

MODERNISING FREEMASONRY ?

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Modernising Freemasonry is a lecture concerning modernity as part of a Masonic look into the future and an analysis of Freemasonry today.

Brethren, consider the structure of the Craft as dual concepts of freedom and service.

Freedom is never an end in itself, either for an individual or for a nation. It must be directed along paths that throw up challenges, tests of our moral fibre and stimuli to our ethical conscience as a moral fibre. It cannot be won without implicit trust between people; it demands the dismantling of superficial barriers, whether ethnic, religious, cultural or social.

We should be obliged to build bridges not walls between all peoples, that is the essence of freedom. It is also the basic fundamental of Freemasonry with new relevance, responsibility and reserve and a challenge to put those words into practice.

Service is giving of yourself to the benefit of others; generally those who are not so fortunate as ourselves. It brings its rewards of inner satisfaction and the happiness that is shared with others.

This moral dimension to the concept of freedom and service involves an adjustment to our worth and role in society. It is more than words because until words become action, they remain just words. We go from dialogue to actual implementation. Eloquent speeches, noble declarations and appeals are not enough.

There must be rational will translated into resolute, credible action. Its fulfilment is only in action, that is the operative word, not merely for selfish personal benefit for ourselves, but for the common good; it will always be relevant and urgent. It gives courage and unabated optimism, so that it may become the shared heritage of all.

An agreed resolution would indicate how it is possible to retain agreed values of Freemasonry in a modern world and whether the Craft and modernity are compatible ideas. Modernity is a crucial word for us, but it is tied up with definitions of our situation which are subject to change. I repeat action is at a premium today, it is far better than contented immobility.

This has been our strength for two hundred and seventy six years of quality of the men we select as members of our Craft and not necessarily of quantity. The structure of Freemasonry rests on a solid foundation, the careful choice of excellence of character and that selection must meet the criteria, the principles taken as a standard of our choosing in our judgment, a preference of carefully picked quality. Thus making the structure, we put on a strong foundation unassailable by "cowans and intruders".

Shakespeare said "perchance to dream"; but as far as our Craft is concerned, we must wake up to realities. So, let us put into operation that in which we believe, the real nature of Freemasonry, the genuine existence of brotherly love with absolute sincerity.

Freemasonry needs analysis, the knowledge and understanding to appreciate its aims and its intelligence; for us and to us. Then with that appreciation we will be cognizant of where our aims lie and what action is needed to put them into operation, it is virtually a reinvigoration, a mutually reinforced role.

It is a healthy sign when an organisation is alert to its weaknesses and when its members consider proposals to improve and reform its structure. Much has to be improved and the Craft needs the courage to face reality and reject old procedures, old values and old norms and superficial attitudes which have led to apathy and complacency. We can therefore welcome any effort to improve the present structure of the Craft.

We have long felt the need to find new ways to address new challenges. With the new outlook on present day Freemasonry, a new morality, brought up to date in its acceptance in accordance to the demands of a new generation, is being affirmatively received. It is not degenerate, but it is different from the old conservative ideals of a Victorian era; a more open understanding to the mores of today, the manners and customs

acceptable today; a willingness to question traditional and well established practices and, when necessary, towards altering them.

We must adapt to changing times whilst holding to unchanged values. Brethren I use the word must often as an imperative, an overwhelming influence as to be essential. Time mandates change. Modernity is a crucial word for us, but it is tied up with definitions of our situation which are subject to change.

Young talent today is different and creative. We should be obliged to be given the chance to develop a variation which is always necessary to accept diverse ways of acceptance to change; sensible change tinged with energy and youth. We must realise this, we must hand over eventually to a new outlook, it is mandatory that we recognise this. It is not a new idea.

Looking back into history there has always been changing times contemporaneous to the times in which they appear. Times do change with new and dissimilar technologies appearing. We cannot be conservative, we should be certain to accept these alterations in our beliefs.

Refusal to face up to change not only makes a person or idea as irrelevant, but an object of pity, if not ridicule. There is always a hard line attitude against change. For many people, a new thought or a new way of looking at things might challenge old ideas to which they want to hold on to, is simply more than they can bear. "Change will come whether people like it or not" (Gavin Simpson in 'West Australian January 2nd 1993)

President Carter of the U.S.A. stated "We must adapt to changing times whilst holding to unchanged values". Brethren, that is the essence of the Craft today. In the past there have been missed opportunities, so let us seek a framework to combine new energies and effectiveness over the challenge of change.

