

ACACIA LODGE: GRAND LODGE APPRECIATION NIGHT

THE TIMELESS VITALITY OF MASONRY

*(This paper is also published on my blog so that readers may comment on it.
www.johnforster79.blogspot.com.)*

Introduction:

It is a great honour to be asked to speak tonight. Acacia Lodge is #561. Inaugurated one month after #560, St Andrew's lodge, the one with which I am most closely associated (but in my current role I am a proud, founding member of Luxor Daylight lodge #714)

Your Lodge is named after the Acacia tree, about which I could speak at some length. Acacia is a hard, long-lasting wood. It is said, probably mythically, that door posts made of Acacia wood have sprouted shoots. Symbolically, therefore it is associated with eternal life. Burned, its smoke has been used as incense in religious rites & ceremonies. It is mentioned in the Old Testament as the burning bush, Noah's Ark and the Ark of the Covenant. Medicinally, its chemicals have (and still are) used as psychotropic medicines (as for example antidepressants and a cure for premature ejaculation).

One of the reasons I'm proud is that I have been privileged to know four past DDGMs from Acacia. **R.W.Bro Colin Lillico**, whose official visit to Mississippi Lodge was the first Masonic meeting I attended in Canada, **R.W.Bro Gerry MacDonald** who was a great friend, choirmaster and caregiver to his wife, **R.W.Bro Ab Sewell**, one of the great all time Masonic characters. And **R.W.Bro Barry Burchill**. I was one of his WMS in 2006-7 and privileged to serve with him on the Long Range Planning Committee last year.

Tonight I want to speak to you about four themes:

1. The relative role of Grand Lodge, the District and the Lodge in planning for the future
2. The Timeless Vitality of Masonry
3. How we model that vitality, and
4. A major impediment to our future health

Grand Lodge, which we honour tonight, provides leadership, administration and resources. Its districts provide the same. But, each Lodge has to decide for itself how it practices masonry. (CF St Andrews and Luxor)

The VISION of Grand lodge is:

To ensure the timeless vitality of Freemasonry in Ontario

The MISSION of Grand lodge is as follows

“Grand Lodge will achieve its vision by providing effective and sustainable leadership to Ontario's Masonic community and preserving the timeless Masonic Initiatory system as a framework for all good men to transform their lives through the ancient and enduring tenets of brotherly love, relief and truth”

What is “Timeless Vitality”?

It is that part of Freemasonry which has persisted, virtually unchanged for centuries, that does so despite changes in the “model” of freemasonry and will do so “until time shall be no more”. It is, in effect, the ritual. The messages that our ritual conveys are timeless. We impart these to the best of our ability.

We do so well or we fail.

The “model” of freemasonry has changed radically over the centuries, and is still doing so. Originally Masons met in taverns -- the Cheshire Cheese Tavern, the Apple-Tree Tavern, the Crown Ale-House near Drury Lane, the Goose and Gridiron in St. Paul's Churchyard, and the Rummer and Grapes Tavern in Westminster.¹

Then these lodges became the original members of the Grand Lodge of England. Time passes and the model changes. Radically. We've had lodges in many countries and places, on the battlefield, in schoolrooms and taverns and in purpose built premises. We in this room don't remember these models. We do remember (some of us) belonging to lodges of over 400 members, meeting on Metcalf Street in Ottawa. Of ladies nights in the Chateau Laurier with close to 600 guests. And a District of 30 Lodges with every one of them having a ladies night!

Our model changes because men change, times change, customs change. But the message and Meaning of Masonry does not change. We can only speculate on how the model will change: it helps if we look at who will be the future mason.

A recent issue of the Masonic Bulletin of the Grand Lodge of BC and Yukon² quotes from a study of 75 million “Millennials”, people born after 1981, their needs, expectations and values. Some of these are:

- They are looking for leaders with honesty and integrity
- They are looking for great role models
- They have new ideas and opinion
- They do not want their ideas to be ignored
- They want learning opportunities
- They love trying new things
- They look for growth and development
- They ask that their ideas be treated with respect
- They are idealistic.
- They are familiar with the concept of multitasking
- They are familiar with, and comfortable with, networking over vast distances, by electronic means
- They understand and embrace diversity
- They seek to work in a friendly environment and to work with friends
- They are busy
- They are vitally interested in history, symbolism, spirituality and learning how to use methods of self improvement (note, for example, the enormous number of young people who filled auditoria throughout Canada on the recent visit of the Dalai Lama)
- They look for growth, strong relationships, and endless opportunities to help others

To quote R.W.Bro. Allan Casalou, Assistant Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of California “New Millennials are a perfect fit for Masonry”

¹ <http://www.grandlodge-england.org/>

² “A new generation” R.W.Bro. Brian Tuckey, SGW, Masonic Bulletin. Grand Lodge of BC and Yukon. Vol. 71. No.5 January 2008

Do we, many of us Masons of the 40s, and 50s, want to return to the model we used then? Probably yes! Do we want to go back to First World War models, Victorian models or to the models used in the Goose and Gridiron? Probably not.

Do the Masons initiated in our new 21st Century wish to go back. Emphatically not! (And couldn't find the time even if they did!)

No, we will move on and the model we will have in the 2020s will be different. Most of us older types will be gone. The model will have changed.

Time passes: 12 months every year. Our model today is but a faint echo of the 1950s and 60s.

What are the obstacles to the attainment of our vision?

