

The State of Contemporary American Freemasonry

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My Brothers, there are very few countries in the world in which the Masonic fraternity is struggling more than in the United States, simply to remain a viable institution. And yet, there are very few countries in the world, using any measuring criterion, in which the Masonic fraternity showed a greater degree of success than it did in our past. It is a monumental tragedy that the Freemasonry in North America is going through what is perhaps the greatest threat to its survival that we have ever experienced, while Freemasonry in much of the rest of the world is showing the greatest success that it has experienced since shortly after its creation. Consider that 31 new regular grand lodges have been consecrated since the turn-of-the-century.

Why this phenomenon? Why is North American Freemasonry struggling to survive while in much of the world it thrives? Why in a civil society perhaps impacted more than any other by the philosophy of Freemasonry are we losing the influence we had for almost 300 years? Why do Freemasons still play a major role in most of the world's countries, while our roles are decreasing? To comprehend the state of contemporary American Freemasonry we must understand how and why.

I have concluded the Freemasonry needs challenge to exhibit its greatest success. North American Freemasonry has probably faced less challenge to its existence than anywhere else in the world. We have never been confronted by a government to prevent the practice of our philosophical purpose. We have never had religious leaders with the power to deny our right to be Freemasons. We have never faced being put to death simply for being a Freemason. This lack of challenge is perhaps a major reason why we have permitted our Freemasonry to slip into complacency that is now evolving into apathy.

Almost 50 years ago I wrote one of my first Masonic papers regarding Freemasonry in North America. At that time my concern was focused on the decrease occurring in our numbers, the **quantity** of the Craft. Several years after I became Grand Secretary I wrote another paper, expressing a concern not regarding the quantity of our membership, rather regarding the quality of the man we were willing to accept to regain the quantity. Although I am still concerned with numbers, my greater concern has become a loss of our ability to influence the evolution of civil society through the **quality** of the membership.

In that paper I made the observation that we have admitted for years that only 10% of our membership is ever active. Conversely, that meant 90% are never active yet they continue to pay their dues year after year knowing full well that they will never be active. There is only one logical reason that a man would do that, there is a perceived value in being able to say, "I am a Freemason". I made then the observation that if we take away the perceived value, we risk losing the 90%. My brothers that is exactly what has happened.

In my observations over the years, I have attributed much of the success of Freemasonry to three primary causes.

1. It was perhaps the first organization in a class-oriented society to accept men from all social strata and professions as members and seat them in a lodge room as equals. This was a dramatic change in the climate of the 1700s.
2. It attracted some of the greatest thinking men who ever lived. These men were the respected personalities of their time whose names remain imprinted upon the history of man.
3. It remained selective in the quality of the man that it would accept. Not quality based upon the social status of the man but upon the ethical and intellectual standards of the individual.

It was these men who created the visual image of Freemasonry to society. This attraction was primary in causing our Craft to become a force unlike any other seen in the world. We thrived as a result of being crafted by some of the most brilliant minds of that day.

My brothers, we are no longer attracting great thinking men in present-day society nor have we remained selective on the quality of the man that we would accept and that certainly is reflected in the state of contemporary American Freemasonry.

When I became a Grand Secretary in December 1979, it was rare to see a brother brought up un-Masonic conduct charges. Today it is an ongoing occurrence and this can only be the result of our failure to guard the west gate. A lodge within 10 miles of my

home lodge recently initiated a man who appeared to receive his first degree wearing an ankle bracelet placed there by court order.

Masonic Membership was once ardently sought by those wishing to affiliate with a highly successful, visible and influential organization; today we are largely ignored and almost invisible in present-day society.

Freemasonry in America has been on a downward spiral for a number of decades. A loss of 75% of our membership is evidence that Freemasonry no longer has the influence that it once had. Our failure to attract great men and professional leaders from our society is indicative of a lack of vision that served as a foundation to the development of Freemasonry in America. It is not the decline in numbers, however, that is the cause for the failure of our visible image but rather it is our response to the issues causing it. We have justified lowering the quality the organization in a failed attempt to regain the quantity.

We have surrendered Freemasonry to the financial demands to sustain what we have created. Our failure to recognize and adjust to the changes of a progressing society has resulted in a willingness to accept less simply for the dollars that they could provide.

Regretfully, too many of our leaders today have also bought into the political correctness phenomenon dominating our country that has made parasites out of many of our citizens and where every man has a right to be a Freemason. Too many also have entered into leadership positions with an unrestrained ego and far exceeding their capabilities with a commitment to perpetuating their own memory instead of contributing to their legacy.

