

Freemasonry and the Modern Culture: Getting Back to Business

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“Tellson’s . . . by Temple Bar was an old-fashion place, even in the year one thousand seven hundred and eighty. It was very small, very dark, very ugly, very incommodious. It was an old-fashion place, moreover, in the moral attribute that the partners in the House were proud of its smallness, proud of its darkness, proud of its ugliness, proud of its incommodiousness. They were even boastful of its eminence in those particulars, and were fired by an express conviction that, if it were less objectionable, it would be less respectable. Tellson’s (they said) wanted no elbow-room, Tellson’s wanted no light, Tellson’s wanted no embellishment....”

Thus it had come to pass, that Tellson’s was the triumphant perfection of inconvenience.....

“...Cramped in all kinds of dim cupboards and hutches at Tellson’s, the oldest of men carried on the business gravely. When they took a young man into Tellson’s London house, they hid him somewhere till he was old. They kept him in a dark place, like a cheese, until he had the full Tellson flavor and blue-mould upon him. Then only was he permitted to be seen, spectacularly poring over large books, and casting his breeches and gaiters into the general weight of the establishment.”

My Brethren, it occurs to me that you may have wondered if this quotation from Charles Dickens’s *Tale of Two Cities* was talking about a bank (which it was) or a Masonic Lodge!

Because in many ways it tells us about the perceptions and values of the men who ran the bank. They did not care about the needs of the general society, or the needs and conveniences of their clients, or even the people who were their employers. Their only concern was to keep things from changing. What was good enough for their fathers was good enough for them—even though their world trembled on the edge of revolution. It could be that the directors at Tellson’s were very much like many of us in lodges today—out of touch with the world around us, and breathing deeply of the dust.

The questions I want to raise and discuss this afternoon are these: What has Freemasonry been in the context of how it has been perceived by Masons from the 1700’s to the present; and how have these internal perceptions compared with perceptions of the greater society of men over the same period? Have these perceptions changed over time? And, in my review, perhaps we can also examine the compatibility of these perceptions in the different fraternal eras we have experienced.

These are important questions because, if the fraternity's perception of itself and the public's perception of it indeed changes over time (and my premise is that it does), then perhaps one of the keys to our survivability is that Freemasonry can only thrive when it moves on a path which is in agreement with the perceptions and expectations of the larger public. It could be that Freemasonry thrives best when it is in a state of change.

At first glance, this may seem a challenging claim to prove. After all, we haven't made any substantive changes in our fraternity in any of our lifetimes. Even if we consider the bandwagon of Masonic Renewal that many Grand Lodges jumped on during the 90's; or the occasional influx of new men raised in One Day Grand Master classes; or the shortening of categorical lectures and candidate memory work; or the heavy emphasis placed on public image building and charitable work over the past decade. We are still only slightly better off than we were 15 years ago and that's only because we're getting some help from the media who have suddenly discovered us. The reality is that over 50% of all lodges that ever existed are now defunct; and, in many Grand Jurisdictions, more than 75% of the lodges have not raised a Master Mason in 2 years.

We seem to be under a great siege within. We, as Masons, may be killing our fraternity a lodge at a time. After all, over 90% of our members are inactive, over 65% of our members are old, and in too many cases, the procedures and behaviors practiced in most lodges are not meeting the needs and interests of men in our society.

What we offer is an organization which is focused upon itself, just like Tellson's Bank, where too little happens, and with procedures, methods, and behaviors that fail to consider the importance of time, family, fraternity, and purpose.

This is a remarkably stubborn challenge for us to overcome. And we desperately need to do something about it. We shouldn't be content with teetering on the edge of death. It is terribly irresponsible of us! We are the trustees of our generation of Freemasons. We have a heritage and a lineage which is ours alone. To get back on the right track, perhaps we need to look back over our own shoulders.

If you were to ask the Mason of the 19th century who the Masons were, he would tell you they were a great philosophic order. He would probably say that the Masons had taken history's profound lessons in morals and ethics and developed these as guides for their members' personal and spiritual growth within private conclaves of secrecy and protection. And truer words could not have been spoken. Because the philosophic and religious undertones which found their way into our Masonic lectures during the 19th century were fully interpreted for us by men such as Newton, Pike, Waite, Haywood, Vail, Buck, Pound and Mackey—all 19th or early 20th century Masonic writers who provided us an understanding of 19th century values.

