

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
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On the evening of Tuesday April 16, 2002, Bro. Tom Jackson addressed the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research. Bro. Jackson has spoken all over the world on what Freemasonry really is, and on how we might address some of its current problems.

Bro. Jackson is the first Secretary of the World Conference of Masonic Grand lodges, Chairman of the Pennsylvania Academy of [Masonic] Knowledge, and Past Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania [1979-1999]. He has received honours from all over the world, including 24 Grand lodges, and has been named one of the top Freemasons of the past quarter century.

The opinions expressed in the following paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research.

WHY DO WE TAKE THIS ROAD?

Several years ago on the same day I experienced these two situations. First, an attorney from Lebanon with multiple academic degrees was in my office. He wanted to become a Freemason because of how much he thought it meant to the world and how much influence it had. His mother was one of his major sources of information. He was so enthusiastic that it became the first time I found myself downplaying the power and influence of the Craft. That evening I spoke at a lodge meeting. Following the meeting a member talked with me and told me that he was considering resigning his membership because of his disappointment with what Freemasonry had become, and I found myself defending it. That day I found myself caught between the idealism and the realism that has become Freemasonry.

The history of the world is replete with the names of men who have led in their country's struggles for freedom, liberty and equality. Some of these names may not be known to all of us, but they are household names in their respective countries and areas of the world. The names of Simon Bolivar in South America, Lajos Kossuth in Hungary, Benito Juarez in Mexico, Guiseppi Garibaldi in Italy and Theodore Kokolotronis in Greece are names that are etched upon the headstones of freedom in their respective countries.

In the United States many of the names of our early patriots who led in its struggles for freedom are well known to us. Who amongst us does not know the names George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Paul Revere to name but a few, or later Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, John (Blackjack) Pershing, Douglas MacArthur and Omar Bradley, who led after them, again to name but a few.

Canada certainly has had its share of great government leaders who were also Masons, including six Prime Ministers. Your first, Sir John A. MacDonald, and more recently, Right Honorable John G. Diefenbaker, were also both very active members of the Craft. We can add to that list Brothers such as Joseph Brant, John Ross Robertson, and Most Rev. William Lockridge Wright as Masonic greats who helped shape Canada's development.

These men all had at least one thing in common. They were all Freemasons. They were all nurtured in a Masonic Lodge where they were taught the precepts of freedom, liberty and equality. This is not to imply that it was the Craft alone that made them the great men they became, but nor can it be happenstance that those who led in struggles for freedom in so many countries of the world that has freedom were Freemasons.

History is also replete with the names of other men who most will recognize. We all know the names of Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Joseph Stalin, Francisco Franco, Marshall Tito and the Ayatollah Khomeini. They also had at least one thing in common. They all were enemies of Freemasonry, and these men all opposed the Craft for the same reasons the others embraced it, the Masonic precept of the right of men to be free and equal and the practice of tolerance of all men's right to believe in and worship their God as their conscience dictated.

Freemasons died by the tens of thousands at the hands of these men's regimes simply because they were Freemasons. Much has changed over the ensuing years, but tyrants remain the enemies of our craft, and we should have no problem with that. We should wear their enmity as mantels of pride, for to oppose tyranny is to embrace freedom, and that is a structural character of the Masonic Fraternity.

Historically we have always risen above their attacks. It may have taken considerable time in some cases, but we have risen. Where there has been tyranny, Freemasonry has survived only underground, but it has survived the onslaught of tyrants almost from its inception, even flourishing in spite of them. We need not fear this class of enemy long term. We continue today under attack by the despots of the world and again we need have no great fear of long-lasting effect by them.

Of an even graver concern are those who have chosen to become our enemies and who quite possibly have benefited the most because of our existence. What makes this an even greater tragedy is that their opposition to the Craft is for the very same reasons as that of the tyrant. They desire to control the right of men to think and to live in accordance with the dictates of their own consciences under a moral code and within a legal system, the right to be truly free.

It is almost incomprehensible that Freemasonry could have as opponents religious and government leaders of the free world when they might very well be in those positions because of the efforts of Freemasons. Make no doubt about it, my Brothers; were it not for Freemasonry this world would be markedly different. And yet, even as with the tyrants there have been men in these categories who must rank with the Craft's greatest enemies. They also have had no long-lasting effect upon our survival in the past, even though they can be traced back almost to our inception.

