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General Systems Theory and Lodge Management

by Owen M. McKinney, MPS

Freemasonry has been facing many problems in recent years. Some of them are prior existing, but possibly at a greater extent, such as loss of membership. Others like computer games, the internet, satellite television, video tapes, etc. are certainly recent creations. These may be new, but they are but a part of a history of competing activities to keep someone from joining a lodge, or participating beyond a cursory effort. The problem with these current activities is not that they exist, but that so many are available all the time!

Freemasonry certainly recognizes that it has problems, and that they must be faced. Most Masters and Grand Masters in recent years have acknowledged this by developing agendas to focus their efforts during their terms to address these problems. What this paper intends to do is suggest an approach to planning generally lacking in comprehensiveness and effectiveness.

What this paper intends to do is introduce the reader to the notions of the General Systems Theory and Systems Sciences. The ideas contained in General Systems Theory, Living Systems, and Systems Sciences can aid Freemasonry in weathering these "storms." These ideas have been effectively introduced into various sciences, and even into management and leadership styles.

Ludwig von Bertalanffy developed the basic notions of systems theory, and gave it a name. Bertalanffy developed his ideas over the first half of this century. His ideas were developed before cybernetics, systems engineering, and the internet. Though the word "system," itself, was not emphasized, the history of his concepts include many illustrious names.

"As 'natural philosophy,' we may trace it back to Leibnitz, to Nicholas of Cusa with coincidence of opposites; to the mystic medicine of Paracelsus; the Vico's and Ibn-Khaldun's vision of history as a sequence of cultural entities or 'systems,'; to the dialectic of Marx and Hegel, to mention but a few names from a rich panoply of thinkers" (Bertalanffy, 1968, 11). In 1924 Kohler's notions of "physical gestalten" pointed towards a general systems theory, but didn't develop his notions to fully address the generality of it (Kohler, 1924). Three years later, though, Kohler did raise the idea of a systems theory, but it still wasn't fully developed (Kohler, 1927, 112).

It wasn't until A. J. Lotka's classic, *Elements of Physical Biology*, which was printed in 1925, that the notion of systems theory blossomed into a complete concept. The field of systems sciences is indebted to him for his basic formulations. Lotka did, indeed, originate a general concept of systems. Unfortunately, being a statistician, his interest lied in population problems. His concepts did not fully develop in application.

From this point on, various personalities added to this developing field of study. Whitehead's notion of "organic mechanism" (1925), Cannon's work in homeostasis (1929 & 1932), the organismic conception of Claude Bernard, who was a 19th Century French physiologist, and Bertalanffy's own developing ideas from as early as the 1920s.

Originally systems theory attempted "99 scientific interpretation and theory where previously there was none, and higher generality than that in the special sciences" (Bertalanffy, 1968, 4). "Classical" system theory aims to state principles which apply to systems in general or defined subclasses (e.g. closed and open systems), to provide techniques for their investigation and description, and to apply these to concrete cases" (Bertalanffy, 1968, 19).

General Systems thinking "precedes the disciplinary studies-and sometimes bypasses them, or integrates them" (Weinberg, 1975, x). "General systems theory offers a vocabulary of both terms and concepts applicable to systems of all types, with the terms and concepts drawn from many different ones" (Sutherland, 1973, 19).

Out of this general system developed many subsystems. The International Society for the Systems Sciences, which traces its roots back to Bertalanffy, has many special interest groups within its overall structure to study various subsystems. Some of the areas include Duality

Theory, Chaos Theory, Hierarchy Theory, Legal and Political Systems, Systems Theory in Evolution and Emergence, Informatics and Communication Systems, Business/Industrial Systems Application, Systems Studies of Climatic Change, Systems Psychology and Psychiatry, Medical and Health Systems, Systems Design in Education, Systems Approaches to Intelligence, and many more.

There's even a Living Systems Theory, which is the brain-child of James Grier Miller (1978), former president of the University of Louisville. During Miller's tenure, the University of Louisville had a Systems Science Institute for graduate study in the field. Unfortunately, it no longer exists. Many useful studies (theses and dissertations) were forthcoming from this program in a wide range of applications.

Living Systems considers similarities among various levels of systems. Types of living systems have been categorized with the following terms from smallest to largest: the cell, the organ, the organism, the group, the organization, society, and the supra-national system. At each hierarchical level, there are many similarities, and it's within living systems theory that these similarities are identified, and compared.

