

BUILD A BETTER TOMORROW

2. Yes, But How?

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Once upon a time the labours of the Craft came to a standstill. There was confusion in the temple. A trestleboard, which long had displayed the designs of a master workman, was blank. Like sheep without a shepherd, the workmen wandered about idly. No longer was there a sense of direction; order had given way to chaos. A noble Tyrian in whose mind the designs had been conceived had been stricken down in the performance of duty -- NOT BY ENEMIES FROM WITHOUT THE TEMPLE, BUT BY FOES FROM WITHIN.

The extent to which a legend may be repeating itself in North American Freemasonry today may be open to dispute, but certainly no man can challenge the premise that the Craftsmen are not at their labours to the extent they should be. And few, I daresay, will take issue when I suggest that there is indeed confusion in the temple.

Today let us address ourselves to the second sub-title in the general theme, Build a Better Tomorrow. It is the most natural of all responses to any great challenge: YES, BUT HOW?

We have just recalled a familiar scene from the Legend of Hiram, that beloved allegory which makes the Sublime Degree sublime. Before we consider specific areas in which our Lodges can help build a better tomorrow, let us return for a moment to another episode in the legend. Perhaps it will be helpful to us in setting the course for our discussions.

You will remember that King Solomon divided the workmen into groups with orders to travel to the four points of the compass in search of the missing Master Builder. One of the parties returned with a report given them by a wayfaring man. He had been witness to an unsuccessful attempt by three men, who appeared to be workmen from the temple, to get passage on a ship about to leave for a far distant country. Thwarted in their effort, they had returned into the mountainous region.

And what was King Solomon's reply? The Indiana ritual has it in these words: "Your intelligence proves but one thing to me -- that the ruffians are still in the country, and within our power."

Let's keep those words uppermost in our minds for the rest of the day and through our discussion periods tonight. Let's take those words home with us, also, and talk about our responsibility with the Brethren of our Lodges.

Here is what Solomon is telling us: If Freemasonry has a stake in building a better tomorrow -- and it has -- and if Masons are to do their part in building a better tomorrow, then we must face the fact that the forces against which we shall have to contend are right here at home, in our own districts and in our own Lodges; right here within ourselves. AND THEY ARE WITHIN OUR POWER. In other words, both

the problem and the answer may be found in our own backyard. If we have the will to do so, we can do something about it.

Ah, yes, indeed, but how?

Very well, let's talk about how. At the outset, however, I have news for you. I am hereby imposing a moratorium on myself. It will be a moratorium on any mention or discussion of the old familiar excuses that Freemasons like to repeat whenever they get together; the aged scapegoats brought out to cover up the fact that Masonic Lodges, by and large, aren't doing the job that Masonic Lodges should be doing.

And so there will be no wringing of hands from me on declining membership of the last several years; or poor attendance at Lodge meetings; or Master Masons who fail to memorize the catechism of the Third Degree; or that Freemasonry doesn't seem to be attracting young men or professional men to the extent we should like it to do; or how much it costs to operate a Lodge; or the common complaint that men petition our Lodges for the degrees, receive those degrees and we see them no more.

There will be no talk from me on the subject of competition, whether it be television, curling in Canada or bowling in the United States, fishing, boating, camping, a multitude of other organizations and activities -- you name it, and we can tell you how it competes with Freemasonry for the time, interest and loyalty of our Brethren.

Best of all, you'll not hear from me even once that Masonry is "hiding its light under a bushel," which is nothing more than a King James Version way of saying that we should seek publicity, be seen and heard and talked about (in a favourable light, of course), going to ridiculous lengths, if necessary, to be in the public eye.

Instead of all these, let's think about how each Lodge, working within its own sphere of influence and within the framework of Masonic tradition, can help Freemasonry to do its part in building a better tomorrow.

At this juncture I am faced with something of a dilemma. As a guest in this Jurisdiction, it ill behooves me to be critical of the regulations and practices of my host, or to tell you how I believe you should operate.

And so, here is the approach that I shall make, with perfect immunity, I trust. Have you ever heard anyone say "If I had my druthers"? It is an old colloquial expression from American pioneer days. Originally it was something like "If I had a choice, I'd rather it would be this." With the carelessness of frontier speech, that soon became, "If I had a choice I'd druther it would be this." Eventually it was, "If I had my druthers."

