

What's Right With Masonry

Historical Overview

Jazz pianist and composer Eubie Blake smoked from the age of six and refused to drink water. On his hundredth birthday he observed, "If I had known I was going to live this long I would have taken better care of myself."

When we contemplate that speculative Masonry has found something to commend itself to 20 generations of men, we cannot say that it was attractive to one generation and when that generation is past it must wither. It has already found a way to make itself attractive to 20 very diverse generations in many different circumstances. There must be something right about the way that it operates if we could properly interpret its history as a whole.

But when you are talking about a 400-year-old institution, this cannot be confined to living memory. We cannot view history like the Trivial Pursuit game where the history questions deal exclusively with events since 1940. We must eschew the idea that the Craft must necessarily have always been like it was in 1950 (except perhaps more so).

As I read more about the history of the Craft, I hear more and more about forms of Masonry which are quite unlike anything within the experience of even our oldest members: military Lodges which spread the Craft over the whole world with no home base, never mind a building in which to meet; Lodge meetings in Taverns, in people's homes, around tables, in forests; lodges which met with no regalia except a Bible; complicated versions of the ritual, and very simple ones; additional degrees now unheard of; lodges where all the offices belonged to the same people for years on end.

Flexibility

The flexibility of Masonry can be seen in its history. At various times it has been more or less formal, with more or less complicated rituals, more or less focus on the esoteric aspects of the Craft, the charitable aspects of the Craft, and the social aspects of the Craft. According to most theories of Masonic history, the Operative structure was enriched from other sources because it was flexible enough to accommodate them.

The Craft is not only flexible in that it can adapt itself to the times, but it can also adapt itself to the individual. Ask ten Masons for what the Craft means to them, and you will get ten different answers. But it has always been able to satisfy those different needs without losing its essence.

Aesop tells the fable of the mighty tree and the feeble bulrush. The great tree spoke of how high it had grown, how thick was its trunk, how widely spread its boughs, and the bulrush was in awe. But when the high wind came, the feeble roots of the tree could not hold and its great trunk could not bend, so it came crashing down, but the reed bent with the wind and its roots held. Flexibility and strong roots will keep you through some pretty hard times.

Historical Roots

What keeps our Craft from blowing hither and yon in the winds of change is our historical roots. Neville Cryer has remarked that if some aspect of the Craft with a pedigree is abandoned in one quarter it tends to reappear somewhere else. Masonry does not abandon those traditions which have come down to us from antiquity, and as a result has a character unlike any other in the world. Exactly what are the Landmarks of the Craft is difficult to define, but its essence has something to do with Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth and Masons acquire in a remarkably short time an intuitive grasp of it.

Harry Kemelman, in his novel Saturday the Rabbi went Hungry describes his hero Rabbi Small as follows:

"It's like the way an airplane flies at night. He's got an instrument, the pilot, and it's as if he's flying an invisible line. The minute he goes off to one side or the other, the instrument gives out a beep. It's like that with the rabbi. He's got in his head the principles of the Jewish tradition. When the congregation goes off to one side or the other, the rabbi gets a warning, like a beep, and he knows we're making a mistake."¹

Masons have a similar radar about the Landmarks of the Craft. Without consciously knowing it, Masons unerringly warm to activities which are directed to Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth and are bored and annoyed by those which are not. Closely observe the reactions of your brethren during a typical meeting. The parts of the meeting which will get their attention are news of their Brethren, particularly when they are ill or in need of comfort, opportunities to help others, social activities and opportunities for fellowship and papers on Masonic or other subjects which help us in our quest for truth. Often we forget to pay attention to this radar and think that we are to be guided by such principles as "We've always done it this way." Our sense of the fitness of our activities when held up to our Fundamental Principles, rather than being ends in themselves is one of our greatest strengths and ought to be used.

Government at the Grassroots Level

One of the great advantages of Masonry as an organization is that there is no General Grand Lodge. This enables each Grand Lodge to deal with its own problems in its own way. Even more significant is that the individual Lodges, and not the Grand Lodges, make most of the decisions and develop their own approaches to their own situations. If a single answer were presented for everyone, it would be the wrong answer for most, as the questions are not always the same. I know that being the Master of a rural lodge with a membership of thirty poses quite different problems from being the Master of an urban lodge with a membership of 250. When decisions are made at the local level they are more likely to meet local needs.