And if you were to ask the man on the street who the Masons of the same period were, he would likely say; "Oh, they are a great secret society—perhaps the father of all such societies." And again, truer words could not have been spoken. We had a match. We were indeed the first fraternal, multi-cultural, and inter-continental society with secrets. By 1900, there were over 280 Secret Societies operating in America. It was popular to belong

to secret societies. And the great 19th century deist religious movement, along with the philosophical debates which centered on morals and ethics were the themes which excited the Victorian mind.

But, Freemasonry was around before it was popular to be a secret society. If you would ask the Mason in the late 18th century who the Masons were, he would probably tell you there were the lecturists—a group of men whose intellectual and oratorical talents molded the basic tenets of the craft into a greater and richer source of wisdom and understanding. And truer words could not have been spoken. Led by the Englishmen Calcott, Hutchinson, Dunckerly, Oliver and Preston; and expanded by the American Thomas Smith Webb, Freemasonry of this period evolved from the simplified ritual stages of the early speculative days to a system of formal lectures which have not been equaled or bettered in 225 years.

As for the man on the street, he would likely tell you that Masonry in the latter part of the 18th century was a social club for gentlemen who exacted political and social influence in many endeavors of public and private life. Once again, his words would be true. What was true of social improvement during the 18th century was also characteristic of Freemasonry. The Masons influenced the ideals and trends of society through the conversations within their lodges.

Again, we had a match. It was popular to be involved with an organization that had a unifying language of power, that demonstrated ordered behavior, and with an overlaying ideology of improvement in things moral and material. Who could not conclude that the leading Masonic thinkers of this period had a considerable influence on the very structure of civil society itself? Ethics in tandem with self interest--it was a powerful idea indeed!

But, Freemasonry was around before it was popular to belong to a formalized school of ritual, or even a social club for gentlemen with political and civic interests. If you would ask a Mason of the late 17th century who the Masons were, he would likely tell you; “Oh, they were the merchants, traders and artisans who met for purposes of mutual protection, economic security, and socializing among the brethren.” To the man on the street, this would have been loosely translated as a group of men of a somewhat rowdy nature who met in organized drinking clubs above the taverns or inns on a regular basis for the purpose of fellowship, feasting and conviviality. Again, both would have been correct in their assessment.

Any Brother who has looked into the Masonry of this period can tell you there was no rigidly adopted ritual. There were no degrees. A man who aspired to be a Mason was simply made one. The process was not much longer than the taking of an oath, along with learning the passes and signs. There was no memory work, no formal instruction, and little protocol. Very little was communicated in the way of moral and intellectual truths. Lectures were a matter of each brother reciting the “Old charges,” the symbolism of the emblems and several moral virtues. Once again, we had a match. Membership was available on recommendation to all sorts and manners of men—all of good repute, sharing the benefits of fellowship and brotherhood together—with simple entrance ceremonies and few secrets.

It was hard not to be enamored by the opportunity.

Of course, Freemasonry was around before it was popular to be a social club. If you were to ask the Mason of the late 16th and early 17th centuries who the Masons were, he might tell you they were men of the operative crafts, or builders, or guildsmen formed to provide mutual protection and job security for their respective trades. It was a dependable forum for networking.

Or, depending on where you were geographically situated, you might also be told the Masons were the scholars, teachers, mathematicians, scientists, geometricians, astronomers—all learned men—men of knowledge—formed together to teach and educate; to bring enlightenment to the non-ecclesiastical world. And the man on the street would have routinely noticed and recognized the guildsmen, or perhaps even been associated with the related educational movement. It was revolutionary in its mission, and reforming in its political structure.

Again, we had a match. An organization representing the economic strength of the culture, in tandem with men determined to bring knowledge and enlightenment to men of the day. Once again, Masonry was a unique and respected movement.

Now, having taken an almost embarrassingly general trip through our fraternity's past, let us move back to the 20th century. What about the Masons of the 20th Century? We know a lot more about the century in which we have all lived. Do you believe the Shrine of North America, for instance, in the early part of the 20th century could have decided to eradicate orthopedic problems in children if the Masons of that era were not connected to the philanthropic interests of men with substantial means?

Do you think the Scottish Rite would have moved to staging the degrees of the Rite in theater settings if live theater had not been the most popular form of entertainment of the day?

Do you think that the great fraternal movement which occurred during the first two decades of the last Century could have been as successful if Masonic leaders of that time did not understand the dynamic of gender separation and adapt the social experience of lodge to a model of manhood that reinforced masculinity and athletic pursuits? Masonry was all about gender separation then.

