

Grand Oration - 2005  
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The sky is falling! The sky is falling! Our membership is declining! We're doomed!

Why has membership declined? Are we obsolete and out of touch with the modern world as some would have us believe? Could it be that through some revelation we discover those truths that have endured for thousands of years, the very tenants of Masonry, are now in doubt or with no appeal? Are the traditions and practices that defined much of who and what we are so antiquated they are without value? And is the loss of fraternal membership confined to Masonry?

Is the sky really falling? Are we really doomed? Well, perhaps not. Or might it be that changes in culture and social climate, the endeavor to be inoffensive toward everyone and politically correct has distorted the lens through which we look? Whatever the reason, the quest for membership has taken on a life of its own and has been the impetus for many profound changes we have seen in our fraternity.

After a decline during the depression, U.S. Masonic membership began to rise in the World War II years hitting its zenith in 1959 with over 4 million members. From that year on, U.S. membership has declined to about 1.5 million. In recent years, the interest in membership has run the gamut from ambivalence to near panic with dire predictions that Masonry is headed for the dustbin of history.

Come with me, if you will, for a walk through recent history to revisit the issue of membership. It will be a brief journey so you need not pack your bags. For those of you born long after my entrance into the world, some of this may be difficult to fathom. For those who share my longevity of over thirteen lustrums, perhaps you have some similar recollections.

To set the stage for our departure, I was born near the end of the Great Depression in a little farm town in Iowa. I well remember Pear Harbor and World War II, Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and those who followed. I took my Blue Lodge degrees and the York Rite in Indiana while a senior at Purdue University before embarking on my career as a Naval Aviator. I note this for two reasons. It has given me a perspective on Masonry covering several jurisdictions and four generations and I have lived through dramatic changes in our fraternity.

Masons and Masonry were different then. There was virtually no advertising or fanfare and actively recruiting new members was unheard of. Indeed, the very concept would have been considered heresy. One might see a Masonic ring or lapel pin but you had to know what to look for. I had discovered that men held in high esteem, respected for their character and integrity were, in many cases, Masons. Within their community they were often men of influence. Long before submitting my petition I wondered if these men were that way before becoming Masons or had Masonry made them that way. I began to learn the answer when interviewed by the investigating committee and it was constantly reinforced beginning with my Entered Apprentice degree in 1957.

Throughout its recorded history and reaching back into our legendary past, Masonry had never been a populist order that welcomed all men. Masonry, I was taught, was not for everyone nor was every man worthy and well qualified to sit with us as Brothers. There were standards and requirements that were, with very few exceptions, rigidly enforced. If the door was opened the man became a part of an exclusive fraternal order. In short, Masonic membership has always been very selective. Our legends, ritual, and history clearly reflect and support that position.

Masonry was shrouded in secrecy or so most outsiders believed. Not bothering with the technical specifics of what is or what isn't secret, what went on in a Masonic lodge was generally unknown to the public and we kept it that way. Our inner workings were never discussed outside of the lodge. So, what were those notorious secrets of a Master Mason that lent such an aspect of intrigue and secrecy to the order? If you wanted to know, you had to earn it and you would discover the learning would take a lifetime.

Declining fraternal membership is not limited to Masonry and to assume so narrows the focus to a point of error. While I was at Purdue University the fraternity and sorority houses were imposing stately mansion of stone and brick. In the adult community, the Lions, Rotarians, Moose, and Elks service clubs were active and did many good things. Aside from their laudable civic activity, they were primarily social clubs.

Today, nation wide, many of the college fraternities and sororities are a mere shadow of the past and even disbanded on some campuses, the big houses gone. As well, many local service club chapters are gone. The Elk's premier golf course and stately clubhouse where I lived are gone with houses replacing the manicured greens.

Membership in these organizations has declined at a similar rate to that of Masonry with the Shrine experiencing a similar fate. And, to the dismay of many, so has church attendance.

What has changed over the passed fifty years? The list would be long indeed but some things come quickly to mind.