What I am saying, then, is, "If I had my druthers -- my choice -- Masonic Lodges would fix their sights on some things that are basic, and strive mightily to operate in accordance with those fundamentals.

First, if I had my druthers, the leadership of our Lodges in Alberta and Indiana, and all across the land, would start asking themselves some pointed questions -- some embarrassing questions, if you please -- such as this one: "Brethren, do we have our priorities in the proper order? And if we do not, then what can we do to get back in the proper order, so that first things will be first?"

The great American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson lamented the fact the "THINGS are in the saddle / And ride mankind."

Hence, when we speak of those forces that "are still in the country, and within our power," we must not overlook THINGS. All we have to do is to converse with our Brethren to observe how, to a very real extent, THINGS have ceased to be our servants and have become our masters. We are the servants of our temples, servants of the dollars required to maintain them and of the insurance premiums needed to protect our investment, servants of the new heating plant, the repairs to the roof, the carpet that is wearing out, the taxes.

And so what happens? All too often our priorities get out of order and we become more attentive to ways in which we can stay alive than in following our avowed purpose of creating and maintaining an atmosphere in which men can experience brotherhood as they never have experienced it before and in a manner not to be found in any other place. We forget that we are here to help men improve themselves; to teach rough ashlar how to become perfect ashlar.

The inevitable result of letting our priorities get out of order is that we become preoccupied with numbers and dollars. We need the dollars to keep alive, and therefore we need numbers, and we need them enough that sometimes we lower the bars, pull down the standards, to get more numbers to get more dollars. And when our standards are lowered ever so little, the entire structure is weakened. Remember Gresham's Law of economics -- that when bogus money is in circulation, good money doesn't drive it out; on the contrary, the bogus drives out the good? Gresham's Law applies in Freemasonry also. For when we compromise a bit and use inferior material, we need not expect that which is sound to eliminate that which is substandard. It can work the other way. Frightening thought, isn't it?

Our future, then, depends on our ability to look beyond numbers and dollars to the quality of our membership and the quality of our leadership, and to the basic purpose for which we are here. One North American Masonic leader admonishes us never to lose sight of the fact that "all institutions that are devoted to the cultivation of the best that is in man are having troubled times in this period of our civilization." Freemasonry does not stand alone. But Freemasonry does have its own peculiar gift, its unique appeal, that will work to our advantage if only we have the eyes to see it and the will to use it.

If I had my druthers, our Lodges in Canada and the United States would, at long last, accept the fact that it takes time to make a Mason. A perfect ashlar cannot be made out of a rough ashlar in three easy lessons. Becoming a Mason -- a real-for-sure Mason -- is a lifetime job if we really work at it.

One of the weakest links in our Masonic chain is the reluctance, or outright refusal, of our Lodges to spend the time necessary to give the new Mason good and wholesome instruction for as long as he displays any interest. The strongest indictment I could level against the Masonic Fraternity in our two great countries is that the Brethren are in too great a hurry to confer the three degrees and get it over.

In the first place, there is a gross lack of understanding as to what constitutes Light, and More Light, and Further Light. Too many of our Brethren seem to think that memorizing the answers to some questions is all that is necessary to make a Freemason. Certainly it is all that is required for advancement. But what do we do when an eager young Mason, thrilled beyond description at his experience, wants to know more? The reason for this and for that? How did it all come about? What does this emblem mean, and that emblem? And how all this can be applied in the everyday life of a Mason?

What do we do with him? The answer is nothing short of a major tragedy. For the most part, we do nothing. We give him the "brush-off", letting him know, in effect, that we haven't time for him. Hence, another disillusioned Mason looks elsewhere, going to the other bodies in the hope that he will find there what we failed to provide, or, worse yet, losing all interest in the Craft. He asks for bread; we give him a stone.

Of course I can appreciate the fact that Lodge officers may be devoting about all the nights to Freemasonry that they can spare. But why not enlist the services of Brethren who are NOT officers? We might be amazed at the contribution they could make to the good of the order.

If Freemasonry has a stake in building a better tomorrow, and if Lodges acknowledge their responsibility in such a noble effort, then here is one of the forces still in the country, and within our power. The greatest service the Lodges of Alberta could render to Freemasonry in this period of our history would be to make available facilities and occasions whereby interested Masons, young and old, can meet informally for food and drink and conversation and exchange of ideas and Further Light in Masonry. Away with endless memorizing! Away with the idea that learning the answers to a catechism is the beginning and the end of the search for Light!

