

The Masterkey

By Lawrence C. Helms

This Short Talk Bulletin is adapted from the Grand Oration given by Worshipful Brother Lawrence C. Helms, Grand Orator, at the 1983 Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Oregon .

We belong to the great Fraternity of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons. The working tools of our Craft, however, are no longer for operative toil. We do not now, as part of our covenant with our ancient Brethren, set fast the Doric pillar, nor shape the marble into Corinthian columns. We no longer sketch the geometry of Gothic piles, and cement the buttresses of lofty towers. The tools of the Craft are representative now of speculative truth, and speak to moral laws and duties that make life noble and character strong. Yet, though we erect no buildings as our ancient Brethren reared and though the temples in which we meet are not the monuments of our own proficiency, we are builders and preservers in a richer sense, for our Craft itself grows more precious with years, and its uses more varied and beautiful with the lapse of time.

The course of history has changed our Gentle Craft from operative to speculative, but the change has not dimmed the light of the truths passed from generation to generation, nor has that change diminished the need for such a truth-bound institution.

There are many in contemporary American society that would venture that the day for Freemasonry has passed. They hypothesize that the changes of the twentieth century family life, social structure and moral environment has made Freemasonry a relic of the past, an object of historical note, but of no value to the future. The view of the Craft, by the non-Mason, is understandable, but lamentable. By viewing the Fraternity only from the outside they obviously cannot be expected to know and understand the deeper truths and common bonds that bind Freemasons.

But, of much more lasting damage to the Craft are those among us who have also heard this Siren's song of self-deception and have fallen prey to the illogical conclusions that follow. They have grasped only the superficial evidence at hand and erroneously deduced a demise for Freemasonry. They forget to place contemporary Freemasonry in an historical context, but instead treat the present situation as if Freemasonry was some type of fledgling order whose initial membership has waned and now approaches an imminent death.

The internal doomsayers affect the Craft in a decidedly negative manner. The image they create for themselves and for all who will listen falsely indicate a Freemasonry that is dying from the inside. Nothing could be further from the truth. But the danger in such thinking is illustrated by the Irish poet, George Russell, who stated that we do indeed become what we contemplate. This idea, of course, was not new to Russell as the Bible teaches. "For whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Even Shakespeare counseled, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

There is a real and apparent danger of a negative self-image being projected to nonmembers. This negative self-image is most certain to be interpreted by the non-Mason as a sign of internal stagnation and impending doom. Such an image is decidedly incorrect and does not accurately portray Freemasonry's future.

In ancient Greek mythology the Phoenix was a bird that lived for 500 years. The Phoenix was reputed to be a magnificent creature whose beauty and graceful flight defied description. In addition to its beauty and grace, the Phoenix had one other exceptionally outstanding characteristic at the end of 500 years, it would immolate itself on a pyre. From its own funeral ashes, however, it would reappear as a reborn youthful bird, destined to live another 500 years before the fiery death and rebirthing sequence would then recur. The Phoenix was symbolic of beauty and goodness that never dies, but instead rose from its own ashes to live again and again.

As the world rushes blindly toward the 21st century, it becomes apparent that mankind studiously examines its ashes, but we tend to ignore the Phoenix that brought us to today. We tend to dwell on our failings, the sensational and the morbid, but we shrug off our accomplishments as if such actions were to be expected and not worthy of notice or comment. This is a dangerous trait for it can cause us to overemphasize the negativeness that forever hounds man. And like Sisyphus, be forever doomed to an exercise in futility. Psychologists have examined a phenomenon they label the "self-fulfilling prophecy," that is, a tendency toward the eventual realization of something once people believe a result is inevitable. Child psychologists have long known that a youngster who is constantly told that he is bad, incompetent, clumsy or dumb, will soon develop characteristics paralleling the image others project of him. The reverse is also true, as the Broadway show, *My Fair Lady* so aptly described. Such a phenomenon has long been known and was the focus of the historical tale of Pygmalion.