Thus we admit freemasonry's adaptability to change. Some brethren feel left out and want to become more involved. If this is to be resolved, it can surely be on the basis of more involvement of more brethren; we must give them the opportunity of offering their opinions for consideration, but under no circumstances any serious violations of accepted principles. But we must give a new voice, new influence and new involvement if we hope to retain its vitality and its relevance to a changing organization in a changing world.

Freemasonry cannot live by a borrowed vitality. Its driving power must derive from its own principles and the energy released by them channelled into a moral ascendancy as a beacon to mankind throughout the world. "The aim of a critical mass of society, and we as Freemasons are part of society, is no longer to adapt to secular values but to recover a sacred foundation for the organization of society by changing society if necessary". (Adapted from the 'Economist' 1st March 1994)

Ted Hughes, the Poet Laureate, wrote and I quote: "When wise men know how to create rituals and dogma, the energy can be contained. When the old rituals and dogma have lost credit and disintegrated and no new ones have been formed, the energy cannot be contained and so its effectiveness is destructive".

Brethren, that is the position with us today. From the eighteenth century idealism- to the pragmatism of empiric realities today, the Craft has developed globally and is continuing to make its impact felt, not by concealment but by open acknowledgement. We should be certain to be self disciplined, mature, sophisticated and imaginative, to bring about the profound changes necessary. Brethren, I am not advocating a ferment of change, but we must take notice of the inevitability of alteration.

The structure of Freemasonry, like faith itself, is based on human values, but these may also change with the times, to a metaphysical force of realities, in a world beset with dangers and difficulties, but also with a core of thinkers with wisdom towards speculations of the nature of being truth and knowledge.

The objective is to transmit these values in every Lodge Meeting where a Degree is being performed and where these values are shared. The participation and sharing in a ceremony is to enhance the knowledge of the Craft, to learn and realise what Freemasonry is, what its messages convey and what is expected of a Freemason, because education is the formation of character.

So when we look to the future of the Craft, we should be obliged to be careful not to emulate the confusion of realities that are taking place in contemporary studies today in art, music, poetry, drama, prose, literature and sculpture e.g. Picasso. To my mind these are not real, but a deliberate attempt to confuse and deviate from real existence and the actuality of the real nature of what exists or occurring.

Whether one agrees with the movements in art, literature and music, and such movements as Vorticism, Modernism, Imagism, Symbolism even Feminism, they are steps towards a new acceptance of change. Most of these movements are just a flash in the pan, temporary in their existence, but they are steps towards changes in understanding of the future towards a millenarian future.

Brethren, Freemasonry is open about its beliefs and is active in brotherhood and charity by demonstrating its leadership and capacities by good works within society at both individual and collective levels. (W.Bro B.W.Davis. Hobart Lodge of Research 62 T.C. Vol. 5 No.1)

This statement is real, explanatory and axiomatic. Further to our trust I quote: " One should learn to adapt to the times and render Masonry a progressive science to inquire into its history, teachings, principles and practice of Freemasonry. It is equally essential to disseminate knowledge by means of lectures, discussions, demonstrations and papers". (M.W.Bro H.V.Biggin Hobart Lodge of Research 62 T.C.Vol. 45 No.1 March 1992)

Tradition is the source of much that is good in life and needs no defence to protect it against the questioning spirit. Some members are seeking to demolish the orthodox version of the past without supplementing it with anything deep in values. I agree we should bring Freemasonry to a new way of thinking without destroying its basic concepts and fundamentals.

After all Brethren, Freemasonry, as we know it today, started because of its great need in the early eighteenth century. It provided the action necessary to preserve democracy at a time when the working people in Great Britain suffered the excesses of an Industrial Revolution. Realising the road would lead to eventual chaos and complete disruption, our founding fathers acted to preserve and defend democracy in England. It was more than a political venture, it was the Craft in action, a moral and ethical action, and involved men of all classes who realised the necessity of great changes to moral principles.

Brethren, this variation is needed now, before we sink into the abyss of despair. We want the discipline of the past brought up to date to suit the conditions of today and use rhetoric as an excuse for action.