These similarities include ideas of how energy is brought into the system, how waste is removed, feedback, information transmittal and decoding, growth, and many, many more. The basic idea here is that a particular function or process is in the system at each level. For example, at the national level, food is transported to areas where people need it by railroads, boats, and trucks along highways and streets.

At the organism level, food is moved through the body by blood being moved through a system of veins and arteries. At each level, there are multiple variables of each of 19 matter-energy and information processing subsystems, normal and pathological states of these variables, and practical indicators for measuring changes in them (Miller, 1978).

Of particular note for this paper is the organization level. This is because both the lodge and the Grand Lodge would be classified as organizations on the hierarchical scale. They are significantly different in size, but their nature is organizational.

Over the past decade, or so, we have been witnessing a similarity in concepts in both business and science. It seems that the lines of demarcation no longer segregate as they once did. Scientist and businessmen are using a surprisingly similar vocabulary to describe events taking place in their fields. New ways of thinking about organizations have been emerging. "This relationship between business and science goes back many years.

Although in many ways Newtonian thinking unwittingly inspired organizational design, science was brought deliberately into management theory and credited with giving it more validity in the era of 'scientific management' in the early years of this century. Frederick Taylor, Frank Gilbreth, and hosts of their followers led the efforts to engineer work, creating time-motion studies for efficiencies and breaking work into discrete task that could be done by most untrained workers.

Though we may have left behind some of the rigid, fragmented structures created during that time, we have not in any way abandoned science as the source of most of our operating principles. Planning, measurement, motivation theory, organizational design—each of these and more bears the recognizable influence of science" (Wheatley, 1994, 140).

"For many years, the prevailing maxim of management stated: 'Management is getting work done through others.' The important thing was the work; the 'others' were nuisances that needed to be managed into conformity and predictability. Managers have recently been urged to notice that they have people working for them. They have been advised that work gets done by humans like themselves, each with strong desires for recognition and connectedness. The more they (we) feel part of the organization, the more work gets done" (Wheatley, 1994, 144).

Leadership skills have also taken on a relational slant. Leaders are being encouraged to include stakeholders, to evoke fellowship, to empower others. Employees are being given more opportunities to manage themselves, school administrators try to empower teachers to be more effective, teachers try to empower the student to become all that he or she can become, and the list goes on.

In days past, managers focused on the tasks that had to be accomplished. People were considered as problems to be overcome in order to complete the job. Today's leadership is focusing on the relationships. "Leadership is always dependent on the context, but the context is established by the relationships we value. We cannot hope to influence any situations without respect for the complex network of people who contribute to our organizations" (Wheatley, 1994, 144-45).

As Margaret Wheatley (1994, 146) wrote, "everywhere in nature, order is maintained in the midst of change because autonomy exists at local levels. Sub-units absorb change, responding, adapting. What emerges from this constant flux is that wonderful state of global stability. Rather than developing pockets of stability and incrementally building them into a stable organization, nature creates ebbs and flows of movement at all levels.

These movements merge into a whole that can resist most of the demands for change at the global level because the system has built into it so much internal motion. The motion of these systems is kept in harmony. by a force we are just beginning to appreciate: the capacity for self-reference. Instead of whirling off in different directions, each part of the system must remain consistent with itself and with all other parts of the system as it changes."

"More than any other science principle I've encountered," wrote Wheatley (1994, 146), self-reference strikes me as the most important. It conjures up such a different view of management and promises solutions to so many of the dilemmas that plague us: control, motivation, ethics, values, change. Perhaps self-reference is the best tool for leaving behind the clocklike world of Newton. If management practice is ever to be simplified into one unifying principle, I believe it will be found in self-reference."

Banathy (1992) noted several changes that occurs in planning, management, and organization when systems are considered rather than traditional methods. Taylor's scientific method of management was effective when organizations were considered to be closed systems that produced items. Systems thinking allows one to consider the organization as an open system with a multiplicity of relationships in which the goal is managing complexity.

"Inspired by the CartesianNewtonian scientific world view, disciplined inquiry during the last three hundred years has sought understanding by taking things apart, seeking the 'ultimate part,' and groping to see or reconstruct the whole by viewing the characteristics of its parts. This reductionist orientation was not able to grasp 'wholeness,' which emerges from the interaction of the parts, where the part gets its meaning from the whole and by its interaction with all other components of the whole.

