

Promote Freemasonry – Diminish the Negatives

**An Address given on 4 November 2002 by
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As Freemasons, we are all very well aware of both the prominence of and the frequency with which the number “3” occurs, not only in our ceremonials, but also related to our history. The title and subject I have chosen to deliver this evening likely raises a number of questions in your minds and it would be appropriate and fitting if, in principle, they should number three.

Appropriate, because it would fit with our traditions and fitting, especially, if they relate to what I next wish to say. To ensure that they do and to negate any likely stress to yourselves and to relieve you of the burden of responsibility, I have taken the liberty of deciding for you what those questions should be.

First. What relevance, if any, has the promotion of Freemasonry in a Lodge of Research?

Second. How can it be related to a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge?

Third. Diminish the negatives! What negatives? To even imply there are any may be somewhat offensive to some of you.

There should be little doubt that a Mason who joins a Lodge of Research is first and foremost an enthusiastic and dedicated member of the Craft, who, over time, has developed a curiosity and thirst for further knowledge regarding our fraternal organization, throughout the several hundred years it has existed.

Toyota New Zealand employs a clever little slogan, which states, *All used cars have a history, ours have a future*. However, I am fearful that if we don't become more successful as promoters of the Craft, than our declining membership indicates, then I would suggest in fifty years or less, the only Research connected with us will be that done by Historians, looking at reasons why Freemasonry ceased to exist.

Mention promotion of the Craft in any form and many of us can't help but think “haven't we been down this well worn road many times before?” Certainly over the past years there have been several very thorough, well-intentioned, in-depth examinations, as to where our organization is at present, what relevance it may hold in today's society and where we envisage and hope it may go in the future. The most recent of these was the Lodge Membership and Renewal Program, an initiate of Worshipful Brother Roger Hutson of Lodge Tauhara. He toured the country explaining and promoting the concept. Many lodges, including my own, accepted it with varying degrees of success and full credit must be accorded his exemplary effort.

All of the Craft's previous attempts to promote itself focused on what Freemasonry stands for - our beliefs and ideals, our benevolent programs and behind-the-scenes acts of humanity and charity within a community. It is my firm belief that this approach is a little like trying to warm up your living room in a howling southerly with all the windows and doors open.

Brethren, over the hundreds of years that Freemasonry has existed, many rumours, myths and misconceptions have endured with it and, until quite recently, the policy seemed to be tell nothing, admit to nothing, turn the other cheek, to all criticism. To illuminate this contention, I am going to spend a few minutes relating to you my own experiences and impressions gained while growing up in a Masonic household.

My late father became a Freemason when he joined Lodge St Matthews No.355 in Masterton in 1954, at which time I was eight years old. This coincided with a period in that lodge's history when a large number of their membership had young families. They therefore had a policy, each year on a Saturday afternoon, sometime during December, to stage a Christmas Party. Santa would arrive, all the children received a gift

and there were party treats in the form of eats and drinks. Being as much of a gannet then, as now, where food is involved, this “club”, that Dad had joined, had my full approval. However, as I got older, as one unfortunately does, I became increasingly aware that my contentment was not shared by everyone.

Approaching high school age and, by now, privy to less guarded dinner table conversations between my parents, very occasionally matters related to Dad's lodge would be talked about. From these discussions, I gathered that there had been instances where workmates and neighbours appeared to display an attitude change toward my father after learning of his Masonic involvement. Several theories were advanced as to possible reasons for this. It seemed that some were due to outright ignorance and misunderstanding, as to what Freemasonry was. There was also a suspicion that some may have been turned down as possible candidates, while still others were waiting to be asked to join and were somewhat miffed that they hadn't been.

It is curious that during this period, it appeared to be a common belief of the public that you had to be asked. At the same time, many members conscious of the term “improper solicitation”, chose to interpret that as meaning - no approach should be made to any person unless they had expressed a prior interest in becoming a member. So, we had two opposing beliefs which should have resulted in a “no win” situation. Surprisingly, that was not the case.

