

(This address was originally given at a Table Lodge in Minnedosa)

When I told some of my brethren that I was going to speak here this evening, they said, "Oh, are you a toaster?" That got me a bit worried because no-one had mentioned whether I was to be a two-slot or a four slot toaster.

Actually we frequently find other kitchen implements around the Lodge. For instance, the garburator--no matter what you throw at him, all you get back is a lot of grumbling. Or the kettle--every once in a while you have to let him let off steam. Or the dripping tap--he keeps on repeating the same thing over and over and won't stop. Thankfully we have paring knives as well--they are small, unpretentious implements that can be turned to a million uses.

My topic for this evening is "Radical Freemasonry". Now I'm sure that most of you will be asking yourselves, "Radical?? What's radical about Freemasonry?" Masonry certainly has the appearance of one of the stodgiest institutions on earth. Every Master of the Lodge takes an oath that he will not countenance any innovation in the body of Freemasonry. Our teachings constantly refer to the customs and usages, or traditions, of our lodges, which are to be kept inviolate and sacrosanct, and have been for hundreds upon hundreds of years. How can an institution like that possibly keep up with the times?

Well, "keeping up with" means chasing after, trying to keep abreast of, always a little behind. It's rather like the story told by the Greek philosopher Parmenides about Achilles and the tortoise. The tortoise challenged Achilles, who was one of the fastest runners in Greece, to a race, but the tortoise had to have a head start. Achilles ran like the blazes until he was where the tortoise had been. But by that time the tortoise had moved a little farther ahead. No problem, Achilles thought, and ran to where the tortoise had been. It didn't take quite as long but by the time he got there the tortoise had again moved on. Indeed, as Parmenides pointed out, by trying to get to the place where the tortoise had just been, Achilles could not possibly catch up.

It's rather like trying to get a "state-of-the-art" computer. Computer people say that the technology is changing so rapidly that if a computer has been manufactured, it is already obsolete. Like shooting ducks; you can only hope to be up-to-date if you try to be ahead of the times, if you lead a little. We Masons could fall into this trap if we were to start aping the service clubs whose star is already on the wane.

Not only is trying to keep up with the times fairly futile, it does not always lead to improvement. We have gone from the attitude that if a thing is antique it must be better to the equally silly attitude that if a thing is new it must therefore be better. They have been calling laundry detergents "new and improved" for so long we are beginning to think that they mean the same thing. But the most recent set of changes to our telephones, for example, meant that we were saved the inconvenience of dialing four numbers by requiring us to dial seven instead. Clearly, not all changes are improvements.

Adapting to the times reminds me of the man who went into a tailor's for a suit. The tailor made the suit and the man tried it on. "Hey, one leg is shorter than the other!" said the man. "No problem," said the tailor, "Just bend this leg slightly, and they will look the same length." "But now the crotch isn't right." "We can fix that. Just twist your

hips a bit." "But what about this jacket sleeve. It must be two inches longer than the other." "No sweat, you just dip this shoulder like this and hold your arm crooked like this."

So the man hobbled down the street from the tailor's shop, one knee partially bent, his hips twisted, his shoulders on a slant, and one arm crooked. And he happened to run into an old friend. After the usual pleasantries, the friend asked the man for the name of his tailor. "The name of my tailor? Are you crazy?", the man said, "Why in God's name would you want to know the name of my tailor?" The friend replied, "Because any tailor who could fit a cripple like you must be a genius!"

If you adapt to the times, you will end up taking on their shape--for better or worse.

If we think about the agents of change in the last two hundred years or so, we mostly think of groups who, feeling that they were treated unfairly by "the others" looked for ways of getting the power to control those "others". But because what they resent about those "others" is that they have power, by gaining the power to control those "others" they become exactly like them. Thus we have in the French Revolution one despot in the person of King Louis removed and other despots: Danton, Robespierre, Bonaparte, to name some of them, put in his place. Or in Russia, we find a Czar replaced by a Stalin, or more recently a Gorbachev replaced by a Yeltsin.

Such persons or groups often say, before they get the power, that they wish to make a radical break from the status quo. But what they really want to do is to grab the reins of power for themselves, and to create a new status quo. They are still fighting for a status quo, but it is tomorrow's status quo, not today's. George Orwell paints an eloquent picture of this process in his book Animal Farm where the animals, led by the pigs, rebel against the farmer only to find that the pigs begin acting more and more like the farmer themselves.

But there is one agent of change that does not fit this mold.

In 1721, Freemasons agreed to allow Jews to become members of the craft. They did not make this decision because they were coerced by the Jews who at that time and for many years afterwards laboured under considerable legal and social disabilities. It was not because it was a popular decision--indeed it was wildly unpopular and stirred up intense opposition particularly from the Catholic church. In those days it was a very politically incorrect decision. The Masons of that day did not make this decision because they felt that it would enable them to throw down their oppressors--indeed it gave their oppressors a new reason to oppress them.

The history of Masonry is full of examples of decisions made in accordance with the ideals of tolerance notwithstanding that no political or social benefit could accrue. Witness the acceptance of Brandt and Prince Hall in the late 1700's, Thomas Jefferson's freeing of his slaves around 1800, the creation of parallel rites in which women could participate beginning in the 1730's and continuing on into the 19th century when the Order of the Eastern Star was formed for no other reason that it seemed a shame that women could not participate in the craft. Indeed, the Order of the Eastern Star is the only

institution I know of which comprises men and women but is always ruled by a woman, and this a hundred and fifty years after its formation.

These ideas were generally so far ahead of their time that the Masons were thought crazy and were vilified accordingly.

Masonry is totally different from other agents of change because rather than trying to promote one group and consequentially stomp down the rest, Masons try to change to an ideal of perfection. If the world is a table with unequal legs, the usual "radical" will want to keep cutting legs until his is the longest. The Mason will cut whatever legs he has to, even his own, to attain the ideal he conceives. The ideal conceived by Masonry is, as the third degree teaches us, not something that can be found, but is something that we are constantly searching to find. It is the unattainable quest for geometric perfection.

If you saw a fistfight, some people, the trimmers and toadies, would side with the winners. The "radicals" would side with the loser so as to beat up on the winner. But the Mason would try to make peace, for that is the ideal. So while the so-called "radicals" want to change who is winning the game, Freemasonry wants to change the rules of the game altogether.

No, not only that, Freemasonry wants to change how the rules are changed. Whereas everyone else envisions change as being effected by the actions of states, armies, secret police forces or the media changing the outward behaviour of people, Masonry seeks to change from within--within its own organization, within the hearts of its members.

Any institution that can look beyond the superficial distinctions between races, cultures, and religions can look beyond the mores of a particular era. If Masonry appears out-of-date then it is because we have substituted our own mores for Masonry. Real Masonry is the world's most radical institution. It is not a question of whether Masonry can keep up with the times, but a question of whether the times can keep up with Freemasonry.

Not likely!