

Century-Ending Dilemmas

Virginia Lodge of Research No. 1777

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September 25, 1999

Today, the 25th of September, is the 268th day of the year 1999. In just 37 days it will be Halloween; in 62 days, Thanksgiving; in 91 days, Christmas; and in 98 days, at the stroke of midnight, we will learn whether the Y2K dilemma, about which we have heard so much, is fact or folly. Hopefully we will find that the feverish effort of the past few years to modify our computer programs, in an attempt to avert computer-induced problems, has been successful.

There are some who would have us believe that with the end of this year life as we know it, will be severely tested, at least temporarily, because of complications existing in the computer programs that are so basic to our existence in this day and age. While millions of dollars already have been spent to identify problems and correct basic faults, there are those who warn that with the birth of the year 2000:

- a) Telephone services could be terminated because of errors in data calculations.
- b) Driver's licenses could expire because some motor vehicle departments may not be able to recognize dates later than December 31, 1999.
- c) Brokers could miscalculate capital gains and other transactions because of faulty dates.
- d) Department stores could reject credit cards because of calculations that outstanding charges are 100 years overdue.
- e) Automated tellers could swallow bank cards, thinking they have expired.

- f) Social security payments could be cut off because the agency's computers may miscalculate ages.
- g) Tax payments could be erroneously billed as overdue by the I.R.S.
- h) Pharmacies could refuse to refill prescriptions because the computer might say it has expired.
- i) And finally, our fraternal computers, once we have reached the year 2000, might conclude that our Masonic records are either in error or non-existent!

Only time will tell whether or not these alarming possibilities, or others of like consequence, will occur. Hopefully already completed remedial efforts will prove sufficient to maintain social, political, and economic stability. That such an eventuality may be realized is suggested by computer testing programs that are now underway or already completed.

Nevertheless, and despite the assurances of knowledgeable authorities to the contrary, there are some who are uncertain about what will happen on January 1, 2000. Moreover, in anticipation of an unknown which they fear could be complicated, some are now preparing for possible crisis by setting aside substantial stores of food, clothing, medicine, water, and money.

The computer crisis, however, is not the only challenge to Freemasonry that is looming on the Year 2000 horizon. As I look at the fraternity, my brethren, I perceive a number of other very serious issues, "double-zero issues," if you will, issues which have evolved because of our failure either to recognize challenge early on or to organize, in timely fashion, fitting responses. If this Craft is destined to perpetuate itself, the solution to a handful of double zero issues must soon be found. With your indulgence I should like to lay at your doorstep a few of them in outline form.

Let me begin with the double-zero challenge of race in the fraternity. It is true, of course, that great strides forward have been realized in the years of this decade. We

have opened the doors in some jurisdictions to all men of color, and of that I am very proud. In at least 29 U.S. Grand Lodges the recognition of Prince Hall counterparts has now been effected, primarily for the purpose of visitation. But these acts of recognition of Prince Hall have, in my opinion, may have done little more than legitimize a "**separate but equal**" concept that long ago was ruled unacceptable in other forums.

In far too many jurisdictions Masons of color still find it difficult to realize basic Masonic privileges, specifically that of membership and/or unrestricted visitation in lodges that enjoy the benefits of "regularity." Until that time when men of all races will be accepted, on an equitable basis, everywhere in the Craft, the "double-zero" challenge of race will impede Masonry's progress and impinge upon its fortunes. The recognition of Prince Hall Masonry alone, in my mind, will not right all of the wrongs that have afflicted the fraternity for so many years in America.

A second "double-zero" challenge in the fraternity is the issue of religion. It is a source of frustration for me to note, almost 275 years after the mother Grand Lodge established the right of men of all faiths to seek the comfort of Masonic membership, that ecumenism in the Craft is less than perfectly developed. We take pride, deservedly so or not, in being recognized as a collection of brothers known for our ability - as Christians, Jews, Muslims, and as men of all other faiths - to work together in fraternal concord. But, unfortunately, by properly and consistently demonstrating an unusual appreciation of tolerance, we have subjected ourselves to attack by those who espouse singular spiritual interests.