A very serious question arises. Do American Freemasons tend to study our ashes and forget the Phoenix that brought us here today? Do we tend to dwell excessively on the problems confronting the Craft and deny the strengths of the qualities that permeate the Fraternity? Let us examine the following passage from the magazine, *The Michigan Freemason*.

"In our Jurisdiction we have many lodges which do not seem to thrive as they ought. The meetings are not attended by the members as they should be, and while all confess that they respect the institution of Masonry, and believe its principles to be very good, and well-

calculated to perfect and elevate mankind, yet they wonder that so little interest is taken in the Order by the membership in that peculiar locality. The meetings of these Lodges are neglected and the officers grow disheartened, and all join in wondering why it is so few are interested in an institution which we are so free to admit is a good one."

Our present situation sounds desperate and undoubtedly we are doomed to certain extinction. Wait a minute! Let us examine the date of The Michigan Freemason from which passage just cited was taken. It is March, 1872. That is correct. The passage that to many ears seems so descriptive of today's situation, the passage that forecast doom and gloom, was written over 100 years ago!

We often forget that Freemasonry is not an isolated social organization, but is composed of men who live and work in a much larger society. The composition of the Craft mirrors a greater society. To be sure, the average age of Freemasons in some locales is fast moving past 60, but let us not forget this merely reflects demographic trends in all aspects of life. The baby boom of the 1940's is now mid-adulthood. Adult part-time students now outnumber traditional college-aged students across the nation. Throughout the land universities are adopting the attitude, "Smaller, but better." Rote numbers have never indicated quality. Freemasonry should be concerned with quality not quantity.

The realization of dwindling membership is not unique to Freemasonry, nor to this era of Freemasons. We tend to forget that Masonry, as it is organized and practiced in the western world today, is simply not that old an institution with a history of a large percent of eligible men holding membership. The first Grand Lodge was not formed until 1717 and although many Masonic zealots attempt to trace modern ritual to King Solomon and beyond, prudent research cannot extend modern history far beyond the Regius Manuscript. Every organization over a period of time, will develop a natural cyclical pattern of membership peaks and valleys. Likewise, at various times the average age in a Masonic Lodge will shift. Those who predict a dire return for Freemasonry based on the number of white-haired heads on the sidelines at Blue Lodge or at the Grand Lodge are, perhaps, too myopic. Whereas all are entitled to their opinions, the chance of developing a damaging self-fulfilling prophecy is readily apparent. This is not to assume a Pollyanna approach of closing one's eyes to the obvious, or ignoring negative trends, but rather to caution the doomsayers to take a broader look at Freemasonry. To be sure, any vibrant social organization must make changes to adjust to constantly evolving social trends, even the Constitution of the United States has been amended dozens of times, but such growth and change in Freemasonry can and will occur.

Those who gloomily examine the Masonic ashes without realizing the Masonic Phoenix serve the Craft no good function. Such soothsayers, intentionally or not, create a form of hypothetical anxiety that is not constructive to the future of Freemasonry.

Those who see the potential adversity facing Freemasonry as insurmountable, should heed the words of such men as William Ward, "Adversity causes some men to break, others to break records," or William Shakespeare, "Sweet are the uses of adversity." We should not be afraid of change and adversity, they should be welcomed with open arms. Adversity and challenge force us to re-evaluate our traditional methods of conducting business. Management studies have shown that successful people have built strong positive views of their capabilities.

Organizations are mirror-images of their memberships' abilities and attitudes. An organization that is filled with negativities and forecasters of doom will surely project that image to the outside world. This is not a newly-discovered phenomenon, but is a fact that has been recognized for decades. In 1917, for example, the hotel magnate, E.M. Statler, sent a memorandum to his subordinates that said, in part: "From this date you are instructed to employ only good-natured people, cheerful and pleasant, who smile easily and often ... If it is necessary to clean house, do it! Don't protest. Get rid of grouches, and the people who can't keep their tempers, and the people who act as if they were always under a burden of trouble and feeling sorry for themselves ... Hire pleasant, cheerful people ... " Statler concluded: "I believe that a majority of the complaints in a hotel are due more to the guests' state of mind than to the importance of a thing about which he complains . "

Without the benefit of modern studies, hotelier Statler seized upon a prime psychological principle: Attitude precedes performance! This is yet another variation of the aforementioned self-fulfilling prophecy.