I shall have more to say on this subject before I finish.

III

If I had my druthers, our Lodges would be smaller in size and there would be more of them -- many, many more. North American Freemasonry, and especially that in the United States, has consistently run counter to the time-tested experience of the Fraternity in the British Isles and on the European continent in this respect. Some of us insist that it doesn't work to the good of the Craft when Lodges become large and impersonal, regardless of how many petitions a large Lodge may receive or how wealthy it may be. It isn't size that counts, nor is it the number of degrees conferred. What counts is brotherhood and camaraderie, the privilege of close fraternal association in a fellowship of kindred spirits, the opportunity for growth through involvement in that which is great and challenging and inspiring, the privilege, perhaps, of presiding in the East.

Smaller Lodges could meet less frequently, and there could be more diversity in the meetings, more opportunities for gatherings of a social nature, more discussions of what Freemasonry is all about, more occasions when the Brethren could assemble about the festive board for physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual refreshment. We might keep these thoughts in mind the next time we are disposed to be critical of a new member who ceases coming to Lodge and develops interests elsewhere. It could be a case of disenchantment; he could be searching for that which his Lodge should have given him, but didn't.

At this point we come to a road block. When we get on the subject of limiting the size of Lodges, many will agree in principle, but few will be prepared to offer an acceptable and workable plan as to how it could be done. Limitation by Grand Lodge legislation would be, in my opinion, a serious mistake. As I see the picture today, the benefits to be derived from smaller Lodges can be realized only over a long period of years and with leadership that is patient and tireless and unshakable in its devotion to an ideal. With Grand Lodge encouragement always available but never insisted upon, I believe the seeds could be sown to germinate within the Lodges, so that when the time for action became ripe, it would come from the Brethren themselves.

Do Masons approaching the nineteen-eighties have that kind of patience? I doubt whether they do in Indiana. The sad aspect of the problem is that economics may force us to do what we haven't the vision to do.

IV

If I had my druthers, North American Lodges and Grand Lodges would develop a more acute awareness of the first of the Old Charges of a Freemason, the Charge which pertains to religious universality, or non-sectarianism, "that religion in which all men agree." Any serious student of our Craft must acknowledge, I believe, that the first of the Old Charges is the strength of Freemasonry wherever it exists in the world. As North American Masons we miss no opportunity to boast about our universality, at the same time taking great pains to ignore it.

It is a curious commentary on our Fraternity that in England more than a hundred years passed before the first of the Old Charges began to be taken seriously; that is, before some measure of acceptance began to be noted. It is an even more curious commentary that in the United States, for the most part, the Charge has not even yet become effective. Having no knowledge what the practice in Canadian Lodges may be, I make no comment. You can supply the answer.

I never cease to be amazed at how shocked some of my Masonic Brethren are when it begins to dawn upon them just what religious universality really means. These are the Brethren who have been told that the Masonic Lodge is the "handmaiden of the church;" whose conception of "that religion in which all men agree" can be described as a pleasant, jovial spirit of toleration enabling Presbyterians, and Methodist, and Baptists, and Brethren of other Protestant Christian denominations to sit in Lodge together without quarrelling over theology.

Late in 1973 and the early part of 1974 I went into the subject with thoroughness while preparing a research paper. The results of that study were significant, for they revealed many areas in which Freemasonry continues to pay little or no attention to the first of the Old Charges -- in ritualistic work, in the lectures, in prayers offered to the Great Architect, in laws, in regulations, in customs and practices. The study yields enough evidence for one to say, if he is of a mind to do so, that m to a great extent, Freemasonry in the United States has an established religion. And most of us who are sensitive on the subject are both distressed and outraged at the lengths to which some of our Christian Brethren will go to cram their religion (and mine) down the throats of our non-Christian Brethren.

Is not this a much-needed area for effort by Lodges in Alberta and in Indiana, and elsewhere in Canada and the United States, setting out on a quiet and low-key, but continuing, program to make our Brethren more keenly cognizant of what that Old Charge means? If we are interested in having well-informed Masons and better Masons in our Lodges, thereby to help our Fraternity do its part in building tomorrow, there is no better place to start.

