

What Are We Trying To Save?

by RWBro Thomas W. Jackson

I recall a quotation I heard many years ago, "When you place your hand in a flowing stream, you touch the last that has gone before and the first that is yet to come." A man's relevant position in history and our position in Freemasonry is as that hand. We stand today as the hand in the flowing stream of Freemasonry touching the last that has gone before and the first that is yet to come. There is a distinctive difference, however, between the hand in the water and us. The hand has no power to change the ultimate destiny of the flow of the water. But we, my Brethren, have the capacity and the power to change the ultimate destiny of Freemasonry.

I want to make it totally clear that I speak to you today expressing my views and my opinions, and mine only. I speak for no Masonic Body. I do speak, however, as one who has spent thirty-six active years in Freemasonry, eighteen of them as Grand Secretary. I speak as one who has made some effort to study the Craft and has a great concern about its future. Freemasonry has existed in some form probably at least since the 14th century we think in its organized speculative form it has existed since 1717 we know. Although we cannot be sure of what it was originally, we think we know what it is now. But do we?

Freemasonry has been defined in many glowing terms by Freemasons for a long period of time and in less than glowing terms by its detractors for an equally long period of time. The definitions are there, and yet there are precious few who truly know what we are, and that includes us. We look with regret at not being as significant in today's world as we were in yesterday's because our numbers are not as great. We evaluate ourselves in terms of quantity instead of quality and that is an unfortunate appraisal of the Craft for it has caused us also to lose sight of what we were. Our attempt to return to former influence may, therefore, be unachievable, for if we don't know what we are how can we hope to become what we were. One thing is certain, however, if we continue to change from what it was which made us great we reduce the chance to regain that greatness.

Think for a moment of how much time and money you have invested in this Craft. Now multiply that investment by tens of millions. The resultant figures are astronomical. Why have we done this? There has to be some stimulating factor which has caused the Craft to be carried in its speculative form for almost 300 years. I would suggest that it was the constancy of its purpose and the positive image it projected to the world. We have for the last two decades been concentrating our best leadership ability on an issue which we perceive to be the greatest threat against our integrity—the loss of our quantity. It is significant that we are not a static organization. Freemasonry is an ever evolving entity, and change cannot be opposed because it is change, but nor should it be accepted for its own sake. We each have an obligation to be certain that any change we make will be of a benefit to the Craft or, more importantly, at least not a detriment. In analysing this evolution we find one constant denominator that did not vary through all its years the emphasis on the quality of its membership, which in turn probably has been the primary reason for most Member affiliations. We projected to the world an image which good men wanted to be part of.

We have probably changed Freemasonry overall more in the last 20 years than was done in the prior 250, and what have we accomplished? We certainly have not stopped the decline in numbers for which reason we made most of the changes. We have, however, managed to reduce our attractiveness to the professional class which comprised much of our membership. Perhaps the time has arrived for us to examine more closely what has been done and what has been the result. Let's take the time to analyse what we have accomplished and honestly answer and acknowledge where we have failed. We have not stopped the bleeding of numbers, but we sure have reduced our influence from what it once was. I propose that Freemasonry became as great as it did, and remained as great as it has, for three primary reasons. Reason #1 it was probably the first organization to accept, at least philosophically, men from all stations of life as equals. Reason #2 it attracted some of the greatest minds that ever lived. Reason #3 it remained selective on the quality of the man it would accept. The deletion of any one of these reasons would have prevented the Craft from becoming what it did or remaining as it has, and I am convinced that the loss of any one will also destroy it, at least in the historic form for which it is known. It, therefore, behoves us to ask what are we trying to save?

Make no doubt about it, my Brothers, Freemasonry is the greatest organization ever conceived by the mind of man. It has impacted the evolution of civil society beyond that of any organization outside of organized religion. There can be no doubt that without Freemasonry the civilized world, in its present form, probably would not exist. The world is as it is today because Freemasonry lived.