When this is combined with the small number of Masons required to form a new Lodge, we can see that Craftsmen are often able to adapt themselves to their problems by creating a new Lodge. The recent tendency of the past sixty years has been to make new Masons but not new Lodges, and so to have increasing expectations of the ideal (or even

¹Harry Kemelman, Saturday the Rabbi went Hungry (Fawcett Crest, 1966), p. 106

minimum) membership for a Lodge, contrary to the experience of the previous centuries. We tend also to forget that the formation of a lodge is a relatively easy process.

One of the brethren in our lodge is frequently compelled by his employment in the building trade to spend months on end in remote camps. He told me that at one such camp, he found a number of like-minded men who were all members of the Craft. Wouldn't it have been a wonderful way for these brothers to celebrate their common interests by asking for a dispensation to hold lodge at the camp? Even if the camp broke up in six months, and with it the lodge, so that no charter was issued, would anything but good have come of the exercise?

In the work we are told that the fifteen Fellowcrafts, after their selection, immediately formed themselves into three Fellowcraft Lodges. This underlines that, notwithstanding the attention we pay to Lodge birthdays, small Lodge numbers (as in the case of Kilwinning #0!) and other such tomfoolery, our tradition is that a lodge is there to serve its members and not the other way about. We can create one when we need one and can eliminate it when it no longer serves its purpose.

Memorization

In this modern age, no part of Masonry receives more invective than the tradition of memorizing ritual. Indeed by producing workbooks (and by raising the literacy rate to a state where everyone could read them) we made such memorization unnecessary at the moment that and to the extent that we no longer relied solely upon memory to preserve our traditions.

But the workbooks only tell part of the story; the balance (either in those parts where no specific direction is given or where the words have been intentionally omitted) must depend upon the traditions of the lodge. These traditions arise through usage, as influenced from time to time by the introduction of new or different material, and they are not written down. They are passed on only by memory.

In many cases, memorized (or remembered) details of the unwritten work will pass on from generation to generation without change, as in the case of the Master's word, basically unchanged over 600 years or so. In other cases, where the meaning or purpose of a word or aspect of the work is unclear, people have a tendency to remember it wrong, which results, over time, in change of the more meaningless or useless details to more meaningful and purposeful ones.

Writing down these details inhibits this free-flowing change and restricts change of the written details to institutions and administrative bodies in their nature less responsive than hundreds of individual memories.

There is a further strength in our insistence that our Work be reduced to memory. The principles of the Craft are intended to be with us in every moment of our lives. It is not enough to say "The Fundamental Principles of Masonry? I have them written down and can look them up." or "I can surf the net and find out." The principles of the Craft must be available to intrude upon our lives at any time. That is why memorization without comprehension, making yourself into a human tape recorder, is no better than utter ignorance. Reducing the Work to memory is not a mechanical robot procedure but

an absorption not only of the words but of the ideas and concepts they represent into our very being.

For this reason the delivery of degree work from memory creates an electricity or chemistry between the participants and the spectators like the excitement of watching a play live or a sporting event in person. The degrees create that to an even greater extent because the candidate is a participant in the play, even though he has never before seen the script. The very fact that we have taken the trouble to know the Work demonstrates to the candidate that we consider him important enough to go out of our way for him.

Diversity

The writing down of details of the ritual, as would the existence of a General Grand Lodge, tends to create uniformity, so that wherever one goes, one experiences exactly the same routine. The unwritten work, and the customs and usages of the Lodge, tend to have the opposite effect.

Not only is the Craft flexible in that it can change to meet different circumstances at different times, but it is diverse, meaning that it is different from place to place at the same time. The diversity of Masonry is one of its enduring delights. A Master Mason has a ticket to every Master Mason's Lodge in the world, and every one will be different to a greater or lesser extent. Almost all Masons I know love to visit and to experience a new slant on the work, and to hear others describe such experiences. Equally we all love to be visited, especially by sojourners from far away who do things very differently indeed. Brethren who recount their travels abroad almost invariably tell of being treated like kings when attending lodge.

