

Masonry in the 21st Century

An address given at Cobden Lodge on March 8, 2011
R.W.Bro. John Forster, District Deputy Grand Master, Ottawa District 2

As I near the end of my term, I am pulling together the various basic ideas I have tried to outline over the last eight months and integrating them with observations and conclusions I've reached during my term.

Our craft is healthy. The basic tenets and principles of Masonry are still there and the landmarks are well preserved. The craft however is going to need constant nurturing. This has always been so although in the 20th Century we did enjoy a long period of stability. We spent a lot of time emphasizing the permanence of Masonry but forgot that, despite that permanence, our members and society were changing: at the end of the century they were changing radically. And rapidly.

The new Millennium sees a far different society. We are more diverse, we live in a time of easy and rapid communication, and we have a global perspective. Economically we are well off but most households now rely on two incomes. The role of women in society is changed greatly. The role of men is also vastly different. No longer are they considered the sole breadwinner but must share equally in the household tasks of meal preparation and child rearing. The relationship between rulers and the ruled has also changed. No longer do we meekly accept rules and obey them unthinkingly and automatically.

Masonry still, however, has a solid base: a core commitment to the practice of brotherly love, relief and truth, providing for the young initiate the only place in society where his moral and spiritual centre can be sought after in a place of safety and comfort. This timeless vitality derives from that solid base. Our task, and the task of our younger brethren, is to preserve it, the timeless vitality, and transmit it to future generations. This is vital. This world needs the principles of Masonry. It has never needed them more!

To do this, however we are going to have to modernize our structure and our operations while maintaining our timeless vitality. And that won't be easy. But I am convinced we can do it. I believe that successful lodges are already doing it. They educate, mentor, promote and empower their young members allowing their emergence as leaders and governors.

This same process of course is occurring in society at large. Young men and young women are demanding to have a say in governance. They will not be ruled by their elders: trying to make them do so results in conflict. It has always been so except that in the 20th Century the young were slaughtered in their millions and so simply weren't there to change the status quo.

Change in Masonry however, must take place at the Lodge level. It won't happen just because Grand Lodge officers speak about it. Only a lodge can change the face of Masonry at the local and community level.

That's why each lodge must look forward. It must set out its vision for how it will look in ten years time. The vision must be derived and shared by all lodge members. Yes, by all means celebrate a 100th or a 150th anniversary, but don't dwell on that more than you need to. As important as it is to you, it is not the most important thing that you do. Your younger brethren are much less interested in the past than you are. They may simply not care.

Your activities must include long range planning as a high priority. They must include active and specific plans for how you intend to reach your vision and detailed policies for the nurturing and development and empowerment of your future leaders. Don't leave it to chance.

If you do not do this, they will do it for you. If you're lucky! If you aren't, they will leave. If that happens, you are doomed: with a significant percentage of your members in their 80s, your future is not a long one.

I'm going to end on an optimistic note. My vision is that Masonry will level off shortly before growing again. That the average age of a Mason will be about 45-50. He will attend his lodge every month and visit other lodges several times a year. He will enjoy a meeting lasting 1½ to 2 hours and enjoy a good meal in the fellowship of his friends. 90% of members of a lodge will attend meetings. He will pay \$500 a year for his masonry. Officers will attend a formal practice every month. The lodge will sponsor activities of interest to his whole family, some of who will be part of the planning structure for those events. There will be more community events sponsored by the lodge. There will be fewer lodges in a combined District.

To quote Tennyson:

*Tho' much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.* Tennyson ULYsses