Years ago I was honoured to be the guest speaker at a high school commencement. I based my address on three major tasks that the next generation must overcome. They were:

- Differences in wealth – the gap between the top 20% of a countries people and the bottom 20%
- Tariff barriers on food, and,
- The Us vs Them mentality

Rudyard Kipling, a famous Mason who won the Nobel Prize for literature once wrote:

All good people agree

And all good people say,

All nice people, like Us, are We

And everyone else is They³

For many years, I practiced as a General Practitioner. I referred to myself however as a Family Physician and am a Fellow of the College of Family Physicians of Canada. The change in name was started in the 1960s when the then College of GPs decided that it wanted to distinguish itself from what they considered lesser mortals

I am a generalist: I do not have deep knowledge of a narrow subject: I have a shallow knowledge of a wide one. I must include knowledge not only of health and illness and the diseases and conditions which affect it or the medicines that might cure it but an appreciation of humanity, of people and their relationships with their world, their loves and fears and hopes and sorrows: their marriages and divorces, the things that make them sad, or mad or glad.

It is crucial that we have both sorts of doctors, generalists and specialists. However we have always had difficulty getting along. We put each other down and tell jokes about each other. We belong to different Colleges, we do not have dinners together or play in the same golf club. We have different pay scales and each believes the other is grossly overpaid!

And yet we need each other. In fact depend upon each other.

Let's think about how humans divide themselves into we and they. It's not hard to think of examples. In fact, my Aunts and Uncles and parents turned this into a sport. On a Sunday evening they would sit

³ Rudyard Kipling, We and They

in the front room of our house and put everyone who passed into a “slot”. They could classify endlessly:

Which school they went to
Which church, or chapel
Whether they drank
Whether they did so in a club or a pub. Or at home!!
Whether they played golf on the top course (the rich) or the bottom (the not so rich)
Whether they played football with a round ball or an oval ball
Conservative supporters
Labour supporters
People born in our village / people not
People they knew (almost all of them) / people they didn’t know

My mother would refer to many people as “one of them!”

They had more ways of classifying the human race than Carter had little liver pills.

We still do this.

On a wider scale, we have

Liberals and Conservatives
Republicans and Democrats
Westerners and Easterners
City folk & Country folk
Maple Leaf supporters and Senator supporters (& on and on...)
Newfies and non Newfies (In Newfoundland, they have CFAs, St John’s folk and those from “around the Bay” or from the other side of the causeway)
In England, they still make great deal about the round ball and the oval ball

More seriously, we have Blacks and Whites
Protestant and Catholics
Jews and Gentiles
Muslims and Hindus
Sunnis and Shi

Blood is spilled every day because of some of these differences.
What is it with us??

Why do we do this?

Well, it turns out there is a reason. It is “hard wired” in us. Studies in the first year of life show parts of the brain devoted to spotting differences and being attracted or repulsed in certain ways. We have been on this Earth for millions of years. It was vital that we avoided things that were different from us: indeed that we destroyed them if we could and protected ourselves if we couldn’t.

“Civilization”, so called, is a very recent development. If human activity was a 24-hour day it is only in the last two minutes that we have become civilized. Our hard wiring is still very much in place and it will take a long time to remove it.

We are getting better at it however (despite much evidence to the contrary) and we now know, even if we don’t practice it, that tolerance is a crucially important human attribute.

So what is it with District 1 and District 2??

I came into Masonry in Ottawa when there was only one district. Two years after, I affiliated with St. Andrew's lodge; my sponsor, R.W.Bro. Bob Rowsome, became the last DDGM of Ottawa District. From then on we became two districts. Later I was a founding member of a new lodge, Luxor Daylight Lodge. It was in District 2 and they chose me as their candidate for DDGM . I began for the first time in thirty years to travel in District 2.

Now I had heard that District 2 Masons were a lesser breed of men. They had grown horns, they didn't play golf, or when they did, couldn't hit the ball straight. They had "problems", they couldn't attract candidates, they couldn't fill their line offices and they didn't visit each other.

I didn't see a shred of evidence of any of this. It was all (as we say in the Old Country), "bullshit"

The Masons of District 2 are the same as those in any other District. Masonic activity in OD2 is healthy and full of vitality

On another occasion, I am going to be speaking of our Masonic future: Where are we going as Masons? What is Masonry going to be like in 20 years. Or even 10 years.

These are crucial questions. If we don't have a vision of where we are going we will have a hard time getting there. And when we do get there, we won't recognize the place! Each Lodge must decide, for itself, where it came from, what it does, and where it is going.

This, however, is certain. We will not get there (to a happy, healthy future) if there are divisions among us. We share jurisdiction in the Valley of Ottawa and the City of Ottawa with lodges and Masons that many of you don't know well. And they don't know you. I charge you this. Get to know them. Visit them. Exchange ideas with them. Join in as many activities as you can with them. This year I have instigated a travelling gavel commemorating my sponsor into Canadian Masonry, R.W.Bro Robert Rowsome, the last DDGM of the combined Ottawa District. Try to ensure that your lodge receives and then presents the Robert Rowsome travelling gavel. Or just go and visit your brethren in the other district

You'll find an enrichment of your Masonic experience and life. Masonry will be the stronger for it. You will be the stronger for it. And you will encounter fewer divisions outside of Masonry and they will trouble you less

And, most importantly, you will come to appreciate the crucial importance of planning for a future that will inevitably, radically and rapidly change.