Which leads to the point in question. Deep thought is needed to the challenge of today. Shall we modernise Freemasonry ? Are we satisfied with the Craft today ? We are living in a world that is changing rapidly with the advent of modern technology and we are changing our mode of living to suit these changes. Must we change Freemasonry to, suit these alterations in our lives or do we stagnate with the past ?

Recognition by our Grand Lodge today is just and acceptable to changes going on in society and is a bridge for effective communication. It expresses the recognition for suitable change and for action. It is putting necessary variations into operation with the assurance of a modern attraction for the Craft, filled with a new pride in a dedicated service.

Today, under our Grand Master, we march to a different rhythm; we are participants in a cavalcade of changing times with a rationality based on logic and common sense, plus the interaction of discussion and with the companionship that leads to debate between Freemasons. This leads to further knowledge and understanding. What is the use of the Craft unless there is a deep intelligence and insight of Freemasonry ?

Brethren, wisdom cannot be learnt. I have said this previously in another lecture (Wisdom to Contrive. Wisdom to Conduct W.A.L.O.R. 1987). It can only be acquired through experience. I believe through study and personal observation and conduct, it is better to have wisdom without knowledge than knowledge without wisdom. I am not offering you aphorisms nor pithy maxims. Knowledge is understanding and wisdom is its application.

To learn passages of the ritual by rote is one thing, but to understand the true meaning of the various passages is the primary reason for saying them and more importantly to be able to communicate the basic fundamentals and tenets of the Craft to an Initiate, a Fellow Craft and a Master Mason, as well as the brethren in general.

The success of Freemasonry is that the Candidate should be obliged to be made aware of his obligation not only to the Craft, but also his conduct and moral and ethical behaviour outside the Lodge Room. He should also be made aware of the aims of the organization, in its history, philosophy and the lessons conveyed in the three degrees.

Thus, let us lead a campaign to introduce young intelligent men into our order. This will lead to great expectations of an even greater success, to concentrate on what the Craft teaches, an insight to an intellectual

appraisal of Freemasonry and setting an example for others to emulate. To this extent realising a dream between rhetoric and performance and between ideology and reality.

We should be certain to be conscious of the vital need for change, because attitudes are not uniform in the Craft. This is a daunting prospect with a moral imperative for a measure of achievement. We must adapt to variations within the Order if it is to survive and be more responsible to the needs and concerns of Freemasonry. The need to put words into action is undeniable with a deep intelligence of the true meaning of the Craft. We must be conscious of the truth of Freemasonry, its philosophy, the spirit of the Order and its responsibility.

So, what I recommend is that you offer what you can of yourselves from your own experiences for the good of the Craft. It is, to paraphrase John F. Kennedy, not only to expect what you can get from Freemasonry, that will be valuable to society, but at least it will be some effort to do something. It is all in the spirit of giving of yourself in service.

All we need is something constructive, an idea, a plan in consideration of some change for the benefit of all. Yet there remains a stubborn segment of the people who resist change. Brethren, Freemasonry is on the move. Let us move with the times, let us change to the future with trust and common sense, let us also listen to advice from those who are capable of giving advice in their particular province with competence and understanding.

We should be certain to take practical steps to put our programme into operation by publicising our work; let the public know the extent of our actions by taking it out of the darkness. We can take a leaf out of the Shriners movement in the United States of America, with their many hospitals for crippled children. All America knows of their generous support to help these children and accepts their peculiar ways of achieving it, but it is Freemasonry in action.

We too, in Western Australia, should let the people be made aware of our homes for our senior citizens, not necessarily for Freemasons alone, but also for those in great need for a roof over their heads when available. They should be aware that there is no ingoing charge, that the rentals are moderate so that the tenants can retain their dignity, respect and independence. It should also be realised these Masonic Homes are in all the major centres of Western Australia.

The citizens of Western Australia should also be made aware of the scholarships for indigent students in all the tertiary universities; that we arrange grants annually until they graduate. We do not ask for repayment.

Now, we go outside the Craft and help many institutions financially, who are engaged in helping the community in alleviating suffering and also those who are in research to eradicate disease. These grants from the Western Australian Lodges of Freemasonry and the Board of Benevolence are manifold and are in the extent of hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.

