



MEN OF GOOD TIMBER
AS GOES SOCIETY, SO GOES FREEMASONRY?

John W. Bizzack and Dan M. Kemble

MEN OF GOOD TIMBER

AS GOES SOCIETY, SO GOES FREEMASONRY?

John W. Bizzack and Dan M. Kemble

January 2024

When we refer to the caliber of a good man's character, his work ethic, resilience, decency, citizenship, faith, family values, and other aspects of what we commonly consider the measure of such a man, we say the man is of *good timber*.

American poet and short-story writer, Douglas Malloch, is credited with bringing that term into popular usage in his 1922 poem, "*Good Timber*."¹ The significance of the poem is Malloch's use of a sagely metaphor that reminds us that, like a tree, a man must consistently bear up against strong winds and other elements of his surroundings, and develop deep roots to nourish growth if he is to live an upright life of value, upon which a premium may be placed. Men who strive hard to surmount struggles of their sum and substance become, like trees, *good timber*. Some interpret Malloch's work as a reminder that life without hardship is one of unfulfilled potential.

Good timber represents sturdy trees out of which may come wood used as strong masts for ships, powerfully built beams and supports for structures of all sizes and purpose, and fine wood that may be fashioned into delicate instruments or exquisite carvings. But a tree must first become good timber, and like men, its sturdiness, will depend upon the nourishment absorbed from its past and present.



Interestingly, early fifteenth century English poet, orator, and priest, George Herbert, gave us another metaphor related to good timber.² In his 1663 poem titled, *Virtue*, he speaks to the resilience of a good man's soul which can be compared to the sturdy tree that has a defiant presence against those things that can erode its life. His metaphors relate to the beauty of aged wood, and how all of its knots and cracks, adds to, rather than subtracts from, the sum total of its engrained character that is shaped by the wind, rain, frost, and sun. He suggests that men of virtue are likewise shaped by countless choices for good, even when that which is less good may be more attractive. The map of each of their young and adult lives shows that they bear stress without splitting or warping their integrity. In that way, men of good timber, like sturdy trees, are said to be *well-seasoned*.

¹ Douglas Malloch, "Good Timber," *Journal of Education*, 95(6), 146-146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205742209500603>.

² T. Y. Crowell, ed. *The Works of George Herbert in Prose and Verse: Edited from the Latest Editions, with Memoir, Explanatory Notes, Etc.*, New York, John Wurtele Lovell, 1881.

Trust in the long-standing belief that every generation produces a ready forest of well-seasoned men of good timber is regularly challenged today. It is more often argued that the so-called “pool” of men of good timber is looking more like a puddle, and the density of the forest in which they grow has been substantially thinned out.

But not everyone agrees that such a scarcity exists, and some contend that such concerns are greatly exaggerated. Those embracing that belief commonly cling to the argument that, at some point, every generation simply “comes around” as they slowly recognize how little they know and finally mature into constructive members of society.

Trust in the long-standing belief that every generation produces a ready forest of well-seasoned men of good timber is regularly challenged today. It is more often argued that the so-called “pool” of men of good timber is looking more like a puddle...

Another group, which may be said to be suffering from “recency illusion,”³ agrees that a shortage exists, but argues that it is of recent origin. Embracing the notion that shortages pertain only to the latest generation of young men, this notion suggests that the deficit is a mere anomaly that will just correct itself in the next generation.

The “they’ll come around” and “recency illusion” crowds miss the point that the concern is based on the scale of the shortage and how the dimensions of the scale have already (for decades, now) transformed and eroded the social, cultural, educational, civic, technological, religious, and spiritual landscape of the nation.

Businesses, schools, the military, and other organizations do not need social scientists or cultural anthropologists to tell them that there is a shortage of motivated and qualified young men entering their ranks. The organizations that have already lowered their standards just to be able to fill their rosters find themselves confronting daunting challenges that come with putting to work young and adult men who have problems reading, communicating, being supervised, and who struggle with other maturity issues like time management, and a willingness to work hours that are not convenient to their personal lifestyle. These things represent only a short list.

