

To Be, Or Not to Be

(With apologies to William Shakespeare)

William M. Johnson

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

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I realized on my way here today that I would be standing among Brethren who are much better equipped than I at disseminating Masonic Information. I am sure that you have heard most of what I am going to say many times before and I had to ask myself the question - "Why are we here?"

It suffices to say that we are here because we love this fraternity and if any of our remarks point to criticism, they spring from a sense of genuine concern, not contempt. As officers of our Grand Lodge, we learn a lot, we hear a lot, and we see a lot. This does not necessarily make us scholars in the truest sense of that word, but it does guarantee one thing: Exposure to Freemasonry in this Commonwealth at all levels.

You, of the Lodge of Research, continue to progress in digging into facts and findings from which our Craft may learn. Progress is a wonderful thing.

A friend of mine gauged the world's progress by his own family's changing methods of crossing the Missouri River. "My grandfather rowed across it in a boat, my father drove over the new bridge in a horse-drawn wagon, and I crossed it in an automobile. What's more, my son flew over it in an airplane. That's progress!"

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The Long Range Planning Committee cannot report that kind of progress, but I do want to share with you a little of what we are all about, so I used as an outline the old standard format: Who? What? When? Where? and Why?

Most Worshipful John Boyd Obenchain proposed to the Past Grand Masters at the 1985 Grand Annual Communication that a committee composed of Past Grand Masters be appointed to study the future of Freemasonry, and determine what we need to do to prepare for that future. Five members of this Committee are Past Grand Masters. The Grand Master, the Deputy Grand Master, and two senior Past Grand Masters serve as ex-officio members.

Usually when we talk about our Past Grand Masters we heavily lard our remarks with compliments. That's fine, but some may ask why only Past Grand Masters serve. I know we have some fine minds all around us. I believe Past Grand Masters were chosen because they have visited many of our Sister Grand Jurisdictions and remain in correspondence with them and their active exchange of ideas is a healthy thing for a committee like this.

What areas are to be studied? Let us look at some of them. We will look at Membership and attendance; Ritual; Finances; and Matters of General Interest and Concern. The committee was asked to look into all aspects of the fraternity. We have certainly had some interesting questions. Of course, being in the Grand Lodge office, I get to see the avalanche of mail from our Brethren, for our Lodges, from other Grand Lodges. I get to see the complaints, the fears, the questions.

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We get questions like this one: Has Freemasonry weakened? Is that why it is being ignored today? Congress has talked about a recipe for gridlock. Have we created a recipe for gridlock? Why are we losing a thousand plus members every year?

Good questions and they deserve an answer. Some Masonic writers are even asking Hamlet's question: "To be, or not to be?" Are eligible young men of today asking Hamlet's question: To be a Mason, or not to be a Mason?

Some very successful young men ask this question. They find after graduation that they have material success but some tell us: "But I really have nothing to hold on to." You and I know that Freemasonry replaces that void, that nothing, with something.

An interesting parallel to our discussion is something which happened at Cornell University during the sixties. They weakened requirements to accommodate the masses. Results continue to be a very disturbing factor in education. Indeed, we would have nothing to offer mankind if there is the slightest weakening of the real nature and purpose of Freemasonry. The charm and excellence of its teachings are singular in aim to establishing the Brotherhood of Man. There can be no weakening of standards, of tenets, of structure for our Ancient Craft.

Analysts and critics are prone to say the statistics all point to the decline of Masonry, and they, too, ask in the 20th century: "Masonry? To be, or not to be?"

After some very thought-provoking questions we find a measure of truth in Dean Roscoe Pound's statement: "Freemasonry has more to offer the 20th century than the 20th century has to offer Freemasonry."

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The broad areas to be studied have produced another school of thought in line with the cartoon strip "Pogo." Do you recall Possum saying: "I've found the enemy and the enemy is us-n!" In many of our problems, is the enemy us-n? Have we as a fraternity failed to take a long look at ourselves to determine what kind of job we are doing representing this fraternity?

Masonic Lodges have some of the ablest men in almost every walk of life. Do we train and utilize these men who are the greatest resource we have? Does the world around us echo the need for someone to support the service man can render? Can we make man understand the full meaning of the words: "You are not done; I stand beside you; I am your Brother."

It has been said that Freemasonry is the custodian of the world's morality. It is one of our great cornerstones, but morality is individual, is it not? The work of individuals gets the attention of the world. We, as Masons, probably don't command much attention when only 20% of our membership attend Lodges.

We cannot discount the work of Masons who work in homes and hospitals throughout the world and who make a real contribution. But let us not confuse activities with attendance. Why don't they attend Lodge? Is the enemy us-n?

