

The 20th Century Challenge to Masonry

An Opportunity for Greatness

by
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Grand Orator

An Oration delivered before
THE MOST WORSHIPFUL
GRAND LODGE
OF
FREE AND ACCEPTED MASONS
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It is significant that our legendary hero, Hiram Abif, inspected the work every day at noon when the harsh light most clearly revealed defects and weaknesses in the structure. It is even more significant that he did not hesitate to draw designs on the trestle board to remove defects and to improve and strengthen the building. It is now high twelve for Freemasonry - as it is continually for every human institution. Imitating his daily practice, let us now inspect our fraternity to see if anything may be done to strengthen and enrich it. Let that inspection be realistic and our evaluation honest. Let us tell ourselves the truth, even though the truth hurts.

However glorious its past. Freemasonry today shows unmistakable signs of decay. The most obvious is the decline in membership described by Worshipful Brother Turner in his oration to this Grand Lodge last year. The declines he described have accelerated. Last year this Grand Lodge lost more members than at any time since the depression. We find no comfort in the fact that many of those were lost by death because that grim fact warns us that as our average age advances, we will have even greater losses in this category in the future. The increase in the number of those who drop their membership by non-payment of dues is significant. Many of these are cases of procrastination or inadvertence, but a substantial number are men who were once interested enough to pay the initiation fee, take three degrees and learn the posting lectures, but who no longer consider the organization worth annual dues which, in most cases, are trifling. The decline in membership is all the more telling because it is happening in a time of relative prosperity, increasing population, and when more men have more time for leisure activities. Even more disturbing is the scarcity of attendance at our meetings. Few Lodges can boast of an average attendance of 10% of their members. Yet, if we are to see ourselves in proper perspective, we must observe that, by their absence, over 90% of our more than 66,000 members have voted that our meetings are not worth their time. Many of us can testify as to the growing reluctance of qualified members to start through the progressive officer line. Although some of these potential officers are unable to accept office many simply prefer not to do so. Others can testify as to meetings which are poorly conducted and still others about officers who neither know the work well nor propose to learn it.

If we shrug off the decline as "only temporary" we run the risk that we will discover too late that it was permanent after all. The risk is great because degeneration feeds on itself. It produces a vicious circle; poor attendance causes poor programs which, in turn, cause ever greater declines; failures breed apathy and a sense of defeat which produce ever greater failures.

Why this decline? Why the lack of interest? These involve other questions. What do men want and expect from Masonry? What should Masonry give them? What are we trying to achieve? I think men want, and Masonry should give them, an opportunity for fellowship; for education, particularly in their relations to God, their fellowmen and their institutions; and for a means to decide upon, and take responsible group action on, current issues. Our problem lies in the failure of Freemasonry to fulfill this mission. It does not compete effectively for men's minds and souls. Although parts of our degrees are impressive and instructive, far too much consists of vague generalities couched in archaic language and offering as the final word knowledge which is obviously antiquated. Our degrees seldom tell us how to reconcile duty to others with duty to oneself nor how to practice brotherly love in a modern society which is becoming progressively more materialistic and impersonal. Ironically "success" in grinding out the same degrees repeatedly carries with it the seeds of failure because excessive repetition not only bores the sideler but also thwarts his opportunity to visit with his brothers. We offer very little to a member once he has proved up on his third degree and signed the bylaws. We treat his transformation from candidate to member as the end rather than the beginning of his instruction. Our stated meetings usually consist of little more than the opening and closing, reading of minutes, approval of bills and perfunctory committee reports. Our programs avoid vital topics and current issues because they may be controversial. This leaves us with the nagging suspicion that we distrust the ability of our members to discuss controversial matters objectively. Masonic relief of members and their widows and orphans has faded in importance as social security, industrial insurance, unemployment insurance and welfare programs have pre-empted the field. We are left with a feeling that Masonry is drifting aimlessly. Even more important, we feel helpless to do anything about the problems which confront our fraternity. An attitude prevails that any change would violate "ancient landmarks" notwithstanding the fact that they have never been defined in this Jurisdiction. This attitude stifles constructive self-criticism for fear it will be considered disrespectful or even blasphemous. It discourages improvement as futile.