THE GENERAL LIST

Twenty-four-hour television and radio news cycles, along with broadcast commentaries, exist alongside the incessant posting of opinion on social media, much of which masquerades as, or is interpreted as, fact. Our society’s willingness to accept statements at their surface value, without exploring any underlying or corroborating information, serves as one possible gauge about the extent and depth of the larger issues that challenge it. The popularity and incessant use of these outlets and their platforms voice a reminder about not only how easily facts can become battered

³ Arnold Zwicky, “Why Are We so Illuded?” *Stanford University*, 2006, <https://web.stanford.edu/~zwicky/LSA07illude.abst.pdf>, accessed, October 2023.

relics, but further illustrates how poorly that so many people write and speak, and how rhetoric commonly digresses into sweeping generalizations and sloppy thinking. What passes for “expert analysis” these days, reveals the extent to which feelings have replaced reason as the basis for critical examination.

When we work from the general short list of things believed to be causes of contemporary society’s obvious deficiencies, we find enough reason to be alarmed about the long-term effects of a shortage of well-seasoned men of good timber. And it is easy to see why it appears we are losing ground.

Topping the general list is the extraordinary rise of electronic opiates embraced by the most recent generation — a generation of youth who have never known life without the Internet in their pocket and who increasingly appear to have become perpetually distracted from education, work, citizenship, and the vital development of in-person social skills.

The elimination of the military draft in 1973, after twenty-five years of uninterrupted use, is frequently cited as being one cause young America’s social disengagement. The absence of grounded and focused role models for young men may be considered another factor. The lack of emotional stability and maturity, arising from a culture in which commitment is discounted and which repudiates the premium that was once placed on self-reliance and the grit to overcome that which may be considered difficult or distasteful, is also on the list. Another listing is the increase of young men who never move out of their parents’ home, or who, if they do leave, move back in — a circumstance that we find is higher today than at any time since The Great Depression. The consequences of telling an entire generation that they were special and celebrating them for merely showing up and participating in life events, whether they achieved anything or not, are now evident.

Moving rapidly up the list since 2000 is the lack of scientific literacy that has swallowed at least one generation, juxtaposed alongside the decrease in the number of young and adult males who described or consider themselves religious. The state of elementary and secondary education and the absence of emphasis on teaching contextual and inductive reasoning, civics, economics, and fundamental life skills, may also be identified among the shortcomings of contemporary society.

Additionally, we witness daily the phenomenon of how long-standing truths and community principles are so easily pushed away and are replaced by unsupported opinions and personal feelings that make careful reasoning seem to be a burden to many of the young men and adults of at least the past two generations. The rise of designated “safe places” at colleges, and even at some businesses, to protect the delicate sensibilities of those who are easily offended or who are unable to deal with opposing opinion or life events, continues to move up the list. In conjunction, the consequences of designating some spaces as “safe” seems to have reinforced the implication that all other spaces are unsafe; and has fueled the idea for much of a college generation that all the other spaces must *become* “safe” for them, so that their lives are not in what they perceive to be continuous emotional peril.⁴

⁴ This is not to say that if the point of a safe space is a vital and constructive therapy for people who are actual victims of what is professionally diagnosed as a medical or psychological traumatization that such places are not needed. However, if such spaces are created to sustain the

Looking at the heady days of the 1980s and 1990s, when society was pressed to “raise the bar” on children’s rights so that they could assume more agency and become active participants in their lives and futures, we find an example of what seemed a good idea at the time resulting in some serious unintended (and perhaps disastrous) consequences and dire rippling effects. Youth, with all its passionate intensity, ignorance, and inexperience has increasingly projected and espoused the self-absorbed premise that they hold some kind of moral superiority, and that time-proven norms and behaviors should be altered immediately and eliminated because of *what they feel* - not because of *what reason informs them to be true*.

Any general list threads many of the other debated causes and makes the cliché that our children are the future a distinctly disturbing notion that connects to another equally disturbing concern – that the fundamentals that once underpinned the idea of America and spirit of our culture have withered — and some suggest that the spirit is already gone.

AS GOES SOCIETY...