The record of Masonry, my brethren, despite its stated professions, is stained by the excesses of parochialism, whereby geography, ethnicity, and culture may exercise unusual and, on occasion, undesirable influences on the Craft. In some countries and in some Grand Lodges, religious preference is a fact of life. This is not as it should be. We must therefore defend and propagate our belief that people everywhere will know that Masons in America are God-fearing men of toleration and moderation, men who by word

and deed preach and practice inclusive rather than exclusive principles. In this we are unique, and it is because of this uniqueness that we are and will continue to be unjustly criticized by partisan forces. Nevertheless we must hold fast to principle, for it is by principle that the character of Masonry is forged.

A third "double-zero" challenge that we face in the fraternity is the issue of the role of the ritual of Freemasonry. The bottom line, as I see it, is simply this: What is the position that ritual should play in the Masonic experience in the future, and how is that role, if any, to be satisfied? This is an issue that we have procrastinated over for far too many years, in consequence of which we have experienced a loss in the proficiency of our ritualistic proponents and a lessening of interest by our initiates in the ritual of the Craft. These are unpleasant facts that few of us want to face, but in the process of disregarding reality, we tend to complicate, rather than simplify the problem. It is by no means certain that we can insure the preservation of the ritual by legislatively compelling rote mastery of it. On the other hand, by permitting and fostering inattention to the ritual, the long-term prosperity of the Craft is endangered.

We have long since passed the point of no return on this matter. If our ritual is to continue to be the centerpiece of the Craft, we simply must reach agreement on its content and determine who is to be responsible for its propagation and preservation. The bottom line, my brethren, is that by virtue of our inattentiveness to this matter over the past quarter century, we have relegated ritual to a position of relative unimportance. Is this what we want? If not, isn't it time for us to correct this glaring weakness in the Craft?

A fourth "double-zero" challenge in the fraternity involves the interrelated issues of renewal and rejuvenation, issues to which we have for many years given only lip service. From the initiation of the Solomon II program in Pennsylvania in the mid-eighties to the present, the renewal effort has been largely left to chance, with Grand Lodges encouraging and Subordinate Lodges generally ignoring organized and regimented efforts to increase our numbers and activate our members. It is no longer

enough to merely talk about this issue at the highest levels of leadership; we need immediate action at the grass roots level. The Craft simply cannot endure much more aging and still remain a viable force in society. It is now, my brethren, a case of do or die.

The Secretary of Education recently stated that there are upwards of 52,000,000 students enrolled in the public schools of this nation. The vast majority of these young people, unfortunately, simply do not know that Masonry exists. Our minimal impact on this potential fraternal market is suggested by the relatively insignificant number of young people who are attracted to our Masonic youth organizations. While it is virtually impossible to obtain accurate data on this subject, I believe that at this point in time not more than 50,000 youngsters are thus involved. In view of this painful reality, I suggest that our survival as a Craft demands a Masonic approach to youth that is no less encompassing and no less effective than that of such organizations as the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, and the 4-H Clubs of America.

A fifth double-zero challenge to the fraternity is the issue of territorial jurisdiction. I speak specifically of practices in American Grand Lodges that tend to make a mockery of Masonry's proclaimed belief in man's freedom. As individuals we believe that man is endowed with a host of freedoms which permit him to live, work, and play whenever and wherever he chooses. Many of our Masonic heroes established their place in history by proclaiming and fighting for freedom. As a nation we fought in World War II for the Four Freedoms enunciated by our President and Brother, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The interest of Masons in Freedom have been carried down to the present, particularly in foreign Grand Lodges that are more inclined than are American Grand Lodges to discuss political and social issues of consequence. In November of this year Grand Masters and Grand Secretaries from around the world will convene in Buenos Aires to discuss Masonry from a global point of view. I am sure that at this symposium there will be spirited

discussions of the role that Freemasonry plays in the affairs of man. In these discussions, I am certain, the past will be reviewed in depth, for it is in the presumed glories of yesterday that man finds evidence to support his notions of propriety. I doubt, however, that many, if any, of the consequential freedom issues of the world today will be tabled, and I certainly do not expect that much time, if any, will be allocated to the discussion of fundamental freedoms within the Craft.

