

Testing the Resilience of Freemasonry

The Inartful Practice of Hazarding Guesses

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ABSTRACT

Educator, public official, and political reformer, John W. Gardner, may have said it best, "History never looks like history when you are living through it." The direction of the Institution of American Freemasonry, much of its administration and many of the practices used to deliver the promise of Freemasonry have always been influenced by external circumstances, situations, and conditions. Not every response from the Institution to past external influences has been artful and rippling effects from the decisions and choices made during challenging times prove to affect American Freemasonry long after they are made. There is no reason today to believe the same will not happen as the fraternity moves through the current situation created by the global pandemic. In some ways, shifts in our thinking has already started as we travel closer to this latest crossroad.

If the experience of the pandemic we are living through right now remains fresh in our minds, many changes we see predicted in the daily living habits of Americans may, in fact, come to pass. One writer recently offered a perspective of what else might potentially occur when she observed: *Like the "unforgettable" pains of labor we end up forgetting, the COVID mêlée of 2020 may soon be a distant memory. It is human nature.*¹ History shows she is correct about the power of human nature.

One thing of which we will not experience shortages in the coming weeks and months, is more news stories, articles, and pundits telling us how the tools in our lifestyle toolboxes, are obsolete – perhaps, in some instances, even socially banned or illegal. Even the definition of “temporary” may take on a different meaning.

It is in our nature too, especially in times of uncertainty about anything, to turn to newspapers, the radio, television, and the ever-present Internet - particularly to the surplus of social media outlets that offer a great deal of fact-free opinion and clickbait information that spreads much quicker than the virus affecting us today. We hazard guesses, speculate as we use models, compare statistics, over or under react to some matters, listen to elected officers and others in positions whom we see as experts and presume (and hope) they know what they are talking about. Not everyone, however, filters it all with common sense. That is part of the nature of people.

Our nature, while a focus of criticism by some, is the way our nation and most of the world simply is. That is what we work with. Obviously, people are different. We all have different level of knowledge and intelligence. Our views, biases, life experiences, challenges, faiths, opportunities, personal burdens, and attitudes do not and cannot always be expected to fit seamlessly with everyone else's.

Although humans have repeatedly proven to be remarkably resilient (and stubborn) creatures, *we cannot easily or simply ignore our nature no matter the degree of our disasters, misfortune, and hardships* or standing as members of the fraternity. When we fail to take it into account, we are prone to miscalculate.

¹ Sally Zelikovsky, What the Return to Normalcy Will Look Like, *American Thinker*, accessed April 13, 2020, https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2020/04/what_the_return_to_normalcy_will_look_like.html#.

Whether we like it or not, what may have seemed like sensible practices and choices just weeks ago now require considerable recalibration. Within days of social distancing becoming a way of life at this time, the question, *how long will this continue* was repeatedly asked. Perhaps, instead of continuing to ask when this situation will end, we might find it helpful to ask instead: *how do we continue?*

While the philosophies and teachings of Freemasonry require no recalibration, some of our practices, administration, protocol, and methods in our current toolbox with which we attempt to deliver the promise of Freemasonry could certainly use some attention.

Calls to reassess the content of our toolbox are hardly new. Our nature has been to deflect and, in some cases, ignore these calls and cling to what we had just weeks ago, even when ample evidence exists to warrant replacing many tools or at least polishing them. Since the current global situation today directly affects the assembly of Freemasons in lodges, we see much more discussion about how we might best sustain and preserve the fellowship that underwrites the core of our historical purpose.

Addressing the similarity of our differences we attempt through Freemasonry to teach and encourage the practice of the concept of *tolerance* to guide our behavior, decisions, and choices as to how to strive to lead our respective lives and by doing so, constructively serve as an example to others. Tolerance sounds easy but it can certainly be challenging and at times seemingly impossible to some but subscribing to the intent of learning to practice it, we find one of many of the laudable pursuits promoted by Freemasonry that also helps us better understand ourselves and others.

Unfortunately, not everyone shares the concept of tolerance on an equal basis or by definition. Will members and leaders at all levels cling to the idea that everything in the Masonic world we knew, practiced, and in many cases, took for granted, will eventually, or should, “return to the way it was?” If past is prologue, the answer is that it is not likely *all* members or current leaders will believe that, but some certainly will. As we find true in our past, the course of Freemasonry will depend on which group is in the majority, the level of reason and common sense that take the stage, and, whether or not the group recognizes the new crossroad our Institution has reached.

No, brothers, we are not talking about changes in the principles, tenets, and philosophies of Freemasonry. We are talking about how they are delivered through our operations, practices, and protocols. Some of our delivery methods and administrative practices may become the focus of adjustments and change, because under our circumstance it has become more apparent they are outmoded – perhaps even unnecessary. The lack of emphasis on consistent Masonic education is also surfacing in a way that highlight how the historical aim and purpose of the fraternity has weakened.

Based on its history, American Freemasonry has proven mercurial and ultimately quite pliable to external influences. It is in our organizational nature. While its principles and philosophies have remained the same since its formal organization (although interpreted in different ways), the manner in which they are offered, taught, administered, and led is likely to continue to be mercurial and pliable because we are ultimately the product of the external influences our members bring to the fraternity.

Members and leaders in each past era who have brought about change in our fraternity did so because they believed at the time such changes were for the good of the order. Some proved to be so, some not. We should not be surprised how external influences today and in the coming months and years will influence changes in our institution, again, whether we like it or not. As in previous eras of change, we will have to wait to see to what extent the current external influences will modify or cause us to adjust our thinking about our methods and administration.

Some early discussion during gatherings of Masons on Zoom and on some Masonic websites is the idea that once restrictions are lifted, members will flock to lodge. The optimism is heartening, however, there is no evidence to support the hopeful vision. Perhaps, when a proven vaccine is available the optimism may be realized, however, there is no reason to believe wives and families will not discourage their husbands, fathers, and sons from returning too soon.

Another topic often tossed around in some informal Zoom conferences/casual meetings, is how the current situation may affect the larger gatherings of Masons at Grand Lodge Annual Communications. Cleanliness of lodges have sparked conversations as well, along with how far virtual conference calls can be taken without violating constitution parameters. Fortunately, several jurisdictions have gotten out in front these questions, but the topic is still evolving.



As John Gardner, said, *History never looks like history when you are living through it.*²

Regardless, what we can do in times like these is strive to be consistently aware that the decisions, choices, and directions we practice and adopt will indeed reflect not only on the reputation of the fraternity, but the viability of our Institution to future generations. Change in our national culture affects Freemasonry - as it always has, and it usually arrives incrementally. This time, perhaps, because of the situation the world is in, change could be more accelerated and, as it in the past, define the fraternity for a generation or more with rippling effects – some constructive, some not. That is the nature of organizational behavior.

The enemy always lurking in the shadows during times when change is thrust upon organizations, businesses, and our culture is, shortsightedness. The Institution of Freemasonry has no unique immunity to that foe. A part of our nature too is to seek cures and remedies, and in doing so we adopt quick- fixes to problems and hurdles that beg long-term solutions. Some may appear to be good ideas at the time, but do not always prove to be lasting and effective solutions. That is the nature of shortsightedness.

Like all other organizations and the larger culture of our nation, the current world crisis has catapulted Freemasonry into the future and accelerated our search for solutions to the growing concern of how our fraternity has already, and will be further, affected. The idea that what is happening around the world is a blip in time - a mere passing moment - is challenged daily. While responses to difficult times do occasionally call for stop-gap measures, being mindful that recalibrating and seeking solutions that are effective for the long-run would serve our fraternity best.

² Matthew M. Radmanesh, *Cracking the Code of Our Physical Universe*, Authorhouse, 2006.

CONCLUSION

American Freemasonry has been traveling the path toward becoming a smaller fraternity for decades. We should put aside lamenting that immutable fact and move away from the long-standing notion that the success of Freemasonry is or can be measured counting the number of names appearing on membership rolls. The obsession with large membership rolls has not proven to be what preserves the historical intent of the aim and purpose of Freemasonry. In doing so, we might just find that curbing shortsightedness is easier than we think if we were ever to settle into the awareness of how the power of our teachings and philosophies is best nourished from the strength found in fewness.

We can find many writings about what the future holds for American Freemasonry in Masonic journals, periodicals, annual proceedings, and other publications dating back to the early 1800s. Today, examining them in context to and within the eras in which they were made, some do come across as pious finger wagging, foreboding, and brimming with prophetic dire warnings. When we study comments, remarks, and annual addresses of some past grand masters and from those thought of as involved, rational observers, we find the writing on the wall. The philosophies and the historical intent of our fraternity has been (and remains) sound – that is what has always been consistently defended – as it should be. No matter the style of predictions, that writing on the wall was and continues to be about the methods through which we attempt to sustain and deliver the promise of Freemasonry. Our reaction to external influences shaped those methods.

The resiliency of the timeless principles of Freemasonry will continue to be applicable and undoubtedly relevant well into the future. The principles of tolerance, wise counsel, and the nature of the need for good men to dwell together in fraternity and unity, will remain the core of our laudable pursuit. That is not so much of a prediction as it is simply the nature of goodness in good men.

It will be the decisions and choices we make today and in coming months in response to the current condition in which the world finds itself, that will underpin the quality and future prosperity of American Freemasonry – just as it has always been. Will we take more time than we have in the past to assess the impact of external influences on how we deliver the promise of Freemasonry? Will we look more closely at how the Institution has responded in the past and consider the good and possibly bad rippling effects stemming from whatever decisions are made?

As the future shortly become our present, perhaps by absorbing the basic lessons from our past we will take a small step away from our nature.

One thing we can count on: If we choose to ignore our nature as men and the nature of our organizational behavior, then we are demonstrating how little we actually know about the factual history of our Institution.