V

If I had my druthers, our leadership in the Lodges and on Grand Lodge level would take a long and critical look at the almost-standard Preston lectures used in our Lodges in Canada and the United States, particularly as to their content, the time of delivering them and the manner of their recitation.

Now I am well aware of the fact that to question anything pertaining to the ritual or the lectures is almost the equivalent of desecrating the flag or launching an attack on motherhood.

Furthermore, I think it likely that you are about to say to me, "You may be right, but what are you going to do about it?" And that is, indeed, a logical question, for although I do not know the practice in Alberta, I do know that in Indiana the lectures must be recited in full each time a degree is conferred and before the Lodge is closed.

Every word of the official lecture must be repeated, and then sometimes there are extra-ritualistic additions that happen to appeal to the Brother who is doing the lecturing.

Nothing is missed if the Lodge follows the law, and every time it must be the same. We unload the whole load as if we were never to see that exhausted candidate again, and in all too many instances we don't see him again. That fact of life shouldn't be surprising to us, but it is.

In expressing these thoughts, I speak as one who has delivered every one of the lectures of Ancient Craft Freemasonry, not once but many, many times. Long ago I began to have doubts. "Is this a practice that does something FOR Freemasonry?" I asked myself, "or is it doing something TO Freemasonry?"

The late Myron K. Lingle, Past Grand Master of Masons in Illinois, said it so very well: "It is the lecture that is emptying our Lodge rooms."

I find myself in complete agreement with Brother George S. Draffen, of Scotland, who writes,

William Preston's lectures, as opposed to his ceremonial ritual, were written for another age. If we are to instruct our candidates in the tenets of our Craft, some other Preston must arise and prepare for us a series of short educational talks which can be delivered either in Lodge or in a Lodge of Instruction.

Sadly enough, this is not a question that is likely to be viewed objectively and dispassionately. But it could be, and should. Certainly the Ancient Landmarks would not totter and crumble into ruins if some other Preston were to arise with new and better lectures suited to the new audience that already is here. If lectures as we know them should be recited at all, they should be in brief. And in my humble opinion, they should be designed for occasional use as material to stimulate discussion at a time other than when a degree is conferred, never as a mandatory addition to it.

Lest temperatures and blood pressures rise above normal, let me hasten to add that I'm realistic. There will be little or no abridgement of the Preston lectures soon. Not in North America. Someday, yes; but not now -- that is, not unless economics should step in and persuade us to do what we should have done long ago.

In the meantime, though, we could at least make some needed improvements. We could do something about inaccuracies and inconsistencies. There are too many, and the fact that we persist in repeating them does us no good. I am not familiar with your Canadian lectures, but if they are anything like those in the United States, I'll be hoping fervently for the day when those horrid visual aids and printed illustrations can be discarded forever and new ones, dignified and artistic, used in their stead. We deserve something better than the illustrations we have.

Here again is a place where Lodges with imagination could institute programs featuring brief "capsule" type lectures dealing with one subject only, never at the conclusion of a degree, perhaps in a relaxed atmosphere outside the tyled Lodge and offering opportunities for discussion.

It might be worth the effort. "Some other Preston" within the membership of your own Lodge might amaze you with the presentation he could prepare, provided such brief talks and discussions were encouraged and regular provision made for them. And that brings me to my next "druther."

VI

If I had my druthers, Lodges of Master Masons would begin to take steps, and soon, to re-establish the old traditions of Freemasonry in at least one respect, that of providing frequent opportunities for men of like interests (kindred spirits, if you please) to gather in pleasant, relaxed surroundings for no other purpose than refreshment and conversation -- physical, intellectual and spiritual refreshment; just talking and enjoying the company of each other. In short, I am pleading for the return of Freemasonry to its original concept, a voluntary association in which compatible men may find fellowship and experience brotherhood at its best.

Perhaps the best way to let you know what is on my mind is to relate this experience. In the latter part of February 1978, I went to Washington to attend the national Conferences of Grand Masters and Grand Secretaries. As a national officer of the Philalethes Society, I went two days early to attend the Society's annual meeting and some related gatherings.