This is a pity for there is a crying need to look at the way Masonry regards the freedom of its members and aspirants, and particularly of its aspirants. The ultimate question, my brethren, is simply this: Are we organized and willing to implement those principles which we proclaim to be the foundations of the Craft? Or are we organized instead, in archaic and almost feudalistic form and function, to maintain and perpetuate what has become a system of fraternal monopoly? It seems to me that in many ways we have opted for monopoly rather than freedom.

Many non-Masons seeking entrance into the Craft find that their basic freedoms of movement and association, so far as the fraternity is concerned, have been fraternally broached. Candidates often learn that by the accident of residence alone they have become enslaved to people and organizations about which they know very little. Regrettably when such aspirants learn that for them to enter Masonry where they have friends, especially if their friends are situated in another community or in another jurisdiction, they must first seek the permission of strangers, they often protest and, occasionally, they rebel.

Who can blame them? Is this freedom? Of course it is not. Has it always been thus? No it certainly has not been. In fact, until the middle of the last century, rigid adherence to jurisdictional guidelines was not a priority matter. Preoccupation about jurisdictional prerogatives and rights became an issue during and immediately after the Civil War, however, and in those years the foundation stones of territorial jurisdiction, as we know it, were laid. In that process the Grand Lodge of D.C. played a significant role, for until

the outbreak of the war, Lodges in that jurisdiction were not encumbered by residence rules. In consequence of pressure applied by sister Grand Lodges, however, the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia in 1864 decreed that its Lodges must turn to Lodges in other jurisdictions for information about non-resident applicants, and in 1870 this Grand Lodge took action to require the previous consent of Lodges located elsewhere before acting on the petitions of non-resident applicants.

That our long-entrenched practices restrict the free choice of non-Masons to seek light wherever they choose leads us to question whether or not we can undo the excesses fostered by a the system that preserves what I believe is an antiquated practice. I think that we can and will, in time, given some imaginative and innovative thinking, fostered in part by the now widespread recognition of Prince Hall Grand Lodges. If Grand Lodges do not, in fact, exercise exclusive control of the territories in which they operate, it seems unlikely that they can continue to claim exclusive jurisdiction over the people that live in those territories. The dawn, happily, may be breaking at last.

The sixth and final "double-zero" challenge that I want to lay before you today is the issue of Masonic discipline. Masonry is a discipline for life, within which the members of the Craft are taught how Masons are to live with themselves and with the world at large. In this day of instantaneous communication, however, familiarity has bred a lot of contempt. People, in general, are not as courteous to one another as they once were, and rightly or wrongly, and for reasons that at times defy logic, they tend to selectivity in their behavior. In consequence, respect for age, tradition, and custom, to say nothing of law and statute, have suffered, not only in the Craft, but in society as a whole. Let us never forget that we have voluntarily chosen to live as Freemasons, as men who have respect for our leaders and as brothers who have a healthy regard for our obligations to those we have elected to follow.

The challenge of authority, Masonic or civil, is not now and should not ever be a part of the Grand Design. Nevertheless we must recognize that such challenges have been and

are being made, thereby making it necessary to ask why is there such a lack of harmony in our world, temporal and fraternal? Why are we not able to contain national, religious, racial mistrust? Why can we not achieve and maintain the social Utopia envisioned by the Psalmist who proclaimed that it was good and pleasant for brethren to dwell together in unity? Who knows? Certainly not me. But I do know that these are challenges which we must soon contain.

In summary let me suggest that although our double-zero problems are many and complex, we have resources sufficient to meet and successfully overcome every issue that we face, including those pertaining to race, religion, ritual, renewal and rejuvenation, jurisdictional reasonableness, and Masonic discipline, if we will but labor together in an effort to match our words with our deeds. I therefore implore you to make every effort that you can to contain these "double-zero issues" and thereby earn new respect and admiration for Freemasonry and Freemasons throughout a world that really yearns for friendship, morality, and brotherly love. This, my brethren, is our millennium-ending and millennium-starting mission. May God give us strength and resolve sufficient to permit each of us to make an adequate response.