

The State Of Freemasonry

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We have all heard or read numerous warnings sounded in regard to the impending collapse of Freemasonry, and the causes thereof: apathetic members, declining numbers, rising costs, lack of prestige in the community, and so on. Practically any Masonic publication we might pick up to today has at least one article covering this subject. We have also heard numerous solutions proposed: solicitation, advertising, community involvement, leadership training, de-emphasis of the ritual, the list goes on and on. The many views expressed tend to fall into four major classifications or categories: the sociological, the moralistic, the operational, and the functionalistic. For example, the moralistic view holds that the doctrines of morality and virtue are no longer prized by the general public and therefore our society, founded as it is upon these principles, is no longer relevant in today's world. Each of these views undoubtedly has some application to our present situation, and yet, perhaps they do not fully cover the causes for what we now observe.

Today I would like to examine two phenomena, two distinctly separate and yet interactive situations which may lie at the root of the present condition of Freemasonry. First, the Great Depression of about fifty years ago, and second, the unprecedented influx of members which commenced in the 1940's and carried into the early sixties.

Let us look at the legacy of the Great Depression, that situation which forever scarred and shaped the lives and thinking of all who experienced that tragedy. Those members who had been imbued with the spirit of Masonry prior to the Depression and who were able to maintain their Masonic membership throughout that ordeal, or who were forced to drop out for a time but later returned, carried with them the memory that many good

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men could not afford either to join or to retain their membership in the face of such adversity. Because of this, they became and continued to be vociferous opponents of any suggested increases in dues and fees, perhaps feeling that they were keeping the cost of Masonry within the budget of all.

The effects of this were perhaps not readily apparent to most of the members since the great influx of members swelled the coffers and there was no need to raise the dues to maintain adequate income as the cost of living began to rise. The income derived from initiation fees and from the dues of an ever increasing number of members was probably beyond the wildest dreams of most of those active in Freemasonry at that time. Unfortunately however, in many cases, most of such income was spent in a manner akin to that of an inebriated sailor on shore leave, without a thought that someday the source of this wealth would dry up.

During those years when the cost of living was gradually rising, the structure of Masonic fees and dues continued at a constant level, thereby effectively cheapening the cost of Freemasonry. With the more rapid rise in the cost of living over the past, say, fifteen years, coupled with a dearth of candidates, the real income of the lodges has plummeted to unfathomable depths in terms of constant total dollars. Such increases in dues and fees as may have been approved have not been sufficient to offset the effects of inflation.

To cite an example, in 1866, the dues of my lodge were \$3.00 per year and the initiation fee was \$30.00. Today the dues are \$16.00 and the fee \$150.00, a fivefold increase. What rational individual would claim that such an increase over a period of about 120 years is in line with the cost of living increases over the same period, or more importantly, that such present figures are representative of the true value of Masonry? At today's minimum wage, the dues represent less than a day's pay and the fee little more than that earned in a week. And how many of our members earn merely the minimum wage? For

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the average member, the dues and fee figures are more likely an hour's pay and little over a day's pay respectively.

With such a low rate of income per member, it is no wonder that much concern is now voiced about the shrinkage of our membership, for only with a large volume of dues paying members can the necessary funds for the lodge operation be maintained. Most lodges today are trying to cut costs on every front, striving to reduce their expenses to the levels of their income from a dwindling membership base.

And speaking of the membership base, we should now turn to that situation wherein our ranks were suddenly and unexpectedly swelled to almost unbelievable proportions. The great number of candidates following World War II and continuing into the 1960's necessitated the so-called "Degree Mills" concerned only with accommodating the candidates by conferring degrees on multiple candidates two or even three or more times per week. This obviously did not allow time to instill to any reasonable degree the true meaning of Masonry in these new members. We might even consider that many of these were men who were not then and perhaps will never be prepared in their hearts to be Masons, men who have never truly understood the underlying principles of Freemasonry and have never been active participants in their lodge, content with being a Mason in name only, carrying a card and wearing an emblem. And this is not necessarily their fault, since they may have had no background information about Masonry, did not really know what it was all about, and no one ever took the time to explain anything more than the rote of the catechism. While there have undoubtedly always been those men who have been members and not Masons, with the numbers that were then pouring in, the chances of this were greatly increased, especially with those who joined Masonry since it was de rigueur. But Masonry was and perhaps continues to be swept up in the Great American ideals of size and speed. Bigger is better, and the faster we can grow bigger, so much the better yet. Never mind that we create, not Masons, but only members in many cases.