Stating the problem is relatively easy. Finding the cause is more difficult. Finding a solution has seemed impossible. But let us not be easily discouraged. Remember the old saying: "The difficult we do immediately, the impossible may take a little longer." In this spirit let us now attack the next question; What shall we do to revitalize Masonry? How do we stimulate the interest of members and potential members? How do we stimulate our own interest? How do we give our fraternity a sense of mission and purpose in the world? During the past year I have discussed these questions with many Masons and the suggestions which I offer are a composite of their views and mine. The suggestions do not pretend to be a cure-all, but if they do nothing more than provoke thought and stimulate conversation, they will have been worthwhile.

Because so much of our time is now spent on presentation of ritual, we should immediately begin an objective, critical review of it. Let me illustrate what I mean. As I have already said, our ritual contains much that is inspiring and instructive but it is also inconsistent. For example, we should make it clear that we will not cheat, wrong or defraud anyone with or without advance warning; and that we disapprove violation of the chastity of any woman whether or not she is related to a Master Mason. It is also unnecessarily repetitious. There is no reason to require a candidate to repeat over and over his willingness to proceed with a degree. One lie is enough for perjury. We should require no more. A candidate should not be compelled to repeat, with numerous synonyms, the single idea that he will not disclose a secret; a promise not to write a word automatically includes a promise not to write the syllables, letters and characters which make up that word. The work also exaggerates. No one takes the penalties of the obligations seriously and, stated literally, no one should. Because we do not mean what we say, the overstatement cheapens the ritual. If the penalty is intended to warn of tortures of conscience and death of the soul, it should say so. We should say what we mean. Worst of all, much of the work is obsolete. Take the lectures for example. They were written in his spare time by William Preston, a London printer, who finished them in 1772. They were thereafter copied in various published monitors from which they were officially adopted by this Jurisdiction in 1886. For the most part, the lectures which we recite today are exactly as Preston wrote and illustrated them nearly 200 years ago.

Are the lectures as relevant in our day as they were in his? Did Preston write such eternal truths that they apply to the 20th century as well as they may have to the 18th? This is the question we should decide-and soon. Let us hear the observations of the late Roscoe Pound, a brilliant scholar, law professor and distinguished Mason. In a little book entitled "The Philosophy of Masonry" Pound explains that Preston intended his lectures to teach Masons all the knowledge of his time. They were to be, and are, a compendium of 18th century learning couched in the flowery and elegant language then in style. For example, Preston thought Masons should know something about architecture so he included a description of five different Greek and Roman columns which he said comprised the orders in architecture. His lectures taught physiology by describing five senses of human nature. He talked about the liberal arts and sciences and about a geometry problem solved by an ancient Greek named Euclid. In Preston's time few men went to school so he turned Masonic Lodges into class rooms where he taught men not just ethics, religion and human relations, but astronomy, music, arithmetic, and so on. In his day the lectures were useful. Are they today? How relevant is a recital about Greek and Roman columns in a world which knows of structural steel, pre-stressed concrete, skyscrapers and suspension bridges? Of what use is it to talk of hearing, seeing, and so on to an era which knows of radar, electronic microscopes and Geiger counters? Why do we talk only about Euclid to men who know about Einstein? I shall not belabor the point. The questions answer themselves. Most of the knowledge we have today was unknown to Preston. Somehow we forgot the purpose for which the lectures were originally written. We have gone blithely along giving 20th century audiences samples of 18th century learning with the solemn assurance that it is the final-if not the latest-word. Is it any wonder that we are slipping in the competition for men's minds and souls? Truly it is said that the 20th century will discover and join Masonry only when Masonry discovers and joins the 20th century.

Let us begin at once a thorough, systematic and continuous modernization of our standard work. We must eliminate those qualifying phrases which rob promises of meaning or which give them double meaning. We must minimize repetition and use modern English. Let us recognize that we cannot educate men on all subjects. Man's knowledge today is too broad, too technical and expanding so rapidly that even experts must work hard to keep up to date in their own specialty. We should concentrate on human relations; teaching our members the duties which men owe to God, to their fellowmen (not just to their fellow Masons) and to their institutions, governmental, religious, educational, fraternal. The ritual should outline the basic duties and at the same time emphasize that our philosophy is based on brotherly love and on a relentless search for truth on all questions. Lectures should fill in details, explore the practical application of the fundamental