The transformation of cultural and social institutions, concepts, and rules can take years — even centuries — and the impact of such transformation is not necessarily good or bad, but *it is profound*. And each such transformation, no matter how paltry or noble its character, reveals that each generation shows a tendency to think of itself as better than the one preceding it.

Studying how organized Freemasonry unfolded in America offers a trove of insight about such transformations and how societal change moved the Institution away from the philosophies of the late 17th and the 18th centuries that we know as the Age of Reason⁵ — philosophies on which the powerful idea of Masonry is grounded.

Recognizing that *as goes Society, so goes Freemasonry* helps us to better understand and explain the condition in which we find the Institution in our country today. Revealed, too, is why, after three hundred years of existence, the administration and management of the organization is likely to continue to be influenced more by the external society from which it attracts its members, rather than serving to influence the greater external society in America as it once did.

The historical intent of the powerful idea of Masonry was not designed to change *with* the world but *to bring change to the world* through the work of men of good timber who would steadfastly hold the line on truth. Modeling the fundamental principles that unite and inspire men to act correctly

engineering of puerile college-age students who are believed to need protection like children, are such spaces can be interpreted as a symptom of deeper social problems and the widening challenge of broadening the field of vision and wits of those in a generation who are unprepared to meet more significant social headwinds once they leave campuses.

⁵ Dorinda Outram, (2006), *Panorama of the Enlightenment*, Getty Publications, 2006, p. 29, Milan Zelikovsky, *The Enlightenment and Its Effects on Modern Society*, ISBN: 978-1-4419-7386-32010, p. 144. (The Age of Reason is also thought of as The Age of Enlightenment, a term coined by the major proponents of the movement itself. Part of their claim was that educating people in the ways of scientific reasoning would end all of humanities’ ills: rationality could explain all natural phenomena, including those of mankind, and could be used to govern a range of ideas centered on the value of human happiness, the pursuit of knowledge obtained by means of reason and the evidence of the senses, and ideals such as natural law, liberty, progress, toleration, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state).

toward all mankind serves as an example to others to do the same. Surely Masonry is a catalyst that can aid in that colossal task.

Now, influencing the world in this way may seem a slow and even overly ambitious undertaking, but who, with any weight and credence, is to say that such an undertaking is ever too aspirational? Is any worthy pursuit that helps to purify, strengthen, and chasten society, not worthy of encouragement?

The historical intent of the powerful idea of Masonry was not designed to change with the world but to bring change to the world.

Since the design of the Masonic Institution is to develop its members as men of character, of square conduct and upright intentions, men of sound thought and spirit, men of moral fiber and moral courage, and these purposes are what we are increasingly anxious to see realized in men, then is not the historically *intended* work of Masonry even *more worthy* and *more necessary* any time that a generation begins to unmoor itself from proven values, universal truths, and reason?

Moreover, has the world ever not needed a reawakening of high ideals based on morality and virtue, and a renewal in the recognition of the vital importance of the work that unites men of good timber?

Masonry was founded, and exists today, to be a consistent living force in society, not just another organization that flies a banner—and certainly not an organization that was ever envisioned to merely drift along *with* society merely to sustain itself.

Masonry was not established to be a hobby or to reform *marginally* good men. Instead, it serves to teach and inspire the *already good man* to be an active participant in a universal league of other good men, and for them to validate through their thoughts and deeds the standards that show and tell us what men of good timber look like and what they do with their lives. It is a slow, ambitious process, indeed. And for those suited to the labor required to achieve it, Masonry is a compelling and laudable pursuit.

The long drift from the heart of and uplifting force of Masonry has resulted in its one-time clear distinction among many fraternal and civic organizations, blurry.

But for generations the ignorance of true Masonry, among too many members of the Masonic Order, has been, and continues to be, appalling. This unfortunate reality provides one reason that the Institution is not a suitable measurement to determine the existence of a ready pool of good men, or to gauge the extent of its possibly shrinking level. Multitudes have been initiated into the Fraternity, but of its real meaning too few have been given but a vague idea, and over half of those admitted do not participate in any meaningful way. Many members do not value Masonry because they know so little about it and give little to no thought to the study of its principles beyond what is presented in the ritual and ceremonies. A certain percentage does, however, take its place in the various social functions, share them to the full, and call that superficial experience Masonry.

