

The Decline of Freemasonry in America

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In an article entitled, "The Amazing Shrinking Fraternity" (*Square & Compasses*, Winter 1993), then Grand Master Kenneth B. Hawkins warned against the alarming decline in Masonic membership in America. His admonition was long on conjecture, short on remedies. He merely echoed with disquieting glibness the oft-invoked defense that the practice of "non-solicitation" and the failure to engage in "aggressive recruitment" are at the root of the problem.

The causes for such nationwide erosion, in my opinion, are far subtler and more complex, and require an earnest reappraisal of our collective rationale, our practices, our self-image, indeed our very reason for being.

I responded to Bro. Hawkins's article with an essay, "The Amazing Well-Worn Alibi," in a subsequent edition. A few brothers were appalled by the title of my article. Many more found my diagnosis, not to mention the bitter antidotes I prescribed, hard to swallow. Eventually, the clamor died down. Those who had found merit in my arguments retreated into silence and indifference. And membership continued to drop.

Ten years later, membership is down nationwide. Participation in Masonic activities is in decline. Attendance is low or spotty in most lodges. A shortage of worthy and well-qualified candidates has inhibited the orderly flow of succession from chair to chair, thus forcing the "recycling" of past masters to keep the chairs suitably warm. We've become a refuge for the geriatric set.

Attempting to revive a comatose organization by boosting membership alone is tantamount to dispatching freshly recruited and untrained reinforcements to a battle-weary unit that has lost its will to fight. Imagine applying a band-aid to a severed jugular. In the long term, a successful transfusion depends far more on the wholesomeness of the plasma than on the volume of blood pumped into the veins.

While I agree that a stronger fraternity can provide a greater, more positive influence on society, I reject the notion that strength can only be derived from numbers. If a chain is as strong as its weakest link, then strength must be equated with quality, not quantity.

Later, as he prepared to ascend to the Grand East, Grand Master-to-be Charles Yohe wrote me, to join the Publishing Committee. In his letter, Bro. Yohe lamented the sharp decline in Masonic membership and appealed for a unified, energetic statewide effort to remedy the problem. He asked me for ideas.

I responded, offering a candid analysis of the situation and outlining specific steps which I thought would help reenergize American Freemasonry from an anemic and sluggish band of brothers into a strong and energetic force for world good. I added that Freemasonry in America had lapsed into irrelevance, that it had become an anachronism when it ceased to be an instrument for social reform, when it turned inwardly and changed from an alliance of enlightened illuminati to a bastion of religious and political conservatism out of tune with Freemasonry's roots and fundamental philosophy.

I further commented that, inspired by the nobility and true Masonic spirit of America's founding fathers, I yearned for a dynamic fraternity, a body of men committed to enriching their intellects, feeding their minds, not just their bellies. I said that I looked to an organization dedicated to upholding holistic principles, eager to get involved, not afraid to speak out against injustice, corruption and political chicanery. I warned that so long as Freemasonry remained an insular, closed circuit, self-serving institution, it would not thrive. I asserted that unless we attract men who are truly interested in helping to improve society, the fraternity would slowly fritter away. I insisted that Blue Lodge, Scottish Rite and Royal Arch Masonry should be fused into a single Masonic educational process—as they are in Europe and much of the world—and not three separate bodies. I suggested that it ought to take a year between degrees and that elevation to a higher grade should be based—like in operative lodges of yore—on performance and the completion of a master work—not merely on rote memorization of the ritual. I contended that every Temple should be its own Lodge of Research and Lodge of Instruction, and that every brother should be encouraged to write and deliver lectures that stimulate the gray matter. Last of all, I dared propound the notion that medals, certificates, citations, ribbons, plaques and other accolades of which Masons are so fond, ought to be reserved for extraordinary service to community, nation and the world—not for such intramural distinctions as longevity as a Mason, a spotless lodge attendance record or cooking a great spaghetti dinner.

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Grand Master Yohe never replied.