However, we, my Brothers, are today accomplishing what none of our enemies from without have been able to accomplish. I know that what I am about to say will be approaching heresy to some, but then fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

We, my Brothers, are providing the environment for our own extinction. We have for the last 20 years aided in the gradual eroding of the quality of the membership, and it is this loss of quality that is the greatest threat to our survival as a significant institution. This loss of quality is already showing an impact on our quantity, and it is counterproductive to that very goal of increasing quantity that is causing it. Why do we take this road?

Many of our decisions in recent years indicate a lack of interest in preserving the quality of the craft. We seem more intent is redefining and reshaping it for the simple reason that we do not want to be judged as failures because our numbers have decreased, and yet we acknowledge that this is a sociological phenomenon affecting almost all organizations. It is a phenomenon we cannot change, and it is one, which we must ride out. My Brothers, we cannot afford to continue to evaluate ourselves in terms of quantity instead of quality. To do so offers little hope for a future of an organization that changed this world, and we will shoulder the blame for future generations.

Our willingness to admit into our ranks any single individual who not too many years ago could never have hoped to be a part of the Craft will cause us far more damage than any 10 good men can benefit us, for they will serve to keep away the good men in the future.

I quote from the book *Reflections of Masonic Values*. "If we shall not be careful in the admission of candidates and improve the procedure of admission, we are then starting the composition of a funeral hymn for the death of our noble institution. As Freemasons, we should not allow this to happen. If we do, we are doomed for we have just hammered the last nail in the sarcophagus of Freemasonry."

We all realize that the Craft has had its ups and downs, its increases and decreases in numbers during its entire history. Following the Morgan Affair in North America it almost became extinct in some areas, but it survived to flourish again. Nothing the world outside threw against it was able to hold it down for long. Freemasonry in Russia, although little known, is perhaps a classic example of

the tenacity of this organization. It might also be used as a study as to what the result could be if our approach in North America continues along the pathway we have been following in recent years.

Several years ago I made an observation at a Masonic conference that American Freemasons are the most ignorant Freemasons in the world. At that time I shocked a number of the leaders present by that statement. But my Brothers we are not only the most ignorant we are the most cheap.

There is probably not a Masonic structure outside of North America today that permits Freemasonry to be sold as cheaply as we do. In most Grand jurisdictions the financial cost to become and remain a Freemason is far beyond what we begin to comprehend, and they carry far greater respect in their society than do we. When an attempt to increase fees and dues is made in North America you would think that the attempt is to impoverish the member. The same Brother who will think nothing of spending \$50.00 for a few bottles of alcohol or a few cartons of cigarettes will fight totally against a \$5.00 increase in Lodge dues to support the greasiest organization ever conceived by the mind of man.

My Brothers, how can we be so cheap? How can we justify permitting our Lodges and Grand Lodges to struggle for financial life? Why should an organization as great as Freemasonry be faced with taking in the unqualified because we the members fail to recognize the privilege of belonging to an organization, which made this world what it is? Why do we project this image to society?

One of the lessons I learned in my travels throughout the world is that we in North America have lost the appreciation of the Craft simply because we do not even know the Craft. So little is required from the member that lack of knowledge has become the accepted norm. We continue to think that charity is the basic purpose of Freemasonry. My Brothers, is there a one of you here who thinks that Freemasonry could have impacted this world the way it has simply by raising money and giving it away? Is there a one of you who thinks that Freemasonry's prominence can be regained by the same practice? Do you honestly believe that by reducing requirements in time and cost to be a Freemason will improve our potential to impact the world in the future? Is there one of you here now who truly believes that the greatness of Freemasonry is the result of having high quantity numbers rather than quality numbers?

Margaret Jacob wrote in *Living the Enlightenment* that Freemasonry passed out of serious scholarship in the late 1940s, and I would suggest that this was the time when we began to lose focus on what we were. It is interesting that it was also the time of our most rapid growth. Perhaps it was the beginning of our failure to guard the west gate. Even then however, quantity over quality was not promoted by our top leadership as it is today.