We are proud of our efforts of service to the community, but we should not be modest in publicising our endeavours and exertions. So, let us have more action for our beliefs and let us see what action can do in our present atmosphere of change and consolidation of the Craft today. We must be activated in our endeavours after due consideration of the problems of today.

Brethren, it is not a unilateral effort, it is mandatory that we all accept the responsibility of putting our actions into operation. Further, we should be obliged to see there is a continuity of the exertion of our energies by keeping our good name and work before the public as well as before our own members with an enthusiasm that becomes widespread.

To show that Freemasonry is a dynamic organization that always gets things done within the Order, according to the tenets and fundamentals of the Craft insistently and consistently. Like justice, it must be seen to be done; it is a moral self assertion with the trust of our decision making, by using common sense in our deliberations not controversy.

We are indeed fortunate that our Grand Master has striven to bring his vision of a revigorated Freemasonry into operation. He has led sponsored and overseen major initiatives, producing a groundswell of goodwill within the Craft amid high expectations of change. But, as in the Army, the General must be wholeheartedly supported by his troops, with the knowledge of his strategy. To put his plans into action we should be obliged to be cognizant of its values, and with that understanding turn the plans into reality with victory over our exertions; it is an excitement to victorious effort.

Often, the image of Freemasonry is wanting in liveliness, punctuated by conflict- the conflict of opposing forces not prepared to come into agreement on its vital issues. Once, we had the creativity that knew no bounds. Today, we could not create renewal without encouraging excellence and innovation, but now, we hope the apathy of years is ending.

We are beginning to enter a new phase of rational change to suit contemporary thinking. We teach the principles of the Craft, not only by abstract fundamental truths, but by example. We have to create models for others to follow and emulate. I say WE, because it is the duty of all of us to join in, together, to bring our plans to fruition.

I believe that now we are constructing projects which will focus attention on the prerequisites of Freemasonry as a modern society that understands the problems into action, not merely with words, but with continuous hard work in getting things done.

Our leaders realised that words and sentiments are not enough and with quickness of decision and a sense of control, order and unity of purpose have produced practical plans for a Renaissance of the Craft, we have all been looking and waiting for; to put muscle behind high sounding rhetoric.

But I repeat, it is up to each and everyone of us to carry it into operation, to translate the principles of Freemasonry into a contemporary context of action.

Let us ever be conscious and never forget that the Craft is a commitment with its concept of motivation. Thus, we must never fall victim to inattention; there has been much soul searching and a great amount of exertion in the production of these new plans for the enlightenment of the Craft. Its purpose is to identify Freemasonry's creative institutions and the schemes put forward which will expand our Masonic horizons to the successes we can envisage.

Brethren, we have much to celebrate, I am more than pleased by the many centres of excellence that are being provided. By giving them their due recognition, we can change the mores of the Craft so that success becomes contagious. There is no alternative if we are to renew the strength of Freemasonry and the tenets of the Craft. Remember, Brethren, today is when we live!

The price of indifference is condemnation for our failures. Are we ready to give in to oblivion, after nearly three hundred years of our work in striving and perpetuating the ideals of our aims? Of course not, but this can be no excuse for allowing Freemasonry to pay the price of indifference.

Concentration on the new review would be tantamount to conceding that the Craft is well and active, accepting with complete justification that we are still a vital and virile force in the community. We have had enough of Cassandras preaching gloom and doom; our optimists have come forth with cherished and established values and the practical advantages and usages in its application and the ways of putting them into operation. The goal has been set; let us get on with the job.

I sincerely believe that those Freemasons of purpose can contribute something of value to the Craft and that value should be obliged to be of a practical nature. We can all make our contribution to the esteem and furtherance of our Order. What I deplore in our midst is the parasite and the sanctimonious sycophant. The results of our participation will be noted by its prosperity and favourable issue. The concept of Freemasonry is inclusive, but the burden needs to be shared widely and equitably.

But what new approaches to Freemasonry are available to us in a wholly different social and cultural environment? What actual models of change do we have by which to assess such a possibility? We have purpose when we are active for some goal, therefore the practical, purposeful and productive thinking involves creative ideas. Doing begins when these points are put into practice and when the means to achieve them are put into action.

Brethren, there is another side to the structure of Freemasonry that is relevant to the Craft and that is the philosophy of Freemasonry. This is no mere millennial illusion. A continuous democratic process is essential for human dignity in modern society. These days boldness must be matched with boldness in deeds or the result will be negligible; audacity is the mood that should prevail, not outmoded conservatism and not contented immobility, but earnestness in our actions and desires with fervour in our cause and constant attention to our aims.