It seemed to me that there was, definitely, a complacency, almost an arrogance, regarding the need to attract members. I guess it is perhaps understandable, considering that many Lodges had grown in numbers to the extent that new Lodges had been spawned from them. My father was very much of the old school of thought. Many times during my teenage years, I would ask various questions about the Lodge - what it was and what he did? Always, accompanied by a silly smirk, he would either avoid the question, or only partly answer it, invariably finishing by saying, “When you are old enough, if you are still interested, you can apply to join and the answers to all your questions will then be provided.” He was obviously proud to be a Freemason, but was extremely cautious as regards advertising it to the world in general.

In 1960, I began an apprenticeship as a motor mechanic. The thought of this transition into the working world, an adult world, the real world, was quite daunting. One buoyant feature was that, on the staff of forty, there was a member of Dad's lodge whom I already knew. I was interested to discover for myself if his attitude to me was anything special and if he could be pumped for information. To his great credit, he did take me under his wing and, as far as possible, looked after me, for which I am still grateful. He would occasionally say, “Be seeing your father tonight”, or, “Your father did a great job last night”, but otherwise on matters Masonic, he was of the same mould as Dad.

For my own part, I had more than one uncomfortable experience, when making new acquaintances. During conversation, when finding out about each other's backgrounds and saying where I lived and what my parents' did, I mentioned my father's Masonic involvement, after which the attitude of the other person became distant and conversation was strained. I eventually learnt that in the formative stages of any new relationship, it was not advisable to mention the subject of Freemasonry.

Considering all the preceding you may be excused for thinking “why on earth did I join?” I can honestly say it was because of my father, not, as you will assume, out of some misguided sense of duty, loyalty or to please him especially, but because of the following. Dad was not a matey type of person. He didn't go pub drinking and had never been interested in joining any of the traditional Service clubs. Having served overseas in the 2nd World War, he maintained financial membership of the R.S.A. but attended none of their functions and did not march in the Anzac Day parades. Service on local school committees was the limit of his social involvement.

Of even greater significance to me, were the circumstances of his upbringing. His parents were of the Exclusive Brethren faith. His father was a fanatic who ruled tyrannically with an almost maniacal interpretation of God's word. Punishment was regularly administered, for the slightest perceived wrong

doing, by means of a walking stick, whilst my father was forced to bend over the side of a bathtub. "I will drive the devil from within you, my boy." Little wonder that he left home at the earliest legal age and no surprise that he harboured mixed and sometimes, cynical views regarding religion. Yet he joined Freemasonry with its religious parallels.

Unfortunately and regrettably, I never heard him deliver a charge. Presumably he must have been very capable, having been Master of his Lodge, as well as Most Wise Sovereign in the Rose Croix order and I know he declined Grand Lodge nomination many times, believing the commitment was more than he wished to cope with. My mother often commented on how much more relaxed and confident he had become, attributing it to his Lodge membership. Furthermore, with my own maturity, came an awareness that all the men I knew of who belonged to a lodge, were, with few exceptions, highly thought of in the community, in their respective fields. These factors combined, convinced me that regardless of its critics, there had to be much of value in Freemasonry.

Thus, in 1982, I was initiated into Lodge Waikaremoana No 158, a decision that has led to me deriving a great deal of satisfaction and pleasure. Regrettably, I believe that in the intervening twenty years, fundamentally, little has been accomplished to reduce or subdue our detractors by way of exposing the myths and misconceptions, the rumours and the misunderstandings surrounding Masonry.

So, what are they? These range from the slightly ridiculous and mildly humorous - that "Freemasons are goat riders" - to the far more serious and damaging allegations - that "Freemasonry is a Satanic organization, into Devil worshipping and cult practices". The complete opposite view is that, "Freemasonry is a Religion but it doesn't admit Roman Catholics". We are definitely a "Secret Society", a subversive organization. That we look after our own, even if perjury is involved and, of course, what about the scandals involving us - the P2 group in Italy and the allegations of corruptions within the British Police Force by Freemasons.

Brethren, unfortunately Grand Lodge is not a machine that we can wheel out to do a job, then wind the cord back around it and push it into storage until next time it is needed. Richard Mercer.

So brethren, what to do about them? How should we respond? We could continue to do what we have been doing - ignore them and hope they fade away. However, it has been suggested, that to keep on doing what has been done in the past and expect a different result, is an early sign of insanity.