rules, and probe those areas where one duty conflicts with another. Let me illustrate this point. We now recognize a duty owed to another Master Mason to keep his secrets. At the same time we recognize a higher duty to society to disclose such secrets at least when they pertain to murder or treason. If this is where we draw the line, our lectures should explain why it is drawn there. Another example: The excellent movie "Judgment at Nuremburg" examined the question, when does duty to mankind and to God supersede duty to Nation? Our colonial brothers wrestled with this question; so have our Cuban brothers-too late! This is an eternal question. It deserves our attention. These are only two of the many examples which could be given of tough and fascinating questions which probe the depths of relationships among men and between men and their institutions. Our lectures should discuss these matters and explore those situations in which men may be required to choose between conflicting duties. Such lectures will never answer all questions because our reach will-and should-always exceed our grasp. The ritual and lectures should give our members a positive attitude and skills for seeking truth; teach them to discuss issues objectively without becoming enemies; equip them to decide wisely. To do this we must abandon any notion that we have already found all the answers. We must free ourselves from the dogmas of the past. We must view landmarks not as monuments to which we are chained but as sign posts pointing the way toward the future.

The job of editing the ritual and writing new lectures is too important to be delegated to amateurs who would be able to work on it only part-time. It should be turned over to professionals, skilled in the communication of ideas and adult education who would work at it full time. We should expect to pay enough to attract top talent. Aided by our discussions and suggestions, these professionals would work out a modern standard work. Once prepared, it should be tried in a few Lodges as a pilot project with the idea that it be further edited and improved in the process. After the trial period, the new work could be adopted by the Grand Lodge a part at a time over a period of months or even years. Alternatively, a modern ritual might be offered, along with the old, with individual Lodges choosing the one they prefer. In other words, let the old and new compete with one another for acceptance.

Shortening and modernizing our ritual is not the ultimate answer. It will only help. And it will help only if it equips us with the attitudes and tools, and releases to us the time, for work on the vital public issues and crucial social problems of the day. Our objective should be to assist mankind in solving the problems which beset him. Our ritual should be a means to that end. The answers to most of the questions which confront mankind are found in the delicate balance between two or more public policies, each equally good, which conflict in a particular area. Let me illustrate this point with just one of many examples which could be given. Public policy today views education as a national resource and demands that all pupils, public and parochial, have the best education possible. At the same time, public policy demands that every individual be free to worship God, or not, as he sees fit and that government shall neither establish a religion nor tell us whether to worship God and, if so, when, where, and how. In the administration of the new Federal Aid to Education Act, local communities will be required to find the delicate balance between these policies so as to minimize conflict between them. This will involve consideration of the relations between men, between religions, between government and religion, and between federal, state and local governments. The men who decide these matters must respect one another, have a sincere desire to find the best of all possible answers and be willing to spend the time and make the sacrifices required in finding the answers. In short, they must be motivated by an unselfish, responsible, public spirit. They cannot be fettered with prejudice or hate. They cannot be simply anti-Catholic or anti-this or that, because a negative attitude stifles rather than stimulates the thought and free discussion which test theories and refine ideas. America already has countless organizations committed to one selfish interest or another or smugly satisfied that they already have discovered the ultimate truth in some field. There are precious few dedicated to pursue truth with an open mind and without selfish motives. History has demonstrated repeatedly that groups of men who together think out responsible answers to human problems wield an influence for good far beyond their numbers. There is today a greater need than ever for such groups. Masonry is uniquely adapted to the task. Composed of men of every political belief, of various national origins, open to every religion, trained to have faith in and respect for one another, it is able to foster diversity without being divisive, and to find the delicate balances required to make our social order work. Rather than retreating from the problems of mankind, Masonry should advance upon them. It should seek rather than avoid the opportunity to grapple with contemporary issues. Let us make Lodges forums for discussion of such questions. Such discussions could probably best be conducted at refreshment where the spirit is informal. They would give direction and purpose to our fellowship. To this end we should encourage a revival of the festive board which occupied such a key role in earlier days of

our fraternity. Let us open such meetings to wife, family, friends and guests. Let us bring the community into the Lodge and at the same time take the Lodge to the community. This will require skill. Lodges which wish to pursue such programs should be assisted and advised by professionals employed by this Grand Lodge. It will also require hard work, but it will be worth it. Masonry will again play an active role as it did in those colonial days about which we now boast. Masonry will have an important purpose in life. It will make a valuable contribution to society. Let us free Freemasonry to do the job.

The inspection which we have made in the last half hour is not complete. The designs which we have sketched on the trestle board are not finished. They are unfinished and incomplete because the building and rebuilding of any human institution is a continual evolution. Whether we continue our inspection, whether we make new designs, whether we renovate our institution depends on you and me. What shall our answer be?