As the feminist movement called for equal rights in the work place; and homosexuality found a voice through the arts, athletic interests and clubs among men grew with enormous popularity. In response, Masonic lodges all over the country organized baseball leagues, boxing clubs, hunting clubs, rodeos, and other such activities that reinforced manliness and masculinity as a fraternal good.

To solidify gender separation even further, lodges organized a national network of Masonic clubs which catered to the social spirit in men. As gentlemen of means within the larger culture began building country clubs and civic clubs as private preserves for men, it was not unusual for lodges to build private rooms attached to their Masonic halls, offering newspapers, cards, cribbage, cigars, and fellowship. In some instances, of which Detroit was perhaps our most notable example, Masons built large complexes on vast properties with lakes and beaches offering social, fraternal, and athletic venues for members and their

ladies that matched the finest country clubs in America.

Do you believe that the Masonry of the Depression era would have survived, or played a meaningful role in men's lives without lodges and Grand Lodges focusing their emphasis on employment bureaus and Masonic relief programs offering fraternal charity and benevolence during this period of national economic crisis? Do you think that Masonry of the WWII era could possibly not have been a match with a culture of men who defined war itself as the apex of masculinity? Where military generals encouraged, and in some instances, even ordered men to join the fraternity before they shipped overseas; where Grand Lodges established formal committees on military service ministering to the needs of Masons worldwide. Where Masonic relief chests were established and administered by the Masonic Service Association of North America to distribute money to Grand Lodges overseas to help military Masons; where Grand Lodges, along with American institutions everywhere, encouraged all their lodges and members to purchase war bonds.

The point of all this rambling is to suggest to you what has happened over this 400 and some odd year period across the fraternal landscape. We always saw the business of Masonry as facilitating the desires and needs of men. We helped define the male image men wanted of their own culture. And it always represented an image which the public perceived to be appropriate for male organizations. We were respected even when we were not well known. And it wasn't only about what we did inside our lodges. It was about what we did as Masons living our life in the outside world.

And had we not returned to our tyled recesses after WW II because of an American reaction to a perceived national threat of Communist infiltration which lasted almost 20 years after the war, we might still be progressing, and it wouldn't be nearly so hard to make the changes that we now have to make in order to survive.

You see, what we have failed to do only in the last 60 years of our evolution is to keep adapting to the needs of our culture in each generation, changing a little every decade, and hardly even noticing.

But here's where we are at present. If you were to ask the Mason of today who the Masons are, he would probably tell you (if he was inclined to say anything at all), that the Masons are a great charitable institution—giving away \$2.5 million each day. And truer words could not be said. If we have done anything at all in the last half of the past century, we can certainly say we have taken the old traditional ideal of personal, private, Masonic charity, and turned it into a major public institution of philanthropy, aimed primarily at crippled children burn victims, literacy, sight improvement and medical research.

But as for the man on the street, if he was asked today who the Masons are, he would probably say; "I haven't the foggiest idea. Aren't they some kind of cult?"

Whoa! Wait a minute! What's going on here? What's happened? Isn't there a match like we found in the other 400 or so years?

Of course there is! But the public doesn't know it. And we aren't helping matters much because we have a very mixed understanding ourselves of what we are and what we should represent to today's male.

You see, we have been a different organization in every century. Freemasonry is a different organization today than it was 60 years ago. It will be a different organization in

this century that it was in the last century. If you don't remember anything else I say here today--remember this: *Freemasonry was always popular and/or respected by the culture when it adapted to the expectations and needs of the men of that same culture.*

Make no mistake about this—Masonry has retained its important values in each generation. But in the past, it always added to the institution the very best of what each generation brought to it.

Freemasonry was the network for merchants and learned men of the 17th century. But it did offer mutual protection and economic security for its members. And it kept that, and added the important element of institutional critique and a balance in social and governmental structure during the 18th century. It kept that, and added the great vision of philosophical and intellectual improvement during the 19th century. It kept that, and then added its great social and charitable influence during the first half of the last century.

So, what is wrong? Why aren't we growing instead of declining at the fastest rate in our history?

The reason is that for the first time in our history, we have let the culture in which we live pass us by. We stopped thinking about the needs and expectations of men who are younger than we are. We became only degree mills. We stopped our outside involvement with the kinds of partners in our communities who usually facilitate progress. In our tyled recesses, we stopped the shared dialogue in lodge where we once embraced the nature of God and civic duty in the brotherhood of Man. We stopped paying attention to what younger men were looking for in role modeling. We stopped communicating with each other, and with the men who might be the most inclined to join us. We allowed our lodges to get large and lost our intimate and home-grown connections with the leaders of our communities. We compromised our status by allowing any man to join. Since the 1950's, the gap between the Masonic world and the American male culture has widened dramatically.