Recognizing these facts, my Brothers, we have inherited an awesome responsibility, one of more than just keeping the name Freemasonry alive. We must keep it a viable force that can display to the world what is good and right in mankind, an enclave of toleration in an intolerant world, a unique organization in a world that needs that uniqueness, an organization known worldwide by the quality of its membership. We are making many decisions today, however, that seem to indicate a lack of interest in preserving the integrity of the Craft. We seem more intent on redefining and reshaping it in almost any manner to fit into what we perceive to be what society wants us to be. But, we must be more than that. Freemasonry leads not follows.

We have always been distinctively different from any other organization. Why should we attempt to change into something someone else wants us to be? The world needs Freemasonry; there is nothing out there to replace us. We must make sure the world knows.

It sometimes defies logic to put so much effort into programs that are geared to emulate the principle purposes of other organizations which are declining in membership more rapidly than are we. Not only can we not hope to be more significant than they in their field of endeavour to begin with, but no one has ever reached that pinnacle of greatness that we have. If we are not succeeding by emulating, should we not be considering building upon our uniqueness? We are what we are because of it. First, however, we must understand the cause of the decline.

We look at the loss of membership and interest and have the tendency to blame ourselves for what we deem to be a failure in our structure and our leadership. My Brethren, I honestly do not believe that any difference in our structure or our leadership would have shown results much different than they do today. The loss in membership can neither be blamed solely on inadequacy of leadership or failure of our system. Our purpose and precepts have carried us through changing societies for centuries. Why should it now be judged a failure because our numbers fluctuate even as they have fluctuated in the past. We are no different in terms of membership decline than almost all other organizations today, including most religions. The climate of society today simply is different and not geared to organizational interests that place restrictions on its activities. Because society lowers its standards does not mean we must do the same to attract them. Indeed, we have an obligation to the future to lead the way to what is morally and ethically right, to be more than just average in society. In essence, to be what we have always been. I feel strongly that we are looking at a sociological phenomenon, one probably created by our attempt to make life easier for each succeeding generation and which must run its course before we find a redevelopment of interest in our way of life.

We must realize that there is no immediate spontaneous solution to our decline in numbers. We must acknowledge that this is a problem not localized to either area or organization. It is time for us to recognize that our decrease in numbers is due to a sociological condition of the time and not to our inability to cope with change. The pendulum will swing, my Brothers; there will be a renewed interest in a quality organization based upon our philosophical principles. But, will Freemasonry as a quality organization be there to accept those interested? I quote from Rejections on Masonic Values: "If we shall not be careful in the admission of candidates and improve the procedure of admission, we are then starting the composition of a funeral hymn for the death of our noble institution". As Freemasons, we should not allow this to happen. If and when we do, we are doomed, for we have just hammered the last nail in the sarcophagus of Freemasonry." In this, I agree wholeheartedly with the author.

A few years ago the Dallas Morning News had an article written by historian A. C. Greene regarding the Craft. In it he said, "There used to be a time when it meant something to be a Mason, it showed a level of class." Historians are finally writing about Freemasonry, but they are writing about the quality of the organization not the quantity. Freemasonry for generations has been known by those outside of it for its constancy of purpose and as A. C. Green said, "A level of class." We the leaders of the present have made us as we are perceived by the public today. We are the internal variable of the Craft. Freemasonry, my Brothers, is more than a name; it is an ideal. So what are we trying to save the name or the ideal?

We have evolved into the world's greatest charitable organization, but Freemasonry is not a charity Its avowed purpose is to take good men and make them better. By making good men better, we improved the quality of the world, but of what value will be our charitable nature if we fail to survive. We cannot continue to concentrate most of our efforts on raising money to give away. We must focus greater effort on Freemasonry's survival as the world's premiere organization. We cannot buy admiration and respect. To be charitable is an admirable quality, but our charitable characteristic must be secondary to our primary purpose.

Freemasonry's goal has been to start with the best we can find and improve that best. This goal, out of necessity, implies selectiveness. The selectiveness was based upon the quality of the man. Our Craft has been unique in that it has been able to take men from all walks of life socially, economically, culturally, etc., and provide an environment wherein the similarities of good are far more important than differences of type. I suspect the quality of the man is perhaps the major intangible force which is what brought and held us together. Freemasonry carries with good men much further than any other organization. This is why we have found in Freemasonry Lodges of quality men. Without quality men there can be no quality organization. Quality will attract quality, and quality will ensure survival. We must always remember that Freemasonry was never meant to be an organization for every man. We cannot hope to grow or even remain the same by lowering our standards.

