

WHITHER ARE WE BOUND?

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Good Day, Brethren, Ladies and Guests. Today, I wish to discuss several issues in Masonry that have been of great concern to me. They are the issues of our proficiency requirements, our officer certification responsibilities and holding stated meetings in the first degree.

A theory has been advanced that if we, as a fraternity, make changes in those four (three) areas, Masonry will once again flourish and grow. It has been suggested that we have become too involved in rote learning and painstaking recitations of archaic verbiage at the expense of fellowship and fraternal intercourse.

It seems to me that we have identified a symptom while completely ignoring the disease. We, as a fraternity, have identified an easy scapegoat for our ills and some of us wish to sacrifice on the altar of expediency. I don't believe that the ritual or requirements have failed us. As a great philosopher and student of human nature once observed, "I have seen the enemy and he is us." Yes, Pogo was very perceptive and I believe we need to take his statement to heart. I have a strong suspicion that we as a fraternity must discover our sense of purpose, otherwise we will fade away as an organization. We must stop looking for something to blame and look directly back at ourselves as the agents of our eventual demise.

We have already made some changes to the ritual, such as the shortened first degree lecture and short form closing. It was believed that if we make things easier and shorter, the floodgates would open and men would be knocking down the doors to become members and lodge officers. Well, I don't know about you, but I have not seen a noticeable increase or renewed interest because of these changes. (And) I will venture my own hypothesis that further changes will have little effect. The issue is not our requirements; the real problem is our lack of purpose. I want to ask you this question: "Whither are we bound?" Do any of you know the answer?

The Grand Lodge of California is quite alarmed at the decrease in members and the inability of lodges to attract and retain new members. As a result, it has been necessary to merge several weak lodges into one supposedly strong lodge. I submit to you that if you consolidate three weak lodges, you will eventually have three extinct lodges. Why? Because we have forgotten our sense of purpose. What has been the purpose of Free Masonry? To take good men and, through our ritual and teachings, improve them as human beings.

One of the greatest misfortunes for Free Masonry was the sudden influx of new members into the fraternity at (the) end of World War II. We saw the greatest increase from 1946 to 1960. As a result, lodges literally sprang up overnight and these lodges had upwards of five candidates

a night taking their degrees. We became complacent and somewhat cavalier in our attitudes, because the candidates and money kept pouring in and it appeared there would be no end. As a result, we allowed ourselves to spend as if there was no tomorrow. Our purpose to educate and improve men through Masonry was somehow lost in our frenzy to crank out degrees and feed our growing financial appetites. There was little time to do anything else, or so we thought.

Well Brethren, it is time to face reality. The golden goose is dying. The good old days are no more. We now have lodges with dwindling memberships and few participants. We have ever increasing financial demands on shrinking resources. Support systems were never instituted to ensure that men seeking admission would grow and develop and, through their masonic affiliation, attract men of similar upstanding character. We furnished the working tools but forgot to provide the necessary instruction. Many men entered our society to rediscover the fraternalism that they had experienced in the military and came away with a hollow feeling.

Another excuse I've heard is that today's society has little interest in joining organizations. Look around and you will notice people joining local planning groups and local community councils. People join these groups because they have definable goals and useful functions to fulfill. They know whither they are bound. Yet, there are many service clubs and fraternal organizations in the same dire straits as Masonry. These groups have less stringent requirements than our Fraternity, however, they too are seeing a decline in membership. Why? I believe that they, too, have lost their purpose for existing. People need a reason to belong and they will live up to any requirements as long as they perceive an affinity to the group and a sense of purpose.

What, then, is our purpose as Masons? I believe we need to look back to our ritual to find those answers. Let's look at our first principle tenet: brotherly love. What, exactly, does that mean? We all should be able to remember the catechism, but have we explored the meaning? I will give you my speculative thoughts on the subject. Brotherly love is walking into a lodge full of strangers and leaving with hand shakers elbow. Do you make it a point to find out who the stranger is in your midst? When you sign a petition or conduct an investigation, are you at the lodge to witness that new Brother's degree: Do you personally go out of your way to greet everyone in your lodge?

When a candidate is assigned a coach, is he also encouraged to participate in lodge activities? He may not be able to attend stated meetings, however he can still participate in the many social activities associated with the lodge. Does your lodge have a support system of Masonic education in place to properly indoctrinate the new Brother in the ways of Masonic lore? Do you teach the meaning and not just the words of the proficiency to the aspiring Mason? You cannot set a man to work without the proper instruction in the craft, nor could you expect an entered apprentice to make intelligent and informed decisions about his lodge when he is attempting to develop himself as a Mason. Many otherwise enthusiastic candidates are lost because we didn't

take the time to nurture, develop and properly educate them. May time, even though we give our best efforts, some candidates are lost. We must not bemoan the fact that they chose to go no further. Some men decide that this was not what they were seeking; we should wish them well on their journey to enlightenment. Our goal should be to attract men of good character who sense with their hearts the benefits and beauties of Free Masonry and are willing to make the effort to develop themselves. We cannot attract everyone to our Fraternity, nor should we. We will not lose anyone truly interested in Free Masonry, as long as we care and will aid and support one another.

What activities does your Lodge involve itself in to extend brotherly love outside your walls? Does your Lodge recognize civic leaders, public safety personnel or public school official beyond normal Grand Lodge Decrees? Has your membership taken it upon themselves to be of service to the community through such projects as graffiti paint outs and Special Olympics? Are Lodge members volunteering their time to assist in libraries, schools and public safety programs? More often than not, most people don't even realize that we exist. Some Brothers believe that it is better to remain anonymous than to make a noise and receive some form of negative response. Look around Brothers! It's too late. There are already anti-masonic groups dedicated to discrediting us. We must take the initiative of informing the vast majority of good citizens that we are and upstanding, vital, caring, community minded organization, willing to stand up and be counted.

Which brings me to another important tenet: relief. We are in a recession that has all the earmarking of a full blown depression. Many of our brothers are experiencing financial hardships reminiscent of the 1930's. What are we as a Fraternity doing to relieve their distress(es)? There was a time when Masonry actively networked on its members' behalf. The Masonic Service Bureau was originally designed to act as a job bank for unemployed Brethren. Today, the Service Bureau is relegated to assisting distressed Brethren who may be residing in San Diego County but is not equipped to assist Masons from our own jurisdiction. We must re-examine this county-wide Masonic organization and determine if it can be restructured to assist our members.

We seriously need to return to these two particular tenets, rediscover their meaning and begin to reapply them in our masonic lives. Finally, we must remind ourselves of the tenet, truth. Let's be true to our rituals, teachings and, most of all, to ourselves. Burying our heads in the sand or devising quick-fix solutions will not reverse the current decline. We did not get to this state overnight, and it will take painstaking, dedicated effort to return our Fraternity to a healthy and vibrant state. Reducing our lessons and rituals will not save us as a Fraternity. Rediscovering them and putting them into application will return us to a greatness we once knew. Scores of card-carrying dues payers will not be our salvation. A dedicated corps of Masonically educated men applying the teachings of our gentle craft will carry us well into the 21st Century. Then we will know whither we are bound and what we will discover when our journey is completed.