My Brethren, if we are going to be successful, we have to look below our own generation. We must take the interests of the new generation of Masons seriously and begin communicating our shared values with them. And the good news is that the young men arriving at American adulthood today are very curious about self improvement and spiritual development; about brotherhood and fraternal association.

Young men acknowledge that they need a moral and ethical structure for learning that is not tied solely to the women in their lives. They not only need it, they have an inner craving for it.

This is where Freemasonry comes in. Our purpose is to teach a set of cultural moralisms while establishing a pathway for men which will mold their individual need for fulfillment. This pathway is nothing less than the road to mature masculinity.

The primordial role of our society of men is to take on the virtues of manliness, to enhance and extend the male tradition, to embrace that tradition irrespective of how formidable the demands any present society may place upon it. And the wonderful thing about this scenario is that all of this can occur in the sacred and social space of lodge. It is not dependent upon the success of any hierarchy above it. It's all about what brand each

lodge chooses to adopt for itself. This is the way it was intended to be. The true sovereignty is the lodge itself. Success is a decision; and it is achieved one lodge at a time.

Freemasonry's strength lies in the fact that it can offer the right model by which men can grow and achieve balance as men.

This personal growth opportunity is very compelling for young men. And we know a lot about young men today. We know, for instance, that most young men seek a common identity with other men. They yearn to share a portion of their lives with other men. They want to be on the journey of self-development and improvement. They want patriarchy and role modeling to guide them to mature and manly judgment. They seek truth. They desire authenticity. They want a tribe. They need the influence of elders. They want to be nurtured. They covet brotherhood. They seek meaning in their lives. They want to learn about values. And they want to follow through on their values with personal action. They are interested in how men are connected, how relationships can have meaning across generations. They want to know why they are here and what will bring them fulfillment.

Hello! We have a match! Our fraternity exists to facilitate all these needs in men. We can position ourselves to resonate powerfully with this new generation.

Our lodges are the receptacle in which these needs can be discovered and accommodated because we have no other medium to offer. The lodge experience is our conduit for a collective, inter-generational dialogue in the ways of manhood, virtue and integrity. It facilitates the role of patriarchy for men—male role modeling, if you will—which is supposed to guide younger men from a sort of boyish impetuosity to mature and manly judgment through repeated contacts with older men.

The lodge is not supposed to consist of only one generation of males! Rather, it is supposed to be a dynamic center for male communication and shared dialogue about the nature of being men. The timeless ethical and spiritual traditions which are to be discovered in Masonic ritual, symbol, and allegory, are to be facilitated in the classic “Men’s House”—the manly and sacred space of lodge; where together we lead each other to our own transformation and rebirth.

This is why we must pay a lot more attention to what we are offering in our lodges because it will have a great impact on this new generation of young men. I strongly believe the success or failure of American Freemasonry hinges on our awareness of the fraternal experience this new generation of men expect from us—and what we will deliver them.

In academic studies I’ve read concerning the needs of men in today’s society, the lodge that is centered on education, spiritual development, role modeling and fraternal bonding may be the most powerfully compelling organization in America to join for men who fall within the 19 to 40 age range.

These guys are confident, practical, educated, involved in decision-making processes, articulate and passionate about their world and their place in it. This group will simply not accept the old standard; “we’ve always done it that way.” They will question and argue; they will make us face up to practicing in lodge what we teach in our rituals.

As you well know, this presents an ethical dilemma for some of us. We too often proclaim that the most important purpose of our Order is to take good men and make them better; and then fail miserably to create and protect the setting within which this process can

occur—the sacred space of the tyled lodge and the conversations held there.

To the educated, thoughtful, truth-seeking mind, meeting on the level implies that there is a place where, in fact, no invidious distinctions exist among us. A place where there is no basis for envy or jealousy; no need for power or control; no impulse for influence or manipulation; no motive for condescension and patronizing; no presumption that we will duplicate in our special place the usual behaviors and attitudes we may have outside of it.