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Further, this rapid expansion of lodge membership diluted the spirit of fraternalism among the members, changing what had earlier been a more closely knit society of friends and Brothers into a sort of mega-lodge where the majority of the members were and remain to this day, mere faceless names on the rolls. Whereas previously initiates were well-known to many of the members and were easily assimilated into the group, with the great flood, this all changed. Remember that initiates had been few during the Depression era, and the lodges were unprepared for the large how wishing to join. Now casual acquaintances were being proposed for membership and gladly accepted, bearing in mind the earlier inactivity.

As the numbers in the mystic circle increased, all the members were forced farther away from the center and thus farther away from the majority of Brethren of their lodge. As the circumference doubles, the area enclosed by the circle increases by a factor of four. So the situation developed where, because of the physical size of the lodge, the members were becoming estranged from most of the other members. It is somewhat difficult to continue to practice fellow ship when there are so many to relate to, particularly when many of these remain relatively unknown.

Many candidates perhaps were never encouraged to come back after their Master Mason Degree, and if they did return, what did they observe? Merely more ritual work, in which new candidates supplanted the former ones as the "men of the hour", and those recently brought in were left in the dust of the rush to increase the rolls still further. And so they felt like outsiders and never came back again.

At the same time, because ritualistic work was in demand, those who were superior ritualists were becoming officers. It did not matter that they may have been only parroting the ritual with little concept of the lessons being taught or that they had little or no administrative ability. Ritual was the be-all and end-all. There was little for the vast majority of the new members to do. Committees were already staffed with those who

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had been active participants before. Since ritual was so important, perhaps some of the new men became catechism instructors, with the result of the blind leading the blind. Sure they knew the catechism word for word, probably backward and forward, but they could offer little in the way of explanation or instruction in the underlying principles of Freemasonry. And so this ignorance was perpetuated.

Let us recap the situation as it existed at that time. We had a product, Freemasonry, being sold at an undervalued price to essentially all comers, regardless of whether or not they were the "good men" whom Masonry proclaims to make better. We had men in the community who were identified as Masons by a ring or a pin or a bumper sticker, but not by their actions, since they had never been properly instructed in how to build their spiritual temple. We had a weakening of the Mystic Tie. We had an emphasis on ritualistic performance without regard for leadership ability. And we had a general population which was becoming more mobile, and a greatly expanded variety of leisure time activities to compete for the time spent to attend lodge.

And then, for a variety of reasons, the candidate well dries up. Since there are few candidates, degree work can no longer be the focal point of our meetings. At the same time, mortality is making inroads into the now larger older segment of our membership. Some question the value of their membership, even at its low cost, and are content to be dropped for non-payment of dues. We have an estrangement of the majority of the lodge members, many of whom no longer reside in the immediate vicinity of the lodge. We have the faceless member who gets sick or even dies, but the lodge is not informed and no one knows about it. And no one from the lodge visited the hospital or went to the funeral because no one ever knew him as a Brother.

And the prophets of doom don their sackcloth and ashes and beat their breasts bewailing the impending demise of Freemasonry. And the Mr. Fix-its appear with their tool kits proclaiming to have the answer to all the problems, eager to tinker with our fraternity.

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"Remodel Freemasonry," they say, "Eliminate memory work, promote how great Masonry is in the advertising media, permit solicitation, and so on." You've heard all the miracle cures. And lodge membership continues to decline.