Without venturing onto the forbidden ground of politics we must recognize our country has become progressively more liberal with dramatic changes in attitudes and diminished moral and ethical values. The radical counter-culture of the sixties, with its mantras of freethinking independence and anti-establishment, denigrated a multitude of institutions and beliefs that were a part of our nation's culture and history. National pride, patriotism, religion, and service were to be avoided. Unhappily, many of those attitudes persist being passed on to following generations.

So too was membership in anything remotely exclusive, taking its toll on all fraternal orders, civic clubs, and the Boy Scouts to name but a few. Instant self-gratification that precluded earning the laurels became prevalent. By contrast, to be a part of a selective membership, one had to earn it. I remember the day I made my first arrested landing on an aircraft carrier. "At any given time," our Commanding Officer told us, "only a thousand or so people in the world can do what you just did." It was like The Band of Brothers, a very exclusive group with a bonding that distinguished from others.

Many institutions, believing they must conform to changing social standards in order to attract members, felt compelled to alter or abandon historic traditions, beliefs, and practices. Some churches endorsed radical practices that a few years earlier would have been unthinkable. Academia was not spared. Failure, for any reason, that excluded a person became unacceptable with the trend becoming known as "dumbing down."

The Shrine first dropped the York Rite or Scottish Rite requirement and has gone so far as to propose dropping any Masonic connection.

Unhappily, our declining membership is often viewed as an exclusive Masonic problem. Assuming that faulty premise, the issue is addressed by asking the question, “What’s wrong with Masonry?” Are we to decide that Masonry must conform and embrace changing standards that are contrary to our long history? Are we to believe that the lessons taught, values inculcated, standards, practices, and traditions reaching back thousands of years are now either invalid or have no place in the current culture?

How has Masonry responded to the membership issue? Have we actually benefited from the changes made and at what cost? Are numbers more important than our historic qualifications or, for that matter, even quality?

The prohibition of soliciting prospective members is frequently avoided by subtle means to mine for candidates. We have recently seen examples where the purpose and intent of recommending a man and the investigation process were corrupted and produced disastrous results. Too often the quest for another dues paying member overrides the questions of whether he is truly worthy and well qualified, will he be a good Mason and one who we would happily receive as a Brother. And, of equal importance, will he respect, honor, and embrace our traditions, rules, and practices. Although taken many years ago and in a different jurisdiction, I consider myself still bound by the obligation I took as a Master Mason. Excepting murder and treason, I will keep the secrets of a Master Mason and, regarding the Grand Hailing Sign of Distress, I will fly to the aid of him who gives it if there be a greater probability of saving his life than of losing my own. Those are serious commitments not given to everyone.

In many jurisdictions we see requirements to prove degree proficiency drastically reduced and in some cases virtually eliminated. The justifications vary but the primary reason is to reduce the FTA rate by taking the effort out of advancement to make it easier. It is true that mere rote memory, the regurgitation of words without understanding, is a poor method of learning. Good teaching by qualified coaches produces an understanding of the degree and the obligation. With varying formats, the words then have meaning, the man has earned something of value and taken a step to become a knowledgeable Master Mason.

Many lodges routinely open on the Entered Apprentice degree on the assumption if the newly initiated man can attend lodge he is less likely to drop out. Unfortunately, the necessity to advance, to earn the status of Master Mason, and become a functioning participant and member of the lodge is reduced. So too is the loss of proficiency in the ritual of the Master Mason opening – one of the most beautiful and thought provoking parts of our order.

Political correctness has taken its toll. Now we go to great lengths to downplay any secrecy declaring we are a fraternity with some secrets - but only a few. We emphasize that the only secrets we have are simple means of recognition that are merely a tradition of little or no real significance. Not wishing to offend anyone, even our detractors, some jurisdictions have thrown open the doors to the public, provided detailed explanations of our lodge rooms, and degrees.

While seeking to make ourselves more accessible and with greater public recognition in the hope of attracting new members we become more like the civic club. This is not in any way to demean the civic clubs for they perform truly valuable and commendable services that were never an intended part of Masonry.