We could admit there is a problem, acknowledge that some action is required and wait for someone to do something about it. While we are waiting, we can possibly think of someone else to blame. In a workplace environment, if things aren't going well, if there's a problem, then blame the boss, blame the management. In our situation, management likely relates to the Board of General Purposes. That's it - Grand Lodge, they're to blame, they should have taken action long ago and certainly need to now.

Brethren, unfortunately Grand Lodge is not a machine that we can wheel out to do a job, then wind the cord back around it and push it into storage until next time it is needed. Grand Lodge members came from within our own ranks, were and are guys with the same thought capabilities as each of us and are only human. We elevated them to Grand Lodge position because of the ability and competence we perceived in them, although, having said that, it's likely that during the ensuing two years, I will personally demonstrate to you that ability can sometimes be more perceived than real.

What I'm saying, is that we all have a responsibility and can play a part in exposing the myths and misconceptions surrounding Freemasonry for what they are. Brethren, having met the Grand Master, Most Worshipful Brother Ian Ross, I was amazed at his enlightened out-going manner and he certainly signalled for me, that a new era of openness is here.

In my beekeeping business, I have hives on some 25 different properties. All of the landowners concerned, as you would imagine, are sympathetic towards bees. None of them however, to my knowledge, have any desire to be an apiarist. Obviously, only one gender of our population is eligible to join us and of this only a very small percentage may do so. I am sure that men within this group would come forward far more readily if the population at large were sympathetic towards us.

Accordingly, we, in Lodge Waikaremoana, have instigated a series of articles in our local *Wairoa Star*. Each one deals with a particular misconception, but I do not propose to relate the full contents of the three already published, this evening. We began, intentionally light-heartedly, by looking at how the *Goat Riding Myth* may have begun and then moved onto *Freemasonry is a Religion* and *Roman Catholics Cannot Join*. Future articles will look at the claims that we are a Secret Society, Subversive, Satan Worshipers, the Overseas Scandals and Allegations of Corruption. These articles have taken the form of stating the allegation, such as "Freemasonry is a Religion", exploring the reason why the public might think that and then stating what is the actual case.

For instance, for some years we commonly referred to our Ceremonial Room as "the Temple". It was explained that as some of our ceremonial revolves around the construction of King Solomon's Temple and as some things in the lodge room symbolise this temple, the habit innocently developed of referring to the lodge room as *the temple*, not realising the likely assumption that non-masons would adopt.

Addressing our Masters and Past Masters with the prefix Worshipful, suggests that perhaps we do worship them. It was explained that the origin of the word and its usage can be traced from the earliest of medieval times and is used when addressing a position or office held, e.g. His Worship the Mayor - obviously that dignitary is not worshipped. Referring to our members as Brethren - some religious orders do likewise. Brethren, also means brothers or members of a guild. A guild being a society for mutual aid or common objects and can relate to a medieval trade or craft. This fits our stonemason's origins perfectly.

Brethren, I'm not going to detain you by detailing the other articles. We dealt sensitively with the misconception regarding Roman Catholics joining us, explaining we do not have an exclusion policy but, we are at variance with the Vatican, which would prefer to not have it's members possibly being in a Lodge room where non-Christian faiths were present.

Brethren, as well as not being transparent and answering our critics in the past, it is my opinion that some of our slogans did us a disservice. To rebut the claim that "Freemasonry is a Secret Society" by turning it around to say "no, but it is a Society with Secrets" was, merely, a play on words. Might it not be better, after explaining that these related in former times to the modern-day equivalent of a Trade Certificate or CV and, for the benefit of non-masons, to refer to them as "Codes of Recognition".

To attempt to promote our Order by stating that Freemasonry makes "good men better", is not only pompous sounding, but begs the question "better than what? and, in whose eyes?" Our ritual book would invoke less suspicion if we called it our Ceremonial Guide. Unfortunately, the Klu Klux Klan indulge in rituals and so do the Satanists.

These articles, as published, plus, all future ones, will be made available to anyone on request. If any Lodge wishes to make use of any part or parts of them, they would be very welcome to do so.

Worshipful Master and Brethren, I hope I have given you some positive thoughts and ideas. I apologise if anything I have said has given offence, that most certainly was not my intention and I will conclude this address by leaving you to reflect on a slogan which is not original but is very relevant to our situation.

If nothing changes, then nothing changes. If we keep on doing what we have been doing, we will keep on achieving what we have been achieving.