It is perhaps not surprising that such an interest in diverse and different customs should prevail in an institution which, more than any other in the world, fosters tolerance for, and bridges the gulfs created by difference. Rather it is surprising that so many have desired uniformity so strongly. (Perhaps this is the influence of military thinking) It is worthwhile to reflect that our Grand Lodge was split in two in 1878 by the desire for uniformity--a clear example of how destructive a force it can be.

Fundamental Principles

I talked about our fundamental principles of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth earlier. I sometimes like to refer to them as Brotherhood, Generosity and Love of Knowledge. The fact that as an organization we have principles in itself sets us apart from many organizations. It enables both flexibility and diversity, and therefore tolerance, because we acknowledge that these objectives can be attained by a number of different activities in different situations and at different times. This sets us apart from organizations whose members have no difficulty in answering the question "What do you do?" because their activities are ends in themselves. We are able to reappraise our activities and adjust them to better accomplish our aims.

The fundamental principles which we identify as being essential to Masonry apply both to our activities within and without the lodge.

Brotherhood

The first principle of Masonry is Brotherhood. With other Masons, this means treating them as more than friends and more than acquaintances--like members of our families. And as we would do with family members we must be prepared to aid them at any time with no reservation apart from prudence. Instances of such Brotherhood abound in our history and experience. And as we have such a relationship with our Brothers in Masonry, it carries itself outward to our sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews who are equally entitled to our regard.

But of course we extend these principles still further so that we can never deal with another human being without being conscious that we are of the same stock, and are of the same nature. This consciousness is the foundation of all morality.

Generosity

Generosity, the second great principle of Masonry, flows from the first. It is no coincidence that when we, as Apprentices, are brought to the uttermost depths of material poverty, we are not told to demand our rights to someone else's bounty--indeed, we are not told that we have any such claim. On the contrary, at that moment we are reminded of our regret that we are unable to give anything to others. Generosity, or Relief, means that we must be prepared at all times to share whatever good fortune we may have with those less fortunate. This is particularly true of our brothers, but applies to anyone in distress.

Knowledge

Masonry's third great principle is Knowledge. We are constantly trying to increase our individual knowledge and to contribute to the sum total of human knowledge. We know and acknowledge that this cannot be attained by closed-mindedness and dogmatism. Our commitment to tolerance and openmindedness in all intellectual pursuits is really our affirmation that Truth can only be attained if we are at all times and in all things able to entertain, even if briefly, the possibility that we might be mistaken.

Masonry's Biggest Asset

The greatest asset of all that Masonry possesses, however, is right here in this room--I mean Masons. We have developed a system which attracts the best in men; not the richest, or smartest, or best educated, or most powerful, or most influential, but those in whom the flame of desire for Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth burns most brightly. We do that by insisting that any candidate have a deserved reputation for virtue, by insisting that members enter and stay within the order in perfect freedom, and finally by insisting that a Mason continue at all times to work on and improve himself as a man and a Mason. That means that we have not only the ability to sift out any applicants who are clearly chaff, but, and much more effectively, give the chaff every opportunity to blow away on its own.

The result is that by insisting on quality in our members, we cannot also expect rapid growth or great numbers. Rapid growth may not be a sign of health. It may be a sign of disease. Cancer is a disease where cells grow and grow until they impair the normal operation of the cells around them. It is my belief that the rapid growth in the Craft three to five decades ago was unhealthy and has impaired the development of

Masons at the normal rate since. Impaired, I say, but not prevented. I believe that declining quantity means, in this case, increasing quality in our membership and the potential for greater strength in the organization as a whole.

The result is that I cannot but agree with the only statement my grandfather made to me about the Craft of which he was such a proud member--you will never find a finer bunch of men. That is as true now as it was then; maybe more so. So long as it remains true, there can never be anything wrong with Masonry.

Summary

Let us catalogue those things which are right about Freemasonry: it has an organization which is ruled primarily at the Lodge or grassroots level, which enables it to be very diverse and therefore interesting, and also to have the flexibility to adapt to local and even individual circumstances and to changing times. This flexibility and diversity is further enabled by our dedication to principles which allow for many different approaches but which encompasses the root of all morality, of all charity, and of all knowledge. We are able to work with these somewhat nebulous concepts because we have a strong historical basis to refer to and because the concepts are instilled by requiring Masons to remember the traditional expressions of them. Finally, our system has in fact brought together men who are especially dedicated to each other, to God and their fellow creatures.