

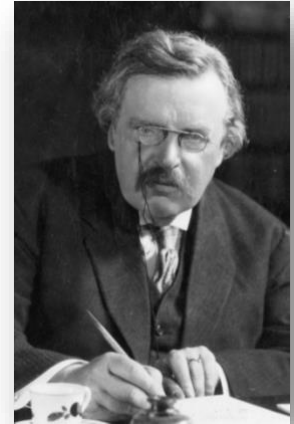
A LOOK INTO THE MASONIC MIRROR

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Gilbert Keith Chesterton, prolific journalist, and British author, was well known for his apologetics, biographies, detective fiction, literary, social, and political commentary, and modern history.

Reviews of his writing commonly note his mastery of paradox, genius, and cordial and humor. Whenever possible, Chesterton made his points with popular sayings, proverbs, and allegories—first carefully turning them inside out.¹ In 1902 the *Daily News* gave him a weekly opinion column, followed in 1905 by a weekly column in *The Illustrated London News*, for which he continued to write for the next thirty years. Many of his essays and opinion writings were published as books. Today, over one-hundred books by or about Chesterton's writings are published.²

Chesterton was known to many as simply, GK. George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright, critic, essayist, political activist, and one of only two people ever to receive both a Nobel Prize and an Oscar, was GK's friendly enemy. He said upon news of his death in 1936, that Chesterton was, "A man of colossal genius."



G.K. Chesterton
1874-1936

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD TODAY?

One of many stories about Chesterton was his reported response to what was sent out by *The Times* as an inquiry to famous authors, asking the question, "What's wrong with the world today?" Chesterton responded,

Dear Sir,
I am.
Yours,
G. K. Chesterton.

In his characteristic, inimitable way, Chesterton's two-word reply laid out his view that there was nothing wrong with the world, but with the people in it. Chesterton included himself in that group.

WHAT'S THIS HAVE TO DO WITH FREEMASONRY?

What does that Chesterton story have to do with Freemasonry? Read on.

Volumes of Masonic writings from around the mid-1800s through today offer a gentle to impassioned description and outline about how the Institution of Freemasonry unfolded in America in the early decades of

¹ "Orthodoxologist", *Time*, 11, October 1943, archived from the original on 20 November 2009, accessed 30 October 2021.

² S.M. O'Connor, "Who was G.K. Chesterton?" In *The Garden City*, 2019, <https://inthegardencity.com/2019/08/26/who-was-g-k-chesterton-by-s-m-oconnor>, accessed 30 October 2021.

the 1700s. In those volumes, we also find writings that offer more of an analytical eye woven into the descriptions that are supported by realities and, over the decades, repeated concerns about the consequences of deviating from the historical intent that was then, and yet today, to slowly alter the course of the world of Freemasonry. Factual history shows that has course shifted no less than six significant times since the early 1800s.³ Some of those shifts were because of changes in the larger society from which the fraternity draws its membership. Other shifts took place because of the actions and responses of its membership to those external changes.

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

In response to the question *what's wrong with the world, today*, Chesterton wrote, "I am." If we asked Masons in the United States, *what's wrong with the world of Freemasonry today*, it is quite doubtful if we would hear responses that come close to, *I am*.

The fraternity has spent considerable time since the 1960s identifying external causes that adversely affected its once high popularity, and therefore, its capability of attracting qualified candidates and to retaining them. Perhaps there was a shortage, at that time of mirrors in Masonic Halls -- a shortage that some argue lingers today. Many members and leaders spend more time looking out the windows than looking in a mirror for explanations about what is happening in and to the American fraternity.

Although much more evident to some leaders and members in the early 1960's, and to some later that decade,⁴ internal causes did not make it to the top of the hot topic list for another twenty-years.

We find in our external and internal society people who believe they are entitled, and that they deserve rights and privileges without assuming responsibilities or troubling themselves to learn and understand how, why, or from what circumstances they inherited such rights and privileges in the first place. Attempting to rebut that is to also deny the existence of human nature.

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Not everyone is interested in assuming responsibility to actually learn about, much less understand, a variety of things, and so, rarely do we find people who fall into that category who think (that they or their thinking) are the problem. When it comes to the teachings and lessons Freemasonry, where a premium is placed on

³ Alexander Piatigorsky, *Who's Afraid Of Freemasons? The Phenomenon Of Freemasonry*, Harvill Press; 1st ed edition, 1997, John W. Bizzack, *Island Freemasonry: The Final Bastion of the Observance Lodge*, Macoy, 2017.