For this evaluation of the subject of change, both sides of the discourse are essential to a constant state of change, that is the essence of philosophy and it applies particularly in these times of changing values and methods of acceptance of today's estimation of alternative patterns of thought and action.

Thus, with sombre judgment, we must avoid polemics and continue with our objectives, knowing full well that our aims have always been and will ever be the welfare of nations for universal peace through our principles of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth.

Brethren, Freemasonry is selective; we do select our initiates after due examination. Thus, on due consideration, are we elitist? Are we looking for quantity at the expense of quality? Can numbers fulfil our destiny? I suspect not. Elitism, as such, is the choicest part of society that will satisfy and carry out a shared situation, backed by a commonly held set of beliefs, traditions or attitudes. Elitism is not a dirty word, it is the epitome of striving. Is not understanding and wisdom of the Craft more desirable than lack of principles?

These are not rhetorical questions, but must be met head-on with knowledge and answers. My idea of elitism transcends ignorance, whether it be of wealth or age.

I accept and respect wisdom in all its ramifications, whatever its source, or however its humble origins. I am speaking of pragmatic values in all its sources, leading to the arts of leadership and control, to the constructive esteem of a social mode of life.

I value the man who constructs and builds, the musician and artist and all those who contribute to the welfare of society, as much as the academic. It is not sufficient to be a philosopher and a scholar only, but also to be a very practical man of the world, for we all have the capacity to the contribution of some valued asset for the progress of mankind.

This is where we should be certain to realise that knowledge without a positive application is useless for humanity. The success of philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom, is only shown by its application and the results will be noted by its prosperity and favourable issue.

Brethren, the plain white apron is the ultimate of our Order, it gains admission to be accepted as the crowning glory of Freemasonry as a strong sense of identification. to achieve this puts the man forward as a person of worth. All the other adornments to the plain white apron must be earned by giving of ourselves in service to mankind, in knowledge and understanding, by the application of ourselves in evident contributions to the satisfaction of ourselves. To earn the respect of the brethren by bearing a part in the structure of the Craft, a commitment to the values and worth of Freemasonry and give expression to our feelings.

To be a Freemason is to be a liberal humanist with a devotion to human interests, to reflect the universal condition of humanity and to have a valued judgment for universal truth, a world set of structures rationally examined in the problems we face in our time, as the right to free debate retains an eternal validity.

John Locke said on understanding :

"Know our own ideas in our own minds"

Aristotle propounds:-

"Live life forward and understand it backwards" He stated further

"The universal values that elicit respect are Truth, Goodness and Beauty"

We, as members of the Craft, know them as Wisdom, strength and Beauty.

Thus the present day Renaissance of the Craft becomes a source of new life, which is both reverential and deferential. In accepting modern day principles within Freemasonry, I feel sure the Craft will again continue to spread its influence to the welfare of all people all over the world. Freemasonry is strong, let us build on our strength. Productive thinking involves creative ideas and techniques.

Always remember Brethren, Freemasonry is not a secret society, it does not seek to conceal its existence and its objects. It has survived precisely because of its dynamism and flexibility. We, as Freemasons, are acting for some goal and to achieve this goal needs practical, productive and purposeful thinking.

Doing begins when practical thinking is put into action by established methods and when the means to achieve it are put into operation. The present day Renaissance and the humanities become a source of new life.

Brethren, say little and do much. Now is the time for action. I look forward to each and every one of you playing an important and vital role in the development of Freemasonry.

Barbonius in the sixteenth century stated:- " All things are in course of change, we also are in course of change among them".

" Omnia mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis".

I have two burning passions. One is for my research into Freemasonry, which offers me many reasons of acceptance of the Craft. The other is for my faith of Judaism which gives me my guidelines of behaviour to all mankind. These two passions form part of my identity and my purpose in life because it also gives me the justification and pleasure of continuing the wonder of being and doing. S.M.I.B..

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He was initiated into Sir Walter Scott Lodge in 1950 and joined the Lodge of Fraternity in 1959 where he was installed as Master in 1968.

He joined the Lodge of Research in 1952 and was Master in 1971.

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