs us to focus on the passing of time. It’s as if it is speaking to us.

It challenges us to consider past, be mindful of the future, but as they are both out of our control, or focus needs to be on the present. The narrow tube connecting the future and past, restricting the flow of events through it to just a few moments at a time, illustrates that it is those moments that define us. It is through these moments, and not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future, that we impact the lives and hearts around us.

Every grain of sand that falls is another moment that has passed in our lives, and another moment, and another. How are we spending our moments? In reality, life is just a series of “moments” is it not? If we watch each grain fall, and consider each one moment in our life, then it reminds us that we need only focus on this moment right now, because that’s all there ever is. If we focus our attention on this moment, and make it as great as we can, and then the next and the next, we can string together several of those “moments” into a good 10 minutes, a good hour, a good day, and perhaps a good life.

In the Master Mason degree, we are reminded of our responsibility to consider our own mortality. That our legacies are the positive impact we make on our world; not that we need to cure cancer or secure world peace in the endeavor, but by our actions to leave the world a better place than we found it. In this way, we fulfill one of the purposes of Freemasonry and we are reminded that sand is constantly passing through the hourglass. As we pass from the physical to the spiritual sphere, we are to be aware of the future and learn from the past but our focus is to be on the present. From this perspective, the hourglass perhaps perfectly summarizes the message of the degree.

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Grand Lodge Free and Accepted Masons of Wisconsin



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Discussion Questions

The following discussion questions are written to be presented immediately following the presentation of the topic above. There is no right or wrong answers to these questions, they are designed to promote thought and engage all the members that are present in conversation. Take care that the presentation of the topic and the discussion questions does not exceed 30 minutes. The presenter can present any part of the questions below, or any additional questions, he feels is appropriate.

- The hourglass is an emblem of human life, and of time. Where else in our ritual do we see symbols or emblems that allude to the importance or passing of time?
- The hourglass has two spheres. One spiritual, one physical. Where else in Masonic symbolism do we discuss the use of two spheres?
 - What is the relationship between the lessons expressed by the representation of the spheres?
- For those who pray, is the communication only one way (i.e. from the lower sphere to upper sphere – or from you to God)? Or is that communication sometimes 2 ways (essentially turning the hourglass upside down), where the communication flows equally in both directions.
- As Freemasons, why is it important to remember the past and focus on the present?
- Why is it important to consider how you are spending your time?

An appropriate quote to consider:

“Because we don't know when we will die, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, an afternoon that is so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four, five times more, perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps 20? And yet it all seems limitless.” — Paul Bowles