As I see it, the issue is not attracting more Masons but making Masonry more attractive to Masons. This requires turning Masonic proceedings into meaningful, stimulating, relevant happenings in lodge, while extending Masonic principles and objectives beyond the lodge. There is nothing more baffling to an Entered Apprentice or a Fellowcraft or even a newly-raised Master Mason than to sit in a nearly empty lodge, however impeccable the ritual might be. Nor is there anything more disconcerting than a lodge solely dedicated to mass-producing Masons but which is otherwise afflicted with inertia and ritualized boredom.

If there is a correlation between diminishing visibility and decreasing membership, perhaps it is because, after having been initiated, new brothers are often left suspended in a vacuum. They've paid their dues. They've become small cogs in an immense engine laboriously engaged in keeping its own wheels turning, a sort of Rube Goldberg perpetual motion contraption out of sync with its own driving force. But the intellectual nourishment, the spiritual stimulation, the social dimensions so vital to Freemasonry, are virtually nowhere to be found.

Since I was raised, 15 years ago, I have seen many brothers elevated to the Sublime Degree. Many attended a couple of meetings, then discreetly vanished, never to be seen again. Did these men fail to find in the Masonic experience what they sought—or were led to believe they would find? Or were they simply unfit? Were they disillusioned or utterly uninspired? Is there further light at the end of Hiram's resurrectional tunnel or just a faint glow of what was?

Owing to a European Masonic heritage (my father was raised in one of the Temples of the Grand Lodge of France), I admit to having been imbued with a different perspective when I applied for membership in America. I came armed with the belief that there must be a more glorious aim, a higher purpose, a loftier calling, a grander design in Freemasonry than a couple of monthly meetings, a slate of swiftly adjourned Stated Communications and a belabored and half-hearted degree conferral or two.

What I sought was a challenge, a journey toward self-fulfillment and higher learning shepherded by able guides, in the company of neophytes eager to apprehend the history, lore and character of the Craft. What I hoped to find was a body of men willing to take a stand on

issues of cosmic importance, brave enough to speak out against injustice, to share ideas, to impart knowledge, to foster true universal brotherhood, to shed light—not just to receive it—to vie for new insights, not just bask in the brilliance of yesteryear's Masonic constellation.

Yes, we are in good company: George Washington, Ben Franklin, John Hancock, Paul Revere, Lafayette, Mozart, Bolivar, Garibaldi, John Glenn, Jonathan Swift, Goethe, the Roosevelts, Harry Truman, etc. We seem to venerate these men as though their notoriety, wisdom, creative genius and courage were “Masonically” transferable through some generational osmosis. It is not! If a child should not bear the burden of his ancestors' misdeeds, nor should he revel in his father's fame. He must seek his own paths of glory. The brothers I name were men of action, builders, shakers, movers, mavericks, gadflies, thinkers and creative geniuses long before they were asked in whom they put their trust. It is they who enriched Freemasonry—not the other way around. They all believed in a better tomorrow, a more just, progressive and nobler human society. All were inspired by other thinkers and mavericks and revolutionaries—Moses, Isaiah, Amos, Solomon, Jesus. The revolution is not over. So long as there is injustice and suffering, inequity and persecution in the world, the spiritual revolution must go on. No one, in my view, is better equipped to wage it than Freemasons.

Produce more Masons? Go forth and multiply? We are Masons, not rabbits. No man should father children he cannot love, protect, educate, guide and inspire. No organization should recruit more members until it can satisfy the needs and aspirations of its present constituency. No institution should place its own corporate welfare above the welfare of each individual member.

A sustainable and thriving membership should be the culmination, not the basis for a healthy Masonic family. Fellowship should be the consequence, not the motive for joining the Craft. A passionate quest for truth should be, at all times, the inspiration and vocation of every Freemason. Yes, the club needs more members. Let's first spruce up the clubhouse—from the inside. And let the faithful breast, the attentive ear and the instructive tongue be the true measure of our eminence. ■

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