⁴ Knights of the North, *Laudable Pursuit: A 21st Century Response to Dwight Smith*, Lulu, 2005-2006. (This booklet provide the best overview and examination of PGM of Indiana, Dwight L. Smith's two seminal writings, *Whither We Travel, Why All This Confusion At the Temple*, first appearing in the early 1960s. "Whither Are We Traveling?" appears in *Transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076*, London, 1963. *Why This Confusion at the Temple* was published in 1966 by the Masonic Services Association. Both writings appear in other publications and available on the Internet today).

principles of the Craft's teachings of about self-responsibility, learning, and understanding, we find a rub that challenges us to explain why all those admitted are not committed to those principles, or why the principles are now taught and delivered in such way that promotes commitment.

Those who believe they deserve rights and privileges without assuming responsibilities, or troubling themselves to learn and understand where those rights and privileges came from, would never be the ones who would answer *what's wrong with the world or the Institution of Freemasonry today* by taking, at the minimum, a share of the responsibility by admitting, "I am."

"Nothing in Freemasonry has disappointed me, but many times I'm disappointed in our response to it."

Presumably, we come to Freemasonry already good men. And governed by that supposition, we have admitted millions into our ranks over the years under the premise that *if* they learn, understand, make a daily advancement in (and practice of) their Masonic knowledge, subdue their passions, integrate the principles of our Craft into their daily lives, and strive to serve as an example to others as they do those things, they will become better men. The concept is proven to work, but it

cannot be successfully argued that it works for all who are admitted. We find the reasons why it works for some and not others in those volumes of writings previously mentioned, if, that is, we are aware they exist, and then bother to read and understand them. Human nature makes it much easier to first lay the blame for shortcomings elsewhere, and once that path is taken on a regular basis it becomes easier for each generation to do the same.

When asked, *What aspect of Freemasonry has most disappointed you?* Bill Lorenz, a committed and widely respected Past Master and Research Fellow of the William O. Ware Lodge of Research in Covington, Kentucky, responded, "Nothing in Freemasonry has disappointed me, but many times I'm disappointed in our response to it."⁵

OUR RESPONSE TO FREEMASONRY

We all use measurements every day in ordinary life, about nearly everything. Measurements have to be used to convey how big something is, how deep a hole is, how hot or cold something is, how strong, fast, loud, how much we love or dislike something, capacity, volume, speed, time, force, horsepower, surpluses, shortages, inventory, money, and even one's popularity on social media. Those things, and more, are all based on some kind of measurement. And much of the time, measuring means using numbers to describe a property of something when we try to describe the world around us.

Selecting the correct measurement may be easy when we measure things as temperature, speed, and time, but when measuring the success of an organization like Freemasonry, we fall back on what many seem to think is the obvious way to identify and declare success: *counting members*. We hear the argument that we do that

⁵ *Voices of Freemasonry*, Volume 1, 2020, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky, <https://williamowarelodgeofresearch.com>, accessed October 31, 2021. (*Voices of Freemasonry* is an ongoing Masonic perspective-based research project by the William O. Ware Lodge of Research. Questionnaire-based, the project is currently in its 4th Volume. Demographically, respondents represent an average sampling of membership from 29-92 years of age, with membership of 1-66 years, Masons of all degrees, and elected and appointed lodge and grand lodge officers of all positions from multiple jurisdictions.)

because we are supposedly unable to measure intangibles; those things thought to be incapable of being perceived by the sense of touch, such as the spiritual and the things considered indefinable.

So, we measure the Masonic world by numbers on membership rosters, dollars raised and donated to worthy causes, attendance in lodge, awards and honors given, and some even believe we can measure the fraternity's success by how thick the book is that reports our Annual Proceedings, to name a few indicators. All of those things *are* important in their own way, but it is our behavior, in and outside, the lodge that we find so difficult to correctly measure as a success factor.

There are many members who have said and say today, they became better men by and through their affiliation with Masonry. We acknowledge and welcome their appraisal, of course. However, other than their behavior that demonstrates the truth of the claim, there is no other measurement. How much better a man becomes from his affiliation with Freemasonry may remain generally incalculable, but who can argue that every little bit does not help?

If we choose to measure in conventional ways, should we at least be more aware of the possibility that we may well be measuring the wrong things? The fraternity may not have yet figured out how to best (with a modicum of accuracy) measure what makes the work of the Craft genuinely successful but continuing to measure without truly analyzing the way some things are measured, and what the measurement used actually tells us, has become a very slippery slope. It seems quite reasonable that, if we are going to measure or claim success by counting the names on a membership roster, we should have something meaningful against which to compare it—something more than just the previous year's number or the numbers in our records from decades or centuries ago.

How we have measured our *response* to Freemasonry over the past fifteen generations or more is an interesting saga. Again, we find it involves our reaction to a jumbled mix of external causes and is not necessarily in balance with visible internal causes. As the saying goes, *mirrors reveal truths you may not want to see*.

A mirror image is how you perceive yourself not how others perceive yourself.