In my first dozen years as Grand Secretary I never saw a resignation for religious reasons. Now we receive them almost weekly. Opposition by religious leaders is not new to Freemasonry, but it is becoming more pervasive and effectual. Why do you suppose that is? There was also the time when most of the prominent lay leaders of our churches were also the prominent community leaders, and they were also Freemasons. To attack Freemasonry was to attack the most supportive members of the church and the quality leaders of the community. We are now failing to attract these quality leaders. The church leadership has no longer reason to be concerned about our influence.

We have admitted for years that only 10% of our membership is active (although I have often wondered where that statistic came from). This, of course, means that 90% is inactive, and yet they continue to pay their dues year after year knowing full well that they will never be active. There is only one logical reason for doing this. They have a perceived value in being able to say, "I am a Freemason." Take away that perceived value and we risk losing the 90%, and that is what we are starting to see today. The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania last year had the highest number of suspensions for non-payment of dues it ever had, and I understand that many of the other Grand Lodges are experiencing the same thing. The willingness to be suspended for non-payment of dues or the submission of resignations is indicative of a loss of respect for the meaning of Freemasonry by our own members.

We have made more changes in our structure and system in the preceding 20 years than have probably taken place in the last 200 years. This has all been done for one reason, to acquire numbers, and frankly, my Brothers, I don't know if we have even slowed the rate of loss. We may not have stemmed the decline of numbers, but we surely have decreased our influence in society and, with this decrease, our ability to accomplish our purpose.

I read a quotation of Maureen Dowd in the *New York Times* several years ago, "The minute you settle for less than you deserve, you get even less than you settled for." Well, my Brothers, we have settled for less, and less is what we have received and that is less than we settled for.

I find it difficult to comprehend why we are incapable of recognizing that most of these changes made have not only not benefited us but indeed many have caused considerable harm. I don't understand our attempts to emulate other organizations that are declining at least as rapidly as are we and with whom we cannot compete to begin with. Freemasonry has been the best; we were different, and we were unique. Why not build on that uniqueness instead of trying to convert into something we have never been nor never meant to be? There has never been any organization that could lay claim to being more significant to the world, outside of organized religion, than has Freemasonry. Why not look at Freemasonry in the world where it is succeeding, where it remains influential and try to emulate it? I am not in opposition to change when it is to our benefit, but we must recognize and distinguish what is beneficial and admit when we have failed.

There is no question that the environment in which we exist has changed. Now we must determine whether we wish to retain our principles and values and lift others to meet our ideals or change to fit into the standards of present-day society.

We must also acknowledge that present-day environment is undergoing a metamorphosis more rapidly than ever in our past. Changes are taking place today in our world that out of necessity must cause us to pause and analyze how we will fit in as part of that environment. Freemasonry could and may play a vital role as a stabilizing force in society throughout that metamorphosis. But we surely won't if we can't even stabilize ourselves. We must reexamine our purpose, our precepts, and our philosophy and be willing to make changes in our modes of operation when necessary, but we must be certain that those changes do nothing to damage or destroy the basic principles and precepts with which we were born and with which we flourished.

I cannot believe that a philosophy that sustained us for almost 300 years is not applicable to today's world. Have we become an anachronism in present-day society? Have our principles and values actually had no place for the last quarter century? I think not. Why then do we continue to make a concentrated effort to change into something we are not and fail to recognize that we are destroying the quality of the Craft that is necessary to support that philosophy? If we truly do believe that our philosophy and principles have a place in the modern world, then we must pull others up to meet with us, not climb down to meet with them.

John Robinson made an astute observation concerning our Craft well before he became a member. He said that the problem with Freemasonry today is that it does not practice Freemasonry anymore. My Brothers, how can we when the vast majority of our members do not even know what to practice? We don't need more members. We need more Freemasons.

Without the quality of Masonic membership our all that we do, all that we have done of a charitable nature will be for naught. We will be little more than an afterthought in the writings of some future historian, for we will not be here to support it.

For the first time in our long and glorious history historians are finally writing about Freemasonry, but they are not writing about our quantity. They are writing about our quality. What they write in the future is now in our hands. We cannot let it become less than it was, nor less than it can be.