In 1936, as the Fraternity continued to experience the drift from its historical purpose, and since the Freemasonry in the previous decade had been more influenced by external society than by the tenets of Masonry, a question was asked: *If every Mason were like me, what kind of Fraternity would Freemasonry be?* The relevancy of that question has not faded.

The deficit of more serious Masons than casual ones, contributes to the evidence of how the external society influenced Masonry and its teachings and continues to do so. When little Masonry is taught in lodges over many decades, little inner meaning of it is passed to the next generation of members. The official records of the Institution clearly identify how and why this happened.

Masonry does weld together men of all backgrounds and beliefs. While the banner under which men assemble, however, may extol the *idea* of Masonry, many of the activities that appear beneath that same banner, now more than ever before, represent less of what Masonry was intended to be and more of what many of the generations of men it has admitted have allowed it to become. The long drift from the heart and uplifting force of Masonry has made blurry its one-time clear distinction from the many other fraternal and civic organizations.

*If every Mason were like me,
what kind of Fraternity would
Freemasonry be? The relevancy
of that question has not faded.*

We can debate it, view it from under widely diverse educated and undereducated opinions and perspectives, and attempt to put organized Masonry in context with the almost sixteen generations in which it has existed, but there is one fact that is undebatable. Interest in Masonry (and the institutions surrounding it) is no longer of great interest to society at large, nor has it been to the past three generation of men. Again, the official records of the Institution bear testimony to this fact.

Contrary to alibis, excuses, and fingers pointed mostly to external causes, the list of actual reasons is rather short. Either the pool of good men has shrunk, or the bulk of Lodges are not adequately inspiring each man admitted or interested in Masonry to put forth the labor to earnestly pursue its transformative properties. Perhaps the combination of both is the correct answer.

*...the power of the idea of
Masonry will always appeal to
already good men and certainly
the men considered to be of good
timber – no matter the depth
and breadth of the pool.*

Although interest in Masonry has sharply declined, as plummeting membership and public awareness since the final decades of the 20th century indicates, it does not follow that Masonry will either soon or completely fade away. The idea of Masonry will outlive the external influences, imitative associations, slackened rules, the multiple adverse consequences of once crowded membership, periods of poor leadership, and the increasing perception that it is a public charity. The genuine meaning of Masonry, as revealed through serious study and instruction, and as learned and practiced by a

few, has sustained, and will continue to sustain the Institution. Such sustenance continues to occur notwithstanding the fact that the vast majority of its members have either rejected the genuine meaning of Masonry, or are unaware that it exists. The overwhelming absence among Freemasons of anything more than a superficial understanding of its lessons and tenets has occasioned the retreat of institutional Freemasonry from its historic aim and purpose.

Moreover, the power of the idea of Masonry will continue, no matter the depth and breadth of the pool of good men, if they can be made aware that it exists and the Institution managing it does more to ensure that good men are sufficiently instructed and inspired to pursue it. The membership roster may never again swell above four million men in America as it did by 1959, but, then again, if only the good men who are suited for the life-

journey that Masonry offers are admitted, and if such men are appropriately instructed and inspired, who is to say that it will not again grow? After all, that approach has yet to be steadily tested. Perhaps, if Freemasonry in the future is tested in this manner, members will this time attach less importance to its social side and place greater emphasis on its principles and tenets.

Are young men of the 21st Century willing to step outside of group-think and engage in the more challenging arena of critical-thought? If they are willing, will they have the capability to develop such skill? Will they know that Freemasonry affords them an environment in which such a skill may be developed?

The peril to Masonry in this generation, and perhaps future generations as well, is two-fold. First, is the reality that the institutions surrounding Freemasonry show increasing signs in this century that they are taking on the standing of a bygone way of life for good men. Although its historical intent, aim, and purpose has been stretched to the margins, no level of transformation of cultures and societies has ever been able to successfully suppress *men of good timber* who embrace the power of ideas that contribute to making themselves and their world better.