History is littered with the detritus of organizations whose leadership lacked the vision to maintain its significance to society and Freemasonry is not immune to the vicissitudes of these organizations. Freemasonry in the future will struggle much more than it has in the past as a result of internal challenges rather than external. No longer is it greatest challenges from government or religious leaders it is from us.

When I joined the craft, I was a consummate idealist. However, my idealism has been tempered by pragmatism during the 56 years that I have been a member. I do not know now whether I am a pragmatic idealist or an idealistic pragmatist, but I do know that I think much differently concerning the Craft today than I did when I joined. Frankly, if the Craft was then what it is now, I seriously doubt that I would be a Freemason today.

I was privileged to be a Freemason during a time when the general public looked upon us individually with respect simply because we were a Freemason. It was a time I recall, when almost every professional man in my small town was a member of the Craft. Very few are members today and I am convinced that the loss of the quality of the member has had a major impact upon the loss of quantity of our membership.

It is never my intent to be a harbinger of doom but nor is it my intent to paint a rosy picture based upon the greatness of our past as many are intent to do. It is also not the intent of this essay to serve as a criticism of our present-day leaders or members. It is however, an acknowledgment of our inability to attract the professional man who contributed positively to our visibility in the past.

The result is totally evident in the erosion of the general quality of North American Freemasonry and the creation of an organization ignorant of its own purpose. Frankly, it is my evaluation that the creation of one-day classes is the greatest abomination that has ever impacted Freemasonry and has caused us to be ridiculed by the rest of the Masonic world.

We today are representative of what amounts to a culmination of an evolutionary process of change in North American Freemasonry an from elite, philosophical, learned, highly respected society into a less than elite, almost ignored organization devoted to charitable objectives. It is now a challenge for present-day leadership to restore it to what it once was. Any leader today not committed to that responsibility does not belong in his position.

We have created our greatest problem by making membership too easily obtainable and retainable and that my brothers have been initiated by our leadership in North America. Emphasis on increasing numbers rather than educating those that we have has become a way of life to North American Freemasonry.

Regretfully, there seems to have developed the prevailing attitude that the Freemasonry of the past is not a good fit for modern society and that we must change our operational precepts to adapt to that society. However, all the studies that we have made, all the changes that we have instituted, all the monies that we have invested in all the programs that we have developed to reshape Freemasonry to fit this “modern” world have achieved precious little success. Indeed, if we look at the broad picture, we have not only failed but we have accelerated and contributed to the failure. We have become far too willing to surrender the integrity and character the Craft simply to retain numbers and to satisfy demands from the profane world.

Along with our willingness to forfeit our quality has been our commitment to the support of public charities. Although Freemasonry has historically supported a charitable characteristic, it was initially a commitment to support the brothers along with their families, widows and children. In North America however, we have now made charitable giving the core value of Freemasonry.

Even as our numbers are decreasing, even as our buildings are crumbling, even as the quality of our membership is waning, we continue to dedicate much of our effort to raising monies to give away to public charities in a failed attempt to buy back admiration and respect.

The concern I express is not what we do for charity, but what we do not do to fulfill our purpose because of our concentration of effort we put into charity.

My brothers, the time has come for us to become more introspective, for if we fail to look out for ourselves how can we hope to look out for others. We cannot afford to allow ignorance to consume us while we concentrate our efforts on programs that do not fall within the purview of our reason for existence.

I suspect that there are those sitting here today who disagree with my evaluation of North American Freemasonry, the direction we are going and what is needed to alter the course and I have absolutely no problem with that. As I have indicated many times, "when I speak, I want to stimulate thinking". If I have achieved that, then I have accomplished my intent. If you disagree you must have thought about what I said. However, if we are to change the direction and altar pathway, we must:

1. Consider seriously a change in how we measure what we consider success. Our leadership must acknowledge that the capability to influence society is more important than having a large number of members who cannot.
2. Totally comprehend that respect cannot be bought by large contributions to public charities. All of our millions in contributions have solved nothing for our future or for our purpose.
3. Return to the premise of making good men better through a viable educational process so that at least our membership comprehends our purpose.

Regardless of whatever excuses we garner for our failings, we cannot avoid the realization that unless we can reverse it, the history that could be written today of our future will be of a once great and significant organization that contributed to the development of many societies but failed to find the vision to avoid their own demise.

This is the state of contemporary American Freemasonry.

I finish with this admonition, my Brothers, “Guard well the west gate” for the leaders of our tomorrows are those who we accept into our brotherhood today.