Constant recall of the good old days will not make the past reappear; instead the good old days were seldom as good as they are remembered. In 1982, the Grand Lodge of California took a bold innovative step in publicizing Freemasonry by inserting colorful tabloids in newspapers throughout the state that profiled the Craft, its history, purposes and activities. This was a bold task taken after careful consideration that transcended previous efforts. In Oregon, a television show was produced that explained away the ill-cloaked half-truths that have surrounded Freemasonry, and gave a clear, logical exposure of the Fraternity. Only time will tell the worth of such projects but irrespective of the membership gains, such projects are repudiations of the nay-sayers and a commitment toward positive projective steps! We cannot become so paralyzed by the fear of failure to become inoperative and do nothing. There is an oft told story of a very successful executive who had this truism hand lettered, framed and hung on his wall where he could see it every day:

Q. "Tell me how did you become so successful?"

A. "Two words."

Q. "And what are they?"

A. "Right decisions."

Q. "How did you make right decisions?"

A. "One word ... experience."

Q. "And how did you get experience?"

A. "Two words."

Q. "And what are they?"

A. "Wrong decisions."

No social institution can permit itself to become paralyzed by the fear of failure, the fear of deviating from past practices because the past is known and comfortable.

Freemasonry should be looking to the future, not bogged down in acrimonious fact find or finding warmth and security in a glorious past. Too often Masons tend to revel in the past without planning for tomorrow. Contemporary society seems to believe that change-induced problems are unique to this era, but in the 1770's Adam Smith wrote: "There is always a deal of ruin in the nation." Generations of the past have been beset with as much, if not more, disorder and confusion than we are now. Our love of the past can be explained in a variety of ways, but perhaps the most salient reason focuses on a natural uneasiness that all people feel when confronting the unknown .

It is important to consider the Phoenix in its entirety and not dwell on its funeral pyre. One should not reject the potential negative effects of a dwindling membership, but to dwell on that single issue is exceedingly myopic. The future should be regarded as an ally, not an enemy, and plans for creating a smaller, but better Craft, can develop. As Rudyard Kipling, a Freemason, so accurately stated, "We have forty million reasons for failure, but not a single excuse."

The Royal Bank Of Canada recently published a newsletter that capsulizes the thrust of this presentation. The newsletter said: "The best hope for society lies along the same lines, in the systematic study of future probabilities and the development of contingency strategies in advance to deal with them. Change itself has provided the tools for this in the form of new technologies, techniques and academic skills. 'By making the imaginative use of change to channel change, we can not only spare ourselves the trauma of future shock,' wrote Toffler (author of Future Shock), 'we can reach out and humanize future tomorrows.'" We now have it in our power to anticipate change, or to resist it. Which shall we choose?"

We have a choice. We must choose the future for as surely as we all shall draw another breath, tomorrow will arrive, and then the next year and then the next decade. To ignore the future is to damn subsequent generations.

The Masterkey to success, for both Freemasonry and Freemasons, is to understand what we are and what we can become. We must undergo a thorough self-examination so we know our

strengths as well as our weaknesses. As Plato affirmed, "Before you can move the world, you must move yourself."

If we, as Freemasons, are to be successful in the twenty-first century, we must internalize Emerson's sage counsel: "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us!"

Meaningful self-examination will not come easily as people, as well as organizations, follow a simple law of physics: when a body is at rest, it tends to stay at rest, when a body is in motion, it tends to stay in motion. We must stay in motion.

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