Not a matter of simply paying a fee and becoming a member, Masonry is different. A clear prerequisite is that the man wants to become a Mason with the understanding he must earn the status of Master Mason. It was once said that Masonry made the Rotarian a better Rotarian, the Lion a better Lion and an Elk a better Elk.

There are legitimate fiscal issues facing both Grand and Constituent lodges. Escalating costs strain the available resources. Without adequate fiscal planning and if faced with a declining membership dues receipts alone may not cover operating costs, building repairs and various programs. The quick answer is, “We need more candidates.” The degree fee is worth a couple years of dues and if the man doesn’t drop out we’re money ahead. Unhappily, equating a candidate and particularly a Master Mason to merely a source of revenue gets dangerously close to effectively selling membership – something that might well have induced Hiram Abif to take up the setting maul himself.

What have we gained, if anything, with the departures from our historic Masonic tradition and practice in the quest for membership? Has the trend toward “Cafeteria Masonry” – taking some aspects while bypassing others – actually resolved the membership issue? Or is it possible we have become part of the problem rather than the solution and as Pogo once whimsically observed, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” Membership has continued to decline and the retention rate has not improved. Ritual work is often spotty with degree work and lectures frequently left in the hands of the older members who learned it as a labor of love and respect. In many cases, particularly a solicited initiate, the learning level, degree understanding, and Masonic knowledge is drastically reduced. Absent their understanding, there can be little respect for historic traditions.

And these are not idle traditions simply because “we’ve always done it that way” but are carefully crafted institutional practices that define, teach, and exemplify what we are, what we believe, and who may sit among us as Brothers.

As the millenniums pass, Masonry has stood the test of time – far longer than any other institution. The stability of its truth, traditions, and practices are a life’s anchor to its practitioners who find it RIGHT. It is not subject to the vacillations of social trend for those are at best relative. And RIGHT is not relative.

Unless we abandon our traditional qualifications in the quest merely for numbers, reduce or eliminate the effort to advance, throw open the doors to anyone who has the fee, and actively recruit new bodies is Masonry headed for a niche of past history? I think not and there is light at the end of the tunnel. Many of the more radical trends of the recent past have been rejected as the pendulum is swinging back to reflect the culture and values that made this country great. National pride and patriotism have risen, willingness to serve the country has dramatically increased, there is a growing sense of morality, and even church attendance has increased in many sectors. In many lodges, including my own, I see a growing interest in Masonry by men who seek us out not for a social or civic club but for the Masonic values and to associate with those who embrace them.

The key is knowledge. Ritual, degree work, lectures, and Masonic history must be taught and delivered by those who understand what they are saying. Through a well-planned teaching environment the knowledge is passed on to the new Brother and soon you have another teacher. Ritual and lectures become more than a simple regurgitation of words – they impart valuable knowledge. Our traditions and procedures must be carefully and fully explained for without that knowledge they are but a hindrance without meaning or value.

The knowledgeable Mason is able to only recommend those that meet our requirements. Those found indeed worthy and well qualified will be accepted to sit with us as Brothers.

As I approach a milestone in my Masonic travels I ponder more frequently the quest for membership numbers, sometimes seemingly at any cost, with the distinction between Masonry and other orders becoming blurred. There will be ups and downs in membership numbers and membership is not unimportant. My sense is that the decline in membership is abating. Not because of changes we have made but as a reflection of the return to our nation's traditional values. We are at a crossroad with a golden opportunity before us. If we look to the traditions, practices and procedures that made Masonry so strong, accept only those who meet our qualifications, return becoming a Master Mason to a sought after goal, properly teach and assist the initiates the membership issue will, to a large extent, resolve itself.

Most Worshipful Grand Master, Officers and members of this Most Worshipful Grand Lodge, honored guests – Brothers all - my brief walk is over but the journey has not ended. Freemasonry is not obsolete. Its legends, traditions, practices, and teachings are not out of touch with the modern world and indeed may be needed more today than in the recent past. We are not doomed and the sky is not falling.