We acknowledge that t only 10% of our Members are active. That of course means that 90% are inactive. Yet, they retain their membership. They pay their dues each year knowing full well that they will never participate in Lodge activities. There is only one logical reason why they do that. They see a value to being able to say, "I am a Freemason." There is a perceived value by them to membership. Take away the perceived value of association with a quality organization and we risk losing the 90%. Freemasonry has had in its ranks men whose names are etched upon the headstones of eternity names to be not forgotten. What was the force which drew them in? I suggest it was an organization which embraced high ideals and principles, nurtured those ideals and principles and stimulated aspirations to greatness. And thus we became great with them. One feeds upon the other Great men make great organizations, and great organizations can make men great. Likewise, the loss of one must result in the loss of the other. Freemasonry must never resign itself to be less than it can be. We must always seek great men and seek to make men great.

There is no question that the environment in which we exist has changed. Now we must determine whether we wish to retain our principles and values and lift others to meet our ideals or change to fit into today's environment and thus step down to meet their present day standards. Do we truly believe in the philosophy upon which we existed for over 300 years or not? Have we become an anachronism in present day society? Have our principles and values actually had no place for the last quarter century? I think not. If we truly do believe we are right, if we truly do believe that our philosophy and principles have a place in the modern world, then we must continue to pull others up to meet with us, not climb down to meet with them.

Our vision must be expanded. We must stop looking at long term planning in spans of 5, 10, or 25 years. We are simply too important to the world to limit our vision. We must look in spans of 50 100 or 200 years. To do so, however, we as leaders must not only be capable of fully understanding our past but also be capable of seeing our potential for the future. I am convinced that we are creating one of our greatest problems by making the Craft too easily obtainable and retainable. Of what value can anyone be to us if he lacks either the interest or the ability to be a Freemason except in name, if his projection to society is not positive?

During all the low points in Masonic history, and there have been some, there is no evidence that decisions were made which affected our basic precepts or reduced the quality of the Craft. Nor was it found necessary to make major procedural changes in our methods of operation to recover from membership loss. We seem intent today in reducing all barriers for membership regardless of cost, and the result is evident. We have required less, and less is what we have received. I quote Maureen Dowd from The New York Times, The minute you settle for less than you deserve, you get even less than you settled for." My Brothers, we deserve more than what we are getting today.

When we evolved from a Fraternity of the practitioner to the Fraternity of the idealist, we forged the character that was idealistic. What is happening to that idealism, that noble philosophical precept of the Craft today, when we no longer believe that if we are great we do not have to ask others to join with us. Are we no longer capable of projecting the image which carried us for centuries, the one that stimulated others to want to be part of us? Gotthold Lessing in the 1770's argued that: "if we know a Freemason by

his deeds, then he must leave his mark on the world." John Robinson made the observation: "The problem with Freemasonry is that it does not practice Freemasonry anymore." And how can we when the vast majority of our Members do not even know what to practice.

Where Freemasonry goes from here is up to us. Our hand is in the flowing water of the Craft. If we are trying to save the name, we may succeed. If we are trying to save the ideal, we are not succeeding. This Craft will not be measured in the future by its quantity any more than historians are measuring it today by that standard. It will be judged by its quality. If we cannot have both at any given time, then we must choose. We are confronted today with monumental problems concerning our integrity as an institution. Many of the problems are originating outside the Craft, but, regretfully, most originate from within. Those from within should be more readily solvable but we as leaders must be willing to sacrifice our egos for the welfare of the Craft. We must be willing to surrender personal ambition for the sake of the future of Freemasonry.

The quality of the Craft must not be permitted to continue to decline. We must recognize that the organization is much larger than the combination of all of its component parts. We say we are a Brotherhood of Men under the Fatherhood of God, a Fraternity designed to make good men better. If this is what we are trying to save, we should reexamine our approach. If we make good men better, we succeed in the purpose of the Craft, and these better men will then continue to lead the world. If we fail, the whole world loses, and I personally don't want to be remembered as part of the generation of leaders who destroyed the Craft.

Give it some thought, my Brothers. What are we trying to save?