While there I met seven young Masons, most of whom live within a radius of perhaps 50 miles of New York City. They are exceptionally intelligent and articulate men, all in their mid to late 'thirties'. Each is a tremendously enthusiastic Freemason, yet each Brother is frustrated because Lodges have no place for him and no interest in his kind unless, perchance, he might become identified with the tight little structure that governs the Lodge and oversees every activity. Only one of the seven finds it possible, or has any desire, to enter upon a long period of ladder promotion leading to the East. They enjoy the ritual, but not a steady diet of ritual. More than that, they delight in probing the depths to seek the meaning of Freemasonry and its teachings.

These Brethren are now part of a larger group centred in New York. They have a delightfully casual organization, if you can call it that. It is unencumbered with officers, by-laws, dues or stated meetings. They do have a modest little mimeographed news letter and they permitted me to contribute to defraying the expense of issuing and mailing it. The little group has a name that will make any Mason's pulse beat faster: The Goose and Gridiron.

As noontime approached, I learned that they had reserved a table in Old Ebbitt's Grill, in downtown Washington, just across the street from our meeting place. They invited me to join them; I did so with pleasure.

Seated about the long table enjoying our "Dutch treat" luncheon, one of the Brethren asked me a question almost with a note of pathos in his voice. "Brother Smith", he said, "isn't there something in the Fraternity for Masons like us? SURELY THERE MUST BE SOMETHING BESIDES MEMORIZING AND RECITING."

We talked for more than two hours. It was one of the most stimulating experiences of my Masonic career. When we parted, we shook hands and I said to them, "Carry on!" Since then they have been writing to me and telling me of their activities.

Now do you understand what is on my mind? Here are some young Masons on fire with the true spirit of our ancient Craft but unwelcome within the "establishment" because they want to do something more challenging than memorize, and recite, and go to stated communications, and hear the minutes read, and vote to allow the bills.

Mt Brethren, it isn't possible, it isn't necessary, it isn't desirable that all Masons be just like us. I am totally in earnest when I say to you that I believe the resurgence of Freemasonry depends to a large extent on whether Lodge officers, prospective officers and Past Masters are able to divest themselves of that deadly notion that unless a Mason memorizes and recites and delivers lectures, or holds an office, or works in the craft, or carries chairs, or washes dishes in the kitchen, or sits on the sidelines watching and listening as others do these things, we have nothing to offer. We're going to have to use our imagination a bit; at least to turn our attention to some other avenues of activity.

I have just introduced you to some enthusiastic young Masons, all with a tremendous potential, that will be lost to us if we don't give them some encouragement and find a place for them in our scheme of things. It frightens me to reflect on how many more young Masons, just like the ones I met, might be found in North America -- disappointed, disillusioned, but NOT taking the initiative to find something to take the place of Masonic Lodges that aren't really doing their job!

And incidentally, you might be impressed to know that as an indirect result of the pleasant social relationship enjoyed by these young Brethren several of their friends who were not Freemasons at first are Freemasons now.

Let me share with you some lines from Stephen Leacock that have long haunted me:

If I were founding a university, I would found first a smoking room; then when I had a little money I would found a dormitory; then after that, or probably with it, a decent reading room and a library. After that, if I still had more money that I couldn't use, I would hire a professor and get some textbooks.

Be sure to note Stephen Leacock's priorities. The smoking room came first; the professor and the textbooks, last.

Like it or not, my Brethren, the alehouse, the coffee house, the smoking room have a noble tradition in the history of Freemasonry. They got the Craft off to a good start; our ancestors on this side of the Atlantic banished them as too worldly and not

Victorian enough; they can yet, if given a chance, do much to pull us out of the doldrums today. Let's never underestimate their importance.

And by all means, let's get away from that old bogeyman of Puritanism that to eat, drink and be merry is almost sinful! Freemasonry would thrive on it again. Let's get back to the fellowship and conviviality and good conversation and invigorating exchange of ideas that surround the festive board, and find again that which was lost. Building a Better Tomorrow: Yes, But How?

"THE RUFFIANS ARE STILL IN THE COUNTRY, AND WITHIN OUR POWER."

We have the tools. Indiana author Lloyd C. Douglas, in his great book, "The Robe", has the slave Demetrius say these words to illustrate his conception of the new Christian faith. Let us apply them to our Craft and to ourselves:

This faith... is not like a deed to a house in which a man may live with full rights of possession. It is more like a kit of tools with which a man may build him a house. The tools will be worth just what he does with them. When he lays them down, they will have no value until he takes them up again.

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