Although an altogether uncertain and unverified number, we count and report the dollars raised for worthy charitable and relief causes as a measurement of success. We have appointed and elected many members who are interested in positions of leadership without regard for qualifications, ability, and merit, but declare that in doing so we have established an indicator of success founded on the idea that every member can “get their turn,” if they want. We have admitted thousands of candidates into our ranks, rushed them through degrees, and then rely completely on the premise that each retains from that experience all the instruction they need to *become* more than just a name on the roster. We have watched fixed expenses continue to rise as our average dues rate stagnates, yet somehow construe that keeping dues as low as possible is a measurement of success. A list of what is commonly interpreted as successes not only shows us the generational response to Freemasonry as an organization but tells us little about whether the principles of Freemasonry make all those presumably good men admitted, better. Claiming that membership alone does that by measuring success in these way does not line up with what we or others observe.

LOOKING AT THE OTHER END OF THE DATA

Perhaps, instead of focusing on membership as a measurement of success, we should look at the other end of data in our records: retention numbers. This number may actually tell us how well we are doing with regard to the effectiveness of our investigation committees, delivering Masonry to membership, and holding the interest of a man in committing to a lifetime journey of self-improvement. In short, retention may validate

our labors or reflect a lack of them. Importantly, a study of retention offers a whiff of reality as to whether external or internal causes affect it its level. Our common sense should tell us that the likelihood of external reasons being the primary reason men are attracted to Freemasonry, or remain members, is remote.

There is more to consider about retention rates than just showing that a reasonable number of those admitted retain their membership, of course. Since 56% of members never have meaningfully participated in the activities of their Lodge since having received their most recent Degree,⁶ retention numbers cannot, at least with any certainty, claim that just because a man is admitted and keeps his dues paid, he is anything more than a member in good standing, no matter whether he is member for three to four years before being suspended for non-payment of dues, for 70 years, or merely fades away. So, can high membership be a valid measurement of anything other than men who have come to see what Masonry offers, when slightly less than half remain involved or engaged in their Lodge or with Freemasonry?

Importantly, a study of retention offers a whiff of reality as to whether external or internal causes affect it its level.

If, as a fraternity, we are satisfied with retaining only a minority of all who have, are, or will be admitted (which is what valid research reveals⁷), then let us also be willing to acknowledge and embrace that less than exceptional record as a measurement on our websites and awareness materials.

If, as a fraternity, we are satisfied with members receiving only minimal instruction and education about the fraternity, its historical principles, and profound philosophies (when integrated into the lives of men, can make better a good man) by rushing them through degrees, then let us also widely acknowledge and declare that measurement of success on our websites and in our awareness materials.

If we are satisfied with the general leadership, management, administration, and the way we deliver Freemasonry within the fraternity, then let us start by declaring that we are satisfied with a poor retention rate and offering less than sufficient instruction, as a measurement, and that the decline of public interest in our fraternity is entirely a consequence of external changes that happen to affect the Institution.

The chance of such things ever appearing on a Masonic website or in materials that promote public awareness of Freemasonry is beyond unlikely but that does not mitigate their existence. However, maybe, just maybe, looking at these things in this way will nudge more members and leaders to take a more collective look in the mirror we have ignored for too long, and reflect on the internal more than the external.

What a challenge it is to do something new, or in a different way, after doing things in a certain way for so long that we became too stubborn, or simply do not desire to learn new ways.

In those previously mentioned volumes of Masonic writings and official records, we find what has worked better in the past and today in many aspects of our fraternity—again, that is, if we bother to read, study, understand, and objectively consider them. What is found in those records are not fanciful, pie-in-the-sky ideas but real-world remedies, such as: a consistent focus on Masonic education beyond ritual; leadership elected and appointed consistently on merit; and an unending commitment to excellence in the work proven to most influence the behavior of members to best motivate them to demonstrate in and outside of our Lodges the genuine, no-finish-line pursuit of becoming a better man. What a challenge that is to consistently

⁶ Research Committee, *Characteristics of an Ideal Lodge: Survey Results and Analysis*, October 1, 2019, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky, MWGM Mikel J. Stoops (Kansas), *Membership Retention: A Matter of Value*, Presentation on October 25, 2021, The Rubicon Masonic Society, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Lexington Lodge No. 1, 21's Century Conversations About Freemasonry, Virtual Education Series, 2012 (accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4UBdbv9J84>).

⁷ *IBID*.

labor toward those remedies, and how amazing it is that it constructively affects fellowship and interest in the fraternity.

No matter that challenge yesterday and today, we do find members and leaders advocating such constructive change in the way we respond to Freemasonry *and* measure its successes. If asked *what's wrong with the world of Freemasonry today*, those particular members and leaders are not the ones who must answer, "I am."

What is your truthful answer to that question?