Thus, today we realize that the reductionist method of analysis had to be complemented with synthesis and with expansionism, aimed at understanding larger and larger wholes in which our systems of interest are embedded" (Banathy, 1992, 5). "The unidirectional cause and-effect thinking-a key marker of traditional science-is defeated in the face of our understanding of the S counter-intuitive' nature of complex, dynamic systems.

These systems-such as human activity systems-have too many interactive variables to be treated with a single linear causational notion. We know now that in such systems the dynamics of multiple, mutual, and recursive causation operate" (Banathy, 1992,6).

"Both the closed- and open-systems approaches are utilized in modern organization theory and practice. However, in to days dramatically changing environment an open-systems approach is becoming much more relevant and meaningful. The key for viewing organizations as open systems is the recognition of the external environment as a source of significant input. In systems terminology, the boundaries of the organization are permeable to the external environment (social, legal, technical, economic, and political)" (Luthans, 1989, 577).

Masonic management is steeped in tradition from the ritual, and from the long apprenticeship one must serve before becoming a real decision-maker within the lodge. Changes are slow to come about because of the bylaws and constitution, tradition of doing things in a particular way, the ever vocal sideline of Past Masters, a sometimes too evident lack of vision, and lodge politics.

The Fellowcraft Degree admonishes us to study the Trivium (Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic) and Quadrivium (Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy). Together they make up the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences. It is the premise of this paper that our Masonic leadership should be studying systems, too.

Systems thinking would allow them to consider the whole organization. It would allow them to consider the longrange effects of the lodge's current actions. Likewise, it would allow longrange planning for the good health and survival of the lodge. It would allow the lodge to see its relationship to the community it functions in. It would allow the lodge to understand that the relationship with the community is not one, but many, many different relationships that are ever changing.

Systems thinking would allow the lodge to understand that when it does do something, it is similarly not doing something that may be just as important. Systems thinking would allow the lodge leaders to become proactive in planning, rather than reactive. Systems thinking would allow

the leaders to prioritize the lodge's objectives from a totality perspective rather than a skewed one. Personal agendas would become hard pressed to exist within a systems thinking lodge.

A systems thinking lodge would not forget about its brethren who have gone to that house, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Nor would it forget its widows on "family night." It would not forget that special relationship between fathers and sons. It would not forget the sacrifices so many Masons have made in defending this great nation. It would actually be able to develop a real budget for the year, rather than simply reacting to the bills that come before the lodge.

The Master of a systems thinking lodge would not dare start his year as Master without a complete, detailed agenda for the entire year. A systems thinking lodge would be aware of its need for good publicity in the community. It would be visiting its members in the hospitals, nursing homes, and those confined at home for various reasons. Even beyond that, it would check on members who haven't been coming regularly. The lodge might be able to help the brother be able to come to lodge.

The systems lodge would have an educational program for the year, as well as, a leadership development program for those going through the chairs and those contemplating such a move. It would have a program to thank its members who go above and beyond the call of duty. It would have a communications system (newsletter, telephone calls, etc.) to keep the membership abreast of lodge activities.

It would not be within the purview of a short paper, as this is, to identify all the elements that would make up a systems thinking lodge. Though many examples were provided, they were provided to give a sense of what systems thinking can do for a lodge rather than make a checklist of a complete systems thinking lodge.

None-the-less, if a lodge developed . Systems thinking, it would have ideas of how to become more meaningful and valuable to its members. Membership would not be declining, but increasing! The lodge would be fulfilling needs that would make the membership want to come back each time the lodge had a meeting or activity. The member would value his membership.

In fact, the family would value the membership. This would enhance overall membership levels in time because the children of such members would be coming to Masonry and Masonic-related groups for their own memberships. Likewise, membership would be enhanced because the current membership would be so enthusiastic it would begin to truly be a living example of Masonry to its friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

From this paper one might get the impression that systems thinking and systems science are panaceas for all the ills facing Freemasonry today. It can be to the degree that it is implemented and maintained. Systems thinking is not an end to be reached, but an on-going process. It is a premise of this paper that Freemasonry would be enhanced to the degree systems thinking is applied to it. Not only do these ideas apply to the lodge, but they also apply to the Grand Lodge

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