Perhaps we, as a fraternity, don't realize our own impact upon the social system of the 20th century. The work, then, is to develop the vision to plan for the future; to develop the ability to understand the potential abilities of each Brother available for service. Let us remember that we cannot make Freemasonry better than it is, but we can LET Freemasonry make us better.

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Can we invite men to recognize the best that is in them so that they can carry the thought expressed by Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles, in a letter written to the Corinthian Church: "Ye Are God's Building!" Now there's quite a thought! The Temple within the hearts of men will never be finished, and that's our real work.

I like the old legend that Most Worshipful Brother Dwight L. Smith tells about a youth too young to fight in the Napoleonic Wars, and so was permitted to carry the regimental banner. During a bitter battle his unit was advancing on the enemy under heavy fire. In his youthful zeal the boy went so far ahead of the regiment that he was almost out of contact. The commanding officer sent a runner with a message: "Bring the standard back to the line!" With heroic recklessness the lad sent back the ringing reply: "Bring the line up to the standard!"

Ours is quite a standard to live up to, and the world says: Don't tell me; show me.

Frantic about loss of members we have tried the ways of the world to bring members back. We have experimented with all kinds of ventures. It may be time to try Freemasonry! We cannot allow business to overshadow the jewel of fellowship, nor can we be obsessed with the thought that all of Freemasonry is found in the ritual. I tell the story of the poorest ritualist I know who was the best Master my Lodge ever had.

The late Most Worshipful Brother A. Douglas Smith, Jr., in a discussion about the emphasis placed on the ritual, became a little impatient and asked: "Will we throw the ritual out one door and ask the ladies in the other door?" Sounds like Brother Doug, doesn't it? The ritual is the vehicle which teaches the magnificent lessons of morality and philosophy that are Freemasonry, but ritual is not the primary objective of Freemasonry.

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The Long Range Planning Committee recognizes the need to put things in proper perspective. It recognizes that the foundation stone of Masonry is not the Grand Lodge. It is the individual Mason and the local Lodge of which he is a member. The crying need is a membership with a better understanding of what Freemasonry is and what it is not.

When this committee has reviewed all of this material, all of the facts, we expect to make certain recommendations to the Grand Lodge officers. We have had several excellent papers presented and the discussions in committee have been very revealing. Our committee was put in operation to serve a five year time frame and we believe that is going to give us an opportunity to look at all of the things we set out to examine.

Never a week goes by without some piece of anti-Masonic literature falling in my lap. A great deal of this literature has to do with religion and all the Masonic literature nowadays is having its best scholars of theology write a paper on the answer to some of these anti-Masonic articles. I cannot help but be amazed at how little society knows about our Fraternity. I have a letter from a lady in Van Nuys, California. She writes about how she took issue with an article she read stating George Washington was a Freemason because, she wrote us: "I thought he was a devout Christian."

The anti-Masonic literature is nothing new. Most Worshipful Brother Reuben Murrell Page wrote this in 1882 when he addressed the Grand Lodge: "Let us prove that our protestations are not empty phrases and meaningless words. That we do not pursue the shadow and neglect the substance. Let no man for a moment believe that Masonry is a substitute for the religion of God. Such it is not; such it cannot be. It has been said that Christianity and Masonry are of different origins; the one being divine; the other of human origin. Masonry being merely of human origin can only hope, by the blessing of God, to be an humble handmaid of religion. Doing its duty in the different sphere, and upon the

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lower plane, where man could only place it, seeking to improve man's condition in this life, but with no claim or hope of bettering his soul's condition in the world to come. Let not then any Brother teach, believe, or act upon the idea, however vague or remote, that Masonry can be a substitute for the religion of God."

From this address we learn that 100 years ago our Brethren had this Freemasonry vs. Christianity debate, and probably the same things we are having today with the exception of the electronic media which magnifies the issue and much of their message is not true. Our point is that this problem has existed a long time. How have we as a Fraternity educated society as to who we are, why we are, and what we do? We return to Possum's question: "Is the enemy us-n?" Are we doing an adequate job in perpetuating our ideals and philosophies which are a part of our heritage? Effective progress should have been made in 100 years so that the name of George Washington, Christian and Freemason, are synonymous in world thought.

Again I will quote Dwight Smith: "Well, we seem to assume that Freemasonry is a fly-by-night fad of the mid-20th century; something to be tossed hither and yon by every wind that blows. In the restless, superficial age in which we live, we are impatient unless our organized bodies have slogans, carry banners, and make official pronouncements on about every subject under the sun, however trivial. We want them to follow the conventional pattern, to maintