

That's Not How We Did It In My Year

By WBro Carl W. Davis

The story is told of a bishop who was touring a newly constructed church building. The church's pastor took the bishop into the sanctuary. Above the door was painted a verse of Scripture that said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer." Next, the pastor took the bishop into the kitchen where the following scripture from the Gospel of Matthew was painted above the door "I was hungry, and you fed me." As they went into the Sunday-School room, the bishop saw above the door the words from II Timothy "Study to show thyself approved." The bishop was impressed by this congregation's commitment to the Scriptures. Then, as he entered the nursery he saw these words from the New Testament, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed."

Indeed, we shall all be changed. In fact, the art of Freemasonry is the practice of intentional change. Freemasonry changes a man from profane, to Apprentice, to Fellow, to Master, over time, through a course of allegorical moral instruction. Freemasonry teaches that life is ABOUT change. We learn in our Craft that men advance through life in three principle stages of change, namely youth, manhood and age. Additionally, Masons are taught that we are always undergoing the process of change via the use of our working tools as we seek to change ourselves from rough to perfect ashlar, better fit for the Builder's use.

If Freemasonry is such a progressive order, why then, is the new master of a lodge who seeks to bring about some change that he views as positive, so often met with the words "That's not how we did it in MY year!"? I propose that there are three major reasons that Past Masters say those words: insecurity, ignorance, and impotence.

Insecurity:

It has been said that the only person who likes change is a baby with a dirty diaper. And, frankly I have seen some of them who didn't much care for it either. One of the principal reasons that humans are uncomfortable with change is because, by definition, it is insecure. We are comfortable with what we know. The familiar seldom surprises us.

It is important that we realize that one of the aims of Freemasonry is to provide stability. Indeed, there are few human creations more stable than the great cathedrals constructed by our operative relatives. So then, how do we foster security while at the same time maintain needed change? The answer requires us to have a firm grasp of what Freemasonry truly is, and what it is not. Freemasonry is a course of moral instruction. Freemasons are good men who seek to become better men through the application of Masonic principles in their lives. Therefore, some things about Freemasonry must never change or Freemasonry will cease to exist. A few examples of these unchangeable things are: solid character investigations of our proposed members; the Masonic tradition of initiating, passing and raising men in our ancient ritualistic tradition; the moral teachings of the fraternity; and, the expectation of high moral conduct from all Freemasons. However, many things in our lodges, not only may change, but also should change. For instance, a lodge's meeting time, the attire expected of its members, the food eaten by the lodge, or the lack thereof, the day that the lodge schedules its degrees, whether the lodge reads its minutes aloud or prints them for the members to silently read, are all things that are open to change to meet the cultural expectations and needs of the membership. Once an understanding of what things are changeable and what things are not changeable has been arrived at, then one may safely go about the business of making needed changes. When the changes are being announced and implemented, it is important to emphasize first the things that will be staying the same. Often times, a new master is so excited about his idea that he forgets to present them with tact and humility.

Consider these two differing examples:

Example One: "Wardens and Brothers. We waste a lot of time in this lodge reading the minutes of previous meetings aloud each month. It is boring and stupid. From now on they will be typed out and handed to you as you come in. Read them silently then we will approve them and get down to the good stuff."

Example Two: "Wardens and Brothers. It is important to make sure that our lodge's business is accurately recorded, and that all of the brothers are aware of what happens in our Stated Meetings. Our secretary and Past Masters have all done a good job of

doing that by reading the minutes out loud each month. From now on, however, we will accomplish that same goal differently. The minutes will be in printed form and personally given to each of you as you enter the lodge room. The same attention to accuracy and detail will be preserved. But, it is hoped that this change will allow our meetings to be slightly more efficient."

The second example does not negate the work of past generations. Yet, it effectively brings about the needed change. By emphasizing the fact that the truly important goal of lodge minutes will be maintained, the Past Master's sense of security is less threatened by the new change. Hence, the new man in the East is less likely to hear "That's not the way we did it in MY year!"

Ignorance:

Our Brother Samuel Clemens [Mark Twain] once said that travel is the natural enemy of ignorance. Indeed, Masons who have travelled to lodges other than their own quickly learn that there are many good and equally Masonic ways for a lodge to function. Unfortunately, many of our lodge members are only familiar with the traditions and practices of their own individual lodge. Therefore, when a well-informed Master attempts to improve his lodge by borrowing ideas learned from others, he is met with opposition from less informed brothers in his lodge who consider his ideas foreign to Freemasonry.

Ideally, the new Master could compel his members to visit other lodges and expand their personal understanding of our Craft. However, the next best thing is for him to educate his members about the practices of other lodges. By informing his lodge that some of his new ideas are not really new at all, but rather have a proven record of success in other lodges, he will likely meet with less opposition from ignorant members of his lodge than he otherwise would.

Impotence:

In his play "Death of a Salesman", Arthur Miller tells the story of Mr. Willy Loman. During his prime, Willie had been the best salesman around. He knew everyone, and everyone loved him. Over time however, Willie's friends retired or died. Willy found himself surrounded by people who did not know him. Instead of being viewed with great respect and awe by those he worked with, his new co-workers viewed him with impatience and disrespect. They wished that he would get out of their way and stop talking about the good old days. They had a business to run. Willy just wanted to be treated with the respect and admiration that he had grown accustomed to in his prime. At the same time, he was frustrated with his own decreasing ability to perform. Our lodges are filled with Willy Lomans. Many elderly lodge members are having a difficult personal struggle dealing with their loss of status and power. They have retired from jobs where they were once respected leaders. The children who respected and obeyed them have now grown and moved away. As they look around society, they see people young enough to be their grandchildren in positions of power and prominence. They feel impotent and used up. Therefore, in lodge, the last place where they still feel a sense of power, they often go too far in their attempt to have influence and control. As frustrating as this reality may be to the new Worshipful Master, he would do well to recognize the base cause of these brothers' behaviour. The wise Master will do all in his scope of influence to show the elder members of his lodge true respect. He will appoint them to work that they are capable of excelling in, and frequently praise and thank them for their efforts. When these brothers are busy with tasks such as organizing the lodge's Past Master's guild, overseeing the mentoring committee, working on character investigation committees, on the euchre night organization team, etc., they will be less likely to oppose the new Master's plans with the words "We didn't do it like that in my year!", because they will feel that they still have a sense of belonging, purpose and power in their lodge.

Finally, while the new Worshipful Master will do well to recognize the points made in this essay, he must always remember that it is HE who is Master of his lodge. While he rules his lodge with brotherly love and concern for his members' personal well being, he must also govern with the good of his lodge in mind. And, while he will inevitably hear the words "We didn't do it like that in MY year!" at some point, he can take solace by silently thinking to himself the response "and that is exactly why we are doing it like this now!"