Yet, in lodge after lodge after lodge, we typically find that the normal characteristics of human behavior remain the same within our tyled recesses as without them. These lodges are not really tyled, my Brethren. If the normal failings of humanity do not stay outside the lodge, then how can we claim to offer a different space within it? How do we deliver on our promise that wisdom dwells in contemplation, that we are practicing our operative craft when we are gathered together in a sacred space set aside from the outside world and consecrated specifically for that purpose?

We are finding a surprising number of younger men asking these kinds of questions about Masonry. They have formulated a strong intellectual opinion about us. They believe that Freemasonry is a venue for truth-seeking, a vehicle for self development; a quest for the spiritual. There are secret associations to be discovered there, and these associations are not doctrinal, they have not been filtered by political and religious bias. Many young men are coming into our Order with these kinds of expectations of discovery and personal improvement.

And what do they find? What they too often find is an organization where little happens of substance, where 90% of the members are unseen and inactive, and where behaviors practiced in lodge are remarkable only in their mediocrity and a collective lack of understanding in both its organizational purpose and its relevance to the individual. The difference between his perception of us and our perspective of the lodge experience is just too extreme. In such lodges, we no longer have a match.

I am becoming increasingly fearful that if we do not change our vision and behaviors of what we are supposed to be doing in lodge, we may lose the last generation of men who can save us from our own demise. My fear is not that they will not become Masons. My worse dread is that they will abandon us and move to the new clandestine Grand Lodges now being established across America as we speak. Our new generation is not much interested in regularity of origin. They are interested in self improvement, brotherly love, truth, and the fellowship of thoughtful men. And spurious lodges are being created in a number of states to provide just that. My Brethren, we now have competition.

And if our young men do move out our back door, they will take their impressions of us with them. We will no longer have the opportunity to pass the torch of manhood from one generation to the next in the respectful conclaves of our particular tradition.

The final point then which I want to raise with you today is to never lose sight of the fact there is nothing inherently wrong with our system of Freemasonry. It is only because we have stopped seeing Masonry as a transformative art that we have stopped being successful as Masons. It is only when we stopped the dialogue of sharing the meanings and interpretations of our allegories in lodge that we lost our understanding of Masonry. It is only when we stopped offering the right model for fraternal role modeling to

our younger members, one that provides meaningful generational connections to them that we became less attractive to the largely fatherless culture in our society. It is only when we stopped seeing the lodge as a vehicle for facilitating the ideals and needs of manhood, rather than forcing men to be suppliants to the lodge that we lost the essential requisite for joining. It is when we stopped creating social and leadership venues that offered valuable connections between generations of men that we became irrelevant in their eyes. It is only when we stopped creating meaningful legislation in our Grand Lodges--stopped making the kinds of adaptations which will bring us progress—and replaced progressive opportunities with meaningless rules that we have become too self-serving to be interactive with the larger society. It is when we decided to become a popular organization that permits anyone to be a member, rather than accepting only those who are duly and truly prepared as instructed by our rituals, that we lost the segment of the male culture which could help us the most and sustain us in every generation.

When a candidate knocks on the door of a Masonic lodge, he is standing at the threshold of his own consciousness. Beyond that door, he should find a Temple of Enlightenment. And everything he does therein, every symbol he encounters, every pause he takes, every process he witnesses through the degrees of Masonry from that point forward relates to his increased awareness, his levels of consciousness, and his transformation as a more enlightened human and spiritual being.

It is a place where only peace and harmony is known because each man within it is building a temple to God and he knows that is what he is doing. Every participant knows it is his own edifice of consciousness and wisdom; in which, he himself, is the building stone. We cannot smooth the rough ashlar, we cannot square this stone, we cannot make it fit in the Temple without the awareness that this is the work we are doing; that the lodge is the stage, the studio, the working floor, the trestleboard for such work.

And its potential power rests in this--*such a place does not exist anywhere else in the world!*

If Freemasonry is going to survive beyond the next few decades, it will have to come to a collective understanding that the organization is not about titles and hierarchy. It's about fraternalism and education, and sharing the mutual quest of three or four generations of men laboring together to discover the mature masculine within themselves, which leads them to personal development, self improvement and clarity of understanding. It is about giving back to each lodge its sovereignty to decide what is best for attracting, growing, and keeping the right men in its own community.

My Brethren, we have an opportunity to enjoy the bounty of literally millions of young men out there who are already duly prepared for us....and are waiting. And as Bob Conley, PGM of Michigan has so rightly said; "If we make these young men a part of the right experience, they will move the craft to places it can only imagine. If we leave them out of this experience, they will leave us so fast we won't have time to remember their names.

Our success or demise is clearly in the balance.