

The Future of Our Craft... a Philosophical Look

I'm sure there are very few of us in this room that don't have an opinion about the state of our fraternity. I'm also sure that many of those opinions, if you check closely, tend toward frustration, perhaps even reflecting a bit of 'worry' about our future. All of the angst and hand wringing might be obvious when we think about the decrease in our numbers in past years. But those opinions are also tempered with a sincere belief that we can once again see a growth in the Craft. After all, with all that might be wrong in the world today, Masonry always has, and still does offer the one thing that men, in all ages have needed; the opportunity to make themselves and the world around them better.

Recently, while conducting some research for this presentation, I was in touch with a member of the education committee from the Grand Lodge of South Australia....over the past 6 years we have, on occasion, shared our Masonic writings with each other. He sent me a list of the 'perceived shortcomings' of our fraternity, according to the brethren from 'Down Under'. Interestingly, the list wasn't new, and in many cases his list had some of the very same concerns that were on the horizon when I became a Mason over 30 years ago. Among the most often heard...Masonry is too secret – we need more PR; Masonry is too cheap – our dues should be higher; We don't guard the Westgate – we'll let anyone in; ...and, one of my personal favorites...Mason's are afraid to talk about Masonry – we need more education, and so on. I'm sure you can find one or more of those to agree, or perhaps disagree with.

So, here's the rub.....There is no panacea....No Grand Master's magic wand, no single stroke of the pen to an edict is going to solve it. In fact I don't think there could be enough legislation in a single Grand Annual Communication to resolve all of our concerns and minimize our threats. It took a long time for Masonry to become what it is today, and it will take some time to recapture whatever ground we may have lost. Oh, to be sure, I believe there will always be Masonry...we may be fewer in number, and there may be fewer Lodges, but we will be stronger for whatever trials and tribulations we encounter, and we will survive!

As a fraternity we have been challenged many times in the past, and in different ways. In 1826 the 'William Morgan Affair' was a very big threat. Did you know that William Morgan was born in Culpeper County, and lived for a time in Richmond, before moving to Batavia NY, where he 'disappeared'? The 'anti-Masonic' party that appeared on the political scene some years later was a significant bump in the road for the Fraternity. In recent memory the serious challenges by a few zealots of the religious right gave us cause to stop and defend ourselves. Today, I believe we have a double-edged sword to fend off. Societal changes on one edge, and declining membership on the other....and they are intertwined. The threat brings with it the question...How do we make the sword sharp and gleaming once again?

Now, having just made the point that there is no panacea, I don't believe for a minute that we should drop our guard and stop doing what we do. But, I do believe that most of our concerns can be solved at the Lodge level. The first step is to work on the attitude of our lodges about how we mentor our brethren and educate those within the fraternity.

Over seven years ago, during my first term as a DEO, I stood before you and said that I believe we needed three things in order for our fraternity to survive into the latter part of the new millennium. My equation for the future of Masonry encompassed Leadership, Fellowship and Education. Well, my brethren here we are, well into our seventh year of the 21st century....and the time flew by in a heartbeat...so how do we stand?

There is within Tuckahoe's membership, the leadership needed to successfully carry us to the end of the first decade of this millennium. We also have a good number of eager young Masons who, with some mentoring and a good understanding of what they are part of, will be able to successfully lead us well into the second decade. We in Tuckahoe have always been really good at the fellowship part of the equation; and while I served as a DEO and then as your Division Provost my education team and I tried to instill a sense of urgency about bringing education to the forefront in this division. I believe we at least made some headway on that front.

But, it will take more than just the DEO's and the Lodges. Every Mason has to follow the plan. We as individual Masons across the state have to show up at division leadership conferences, officer-training classes, Thursday night classes and called communications, in larger numbers than we have in the last few years. Let's face it, 35 to 40% attendance overall from our lodges at the Division Leadership Conferences, and lodge officer training classes just doesn't cut it, my brethren. Yes, I know, I'm 'preaching to the choir now...but hear me out. I'm asking that we all make the extra effort to come to the events that are scheduled in Tuckahoe, and bring a brother with you...one who isn't here tonight. You know him....Call him, invite him, go get him if you must, but bring him to these important events. I encourage you to share in the educational opportunities that are available. Do something that can make a difference.... something simple like enrolling in the Grand Lodge Correspondence Courses...they really are very good courses, and you will become a better Mason because of your efforts.

We must educate and mentor our brethren....*all* of them, not just the new Masons. I'm sure you realize that the Grand Lodge cannot, and will not; swoop down out of the hills from the east end of Richmond to save our proverbial bacon. It doesn't work that way. It's got to happen at the grass roots level....and that's you and me...on the level. It's up to each lodge and each Mason. It will take dedication, and some creative thinking...but it won't happen if the only function of the lodge is to meet for the stated communication, or confer degrees.

Look at it this way.... this and every other Masonic Lodge is a school, where the Master and his officers are the teachers, and the members are the students. You could say that Freemasonry is the oldest and largest 'adult learning center' in the world. Education is essential to the success of every lodge. Without it, a lodge will struggle. Without it, any real change in the attitude of the membership won't have much hope.

Without it, there's no understanding of how to fulfill the needs of not only the lodge, but more importantly the needs of the members...both the older ones and the newly made Masons. As I have said before, real Masonic Education is not an exercise in scholarship – it's a voyage of personal discovery.

The wonderful genius behind Freemasonry is not just in our buildings or the fine trappings of our organization. It's not only in our great charities, or our community and family activities. It is not just our beautiful ritual, or its teachings. It's also the *practice* of Freemasonry by the brethren. Yet, one cannot practice something that one doesn't know *and* understand. Thus... in my opinion...the foundation stone of our future lies in the equation: Leadership, Fellowship, and Education. Are you part of the equation?

Douglas Messimer, PM, LEO
Tuckahoe Lodge 5-07