Second, and of equal concern, is that the stand of “good timber” from which to choose good men is significantly smaller. Young men of the 21st Century have been raised in a very different world than those of preceding generations. The shared pool of societal norms and values are radically different from those of even the late 20th Century. The principles of reason and personal responsibility that made Freemasonry so attractive in the past are not necessarily held in esteem today. Academia, supported by government and media, seems more inclined to teach young men what to think, rather than teaching them how to think. Freemasonry champions free thought. Are young men of the 21st Century willing to step outside of group-think and engage in the more challenging arena of critical-thought? If they are willing, will they have the capability to develop such skill? Will they know that Freemasonry affords them an environment in which such a skill may be developed? Ironically, the

“fight” (as Malloch uses the word) that contemporary men will need to find Freemasonry will, likely, make them be more apt to be the *good timber* necessary to grow the Fraternity for future generations.

Should the power of the idea of Masonry ever consistently become the life force it is designed and intended to be, then perhaps at that time we will be able to reply to the question *where have men of good timber gone*, and answer: “To Freemasonry.”

If the time comes that allows us to honestly answer that question, then the credit will belong to the men in our organization who know great enthusiasm—the great devotion of spending himself in the worthy cause of preserving the historical intent, aim, and purpose of our Craft and successfully passing it on to future generations. They will be the men whose place is not with timid souls who allow the idea of Masonry to drift *with* the world. They will be in the arena and not among those sitting on the sidelines who remain, at best, mere spectators, and at worst, unproductive drones.

It will be the behavior, deeds, actions, constructive words, and the no-finish-line-labor of such men that will best serve Masonry and consistently define what we consider men of good timber whose sturdiness is continuously nourished by authentic Masonry.

The question, *if every Mason were like me, what kind of Fraternity would Freemasonry be?* would lead to purposeful dialogue and lively discussion in most Masonic Lodges. Try it.

Although its historical intent, aim, and purpose has been stretched to the margins, no level of transformation of cultures and societies has ever been able to successfully suppress men of good timber who embrace the power of ideas that contribute to making themselves and their world better.

REFERENCES

- Robert G. Davis, *Understanding Manhood in American*, Anchor Communications, Lancaster, VA, 2005.
Joseph Johnson, *The Lure of Freemasonry*, The Masonic Record Ltd., Kingsway, London, 1936.
Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Penguin Books, 2005.
Earl Nightengale, *The Essence of Success*, Nightengale-Conant, Illinois, 1993.
Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2023
William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Kentucky, *Characteristics of an Ideal Lodge Survey*, October 2019.
John W. Bizzack, *Canker Worm on the Rose*, BSF Foundation, 2023.
Joseph Johnson, *The Lure of Freemasonry*, The Masonic Record Ltd., London, 1936
Rob Morris, *The History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*, Rob Morris, Louisville, 1859.
Robert Davis, “Mediocrity in Masonry ... Shame on Us!” *The Laudable Pursuit* August 3, 2015, <https://www.thelaudablepursuit.com/articles/2015/8/2/mediocrity-in-masonry-shame-on-us>, accessed November 2023.
Theodore Roosevelt, *The Man in the Arena* speech given in Sorbonne in Paris, France, on April 23, 1910.

Good Timber

Douglas Malloch, 1922

The tree that never had to fight
For sun and sky and air and light,
But stood out in the open plain
And always got its share of rain,
Never became a forest king
But lived and died a scrubby thing.

The man who never had to toil
To gain and farm his patch of soil,
Who never had to win his share
Of sun and sky and light and air,
Never became a manly man
But lived and died as he began.

Good timber does not grow with ease,
The stronger wind, the stronger trees,
The further sky, the greater length,
The more the storm, the more the strength.
By sun and cold, by rain and snow,
In trees and men good timbers grow.

Where thickest lies the forest growth
We find the patriarchs of both.
And they hold counsel with the stars
Whose broken branches show the scars
Of many winds and much of strife.
This is the common law of life.