

1,440 minutes...what did you do with your time today?

Masonic ritual is filled with metaphors – the ‘esoteric stuff’, like the lessons in morality that you’ve heard me talk about in many of the ‘nuggets’ I’ve created over the last 11 years. I recall, nearly forty years ago, when I was a much younger and a very inexperienced Mason; I really had no idea what true words of wisdom and meaning the several lectures of our degrees were supposed to impart.

After I advanced through the degrees, and my brain was no longer on ‘overload’ from all the ritual I had absorbed, I began to seek more information about those true ‘secrets’ of Masonry that the older, more enlightened, Brethren were talking about. I discovered that what I had accepted as my idea of Freemasonry was made up of the ‘secrets’ that I was keeping within my heart. But what a terrible waste! Why should I keep all those great lessons of Freemasonry to myself? Why not share what I had learned with my Brethren?

So, I bring you a gift....something that is found everywhere, but takes up no space. We can measure it, but we can’t see it, or touch it. Oh, you can kill it, but you can never change it. You use it up every day, yet I doubt most people can define it! Yes...my gift is....‘**TIME**’.

Webster’s says that Time is ‘a component of the measuring system used to sequence events, to compare the durations of events and the intervals between them, and to quantify the motion of objects’. Allow me to translate...time is that thing we just never seem to have enough of because the minutes and hours pass so quickly now that we have reached this stage of our lives. If you ever watched the soap opera ‘Days of our Lives’ on television (and I’ll *not* ask for a show of hands on that...) but if you did, surely you’ll remember the opening admonition that said... ‘Like sands through the hourglass...so are the days of our lives’. This November that show will have been on the air for 50 years. It’s funny how when you’re growing up all of your elders say.... ‘just wait until you’re older’...but, you can’t wait, it’s too far off in the future. Oh, Really?

The watch I wear on my wrist is designed to keep accurate time to 1 second in every 20 years...but I think at this point in my life I can afford to lose a second in 20 years and not be too concerned. We have become a society of time conscious people. The National Institute of Standards and Technology in Colorado is home to the primary time and frequency standard for the US. The best cesium oscillators (such as the one used at the Institute) can produce frequency intervals with a certainty of 3×10^{-16} , which translates to a time error of about 0.03 nanoseconds per day, or about one second in 100 million years! So much for my cheap wristwatch! We have become so exacting about time...and for what purpose? Now that we have the ability to measure our time in such small segments, do we use it more wisely? I think not!

In 1980 I had a rare and treasured opportunity to spend some time with Dr. Carl Sagan, the noted Astronomer and Physicist. At a summer picnic in the backyard of his home in Ithaca, New York, I sat spellbound as he talked about our three dimensional world, the existence of a 4th dimension (space) and his theory about a 5th dimension...one of time...and his thoughts on how humans perceive, and relate to ‘time’.

Dr. Carl's mind worked in wondrous ways....but he could transform complicated science into everyday terms. He told me... 'If you want to be picky about it, when you look at an analog watch it only tells you what time it 'was' when you looked at the hands of the clock...not what time it 'is', because by the time your brain recognizes the time the watch is showing, real time has already moved on.

He said... 'the bottom line is if you didn't do something with that moment, it's gone...you'll never get another chance.' Now that's pretty profound and very down-to-earth, especially coming from a physicist! Whether it's time measured by a 21st century atomic clock, a cheap wristwatch, or perhaps by an ancient device known as a sandglass (you probably call it an 'hourglass') the result is the same....time waits for no one!

In my research I discovered that the sandglass was invented and first used in Alexandria, Egypt, sometime around 150 BC (give or take a year or two). Back then they were much larger than this one, and were actually carried around by a designated member of the household staff...the 'time keeper', if you will. Written records from the 14th century mention the sandglass, and it appears in a list of ships supplies. One of the earliest surviving records is a sales receipt, written on animal skin and dated 1345, for the purchase of an hourglass by Thomas Stetsham, clerk of the English Navy ship *La George Beauchamp*. It's really a quite simple machine, but I want to take a closer look. There's more to this than meets the eye. My nugget is based upon the virtues I see as moral lessons that can be learned from the Masonic emblem that is all about 'time'...the hourglass. Our ritual notes that...

The Hourglass is an emblem of human life. There's our first metaphor - the hourglass. It represents our life, our very being. It stands upright ready to track and time our actions through life. Its upper portion represents our head where we store vast amounts of information that we learn about life in general and our Gentle Craft. The lower vessel represents our body and feet. As we walk through life we should be ready to share this vast wealth of information we have gathered with our brethren along the way.

Behold! How swiftly the sands run and how rapidly our lives are drawing to a close! By closely watching the falling sands within this machine, we see how rapidly our existence seems to pass in time. Man often spends way too much time reevaluating what he wants to do with his life on earth. If we begin in our childhood to dream about those things we would like to do in life; then in manhood we can strive to fulfill those dreams; so that in old age we may happily spend our later years reflecting on all that we did accomplish.

We cannot, without astonishment, look upon the tiny particles contained in this machine. All those tiny particles represent time - time in minutes, then hours, which quickly stretch out into days, and months, and ultimately into times and seasons, years and cycles. Some of the grains of sand represent the time we spend on what are really inconsequential things, instead of using our efforts on more positive endeavors. Personally, I see the particles of sand in a different way....those individual specks of sand could also represent all the people with whom our pathway in life has intersected...and the souls on whom we have left an impression.

How they pass away almost imperceptibly and yet to our surprise, in the short space of an hour, they are all exhausted! As we watch the tiny particles slip from the upper chamber into the lower one, it should impress upon our heart and mind that we really have very little time in which to accomplish those things we set out to do. Time won't wait for us as we ponder and make up our mind. The sands of time are swiftly passing by. It is my theory that the particles of sand could also represent those who have gone before us, reminding us that when the opportunity presents itself, we must never hesitate to lend assistance to someone in need.

After all, isn't that what Masons are supposed to be doing? We all became Masons to do several things... 'to learn, to subdue our passions, and improve ourselves in Masonry'. All of those things take time. It reminds us too, that we should always strive to do our best because we pass this way but once.

Thus wastes man! Today he puts forth the tender leaves of hope; tomorrow, blossoms and bears his blushing honors thick upon him. The next day comes a frost which nips the shoot.

We're told as Entered Apprentice Masons that we are in the learning stage of our life. There is so much to absorb in preparation for the state of manhood. It's in this next stage of our life that we perhaps marry, raise a family, and earn all that we can to support our lifestyle. Our station in life is temporary and any misfortune, whether it be financial, domestic or medical, dictates that our aspiring honor is indeed limited...by time.

And when he thinks his greatness is still aspiring, he falls like autumn leaves to enrich his mother earth.

In our later stage of life we approach the hour when we find ourselves about to lay down the working tools of life. Those who remain behind will now judge whatever legacy we might leave. All the arguments, all the laughter, all the tears, all the smiles with our peers and loved ones, all the money we have earned, spent, and perhaps lost - all of these things are no longer of any consequence. But, with the abiding faith we have in our Creator and the promise He has offered to each of us, none of the earthly successes or failures will have mattered anyway.

My, Brethren, we're all given the same amount of time to use...1,440 minutes every day. So what have you done with your allotment today? Quickly, now...the sands of time are rapidly flowing into the lower chamber of your life's hourglass. Have you done your best to improve yourself in Masonry in the time that you have left?



...Another 'nugget from the quarry of Freemasonry'. SM

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Some material adapted from the following sources:

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National Institute of Standards and Technology: www.nist.gov