Meanwhile, the various invitational bodies, the Red Cross of Constantine, K.Y.C.H., Allied Masonic Degrees, Knight Masons, York Rite College, are all thriving, even in the face of the decline of symbolic Freemasonry. Why? Perhaps it is because they are all elite organizations of the cognoscente. They select their members from among the workers in our Craft who are friends of theirs. Generally each member in these organizations personally knows every other member and the new member is equally well-known to all. In other words, perhaps these bodies are functioning like a lodge did one hundred to two hundred years ago.

Let me now restate what I view as the situation in Symbolic Freemasonry at the present time. Although contracting, there is still a membership bloated with those who do not truly understand or practice Masonic principles, and extremely undervalued dues and fees. Too many a member views Masonry as only another bill to be paid, along with all the other bills. After you pay the telephone bill, do you feel compelled to go down and visit your local phone company? In like manner, why should you visit your lodge? In a Masonic Degree, we find these words, "What is lightly gained is, by us, least esteemed."

Perhaps this is the major reason that the fraternity is not held in the high regard it once was. Most people spend more for a fill-up at their local gas station than they pay in annual dues to their lodge. And we expect them to value their Masonic membership highly? How many petitioners ask about the amount of the initiation fee or the yearly dues when they make evident their interest in Masonry? To the man who sincerely wants to be a Mason, the amount of the fee is no barrier for he will find a way to pay it.

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All people set priorities in their lives. It is apparent from the lack of attendance that lodge attendance, and possibly Masonry on the whole, has been assigned a low priority by the majority of our members, quite possibly because of its low cost. They prefer to spend their leisure time on other activities and find some excuse not to attend lodge. However, they were able to find the time to be present when the degrees were conferred upon them.

And where does all this lead us? Well, it has led me to make this suggestion. Increase the amount of dues and fees so that they represent the same value in today's purchasing power as they did about one hundred years ago. This would mean that dues should be at least several hundred dollars per year and the initiation fee several thousand dollars. Let me repeat: dues several hundred dollars per year and the initiation fee several thousand.

Sure we will lose a number of our current members if we had such a payment requirement. But we would be bidding farewell to those to whom Masonry really means very little. Those to whom Freemasonry is a Way of Life would find a way to pay their dues, and they could not afford to pay, their dues must be remitted. Today, in my experience, very few Brethren are on the remitted list. This is probably due to the low amount of the dues and the reluctance on the part of a Brother to admit that he could not afford this small sum. But were the amount what I suggest, there are undoubtedly many who would find this a burden and hopefully ask for remission.

Let's look at the numbers. Suppose we raise the dues tenfold. Let's assume that we would lose all but 10 percent of our dues-paying members. Our income would remain at the same total it now is, and if we remitted the dues of another 10 or 20 percent, or even more, our income would still be the same. But now the fraternity is composed of those to whom cost is no object when it comes to maintaining their membership. We will have contracted our fraternity with beneficial results.

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With a significant cost for initiation, the petitioner will consider long and hard about the step he wishes to take. But a large fee should not prove a deterrent to those truly interested in becoming a Mason. People pay similar fees to join country clubs and other organizations because they perceive they will reap commensurate benefits, but nowhere can they reap the benefits that Freemasonry can provide. We need to consider that Freemasonry was never meant to be for everyone. We should remember the injunction not to cast pearls before swine. By freely explaining many of our principles to the general public, we open ourselves to attacks and ridicule from those to whom our principles mean nothing.

But when a member is committed to the kind of financial investment I am suggesting, I have no doubt that he will set a high priority on participation in lodge activities. If those activities do not meet his expectations, he will tend not to disappear as he does now, but to voice his opinions and objections. The lodge will no longer be composed of faceless Brethren but of active participants eager to get their money's worth. When we decide to move Freemasonry out of the Bargain Basement and into the Penthouse, then we will silence the prophets of doom and have no need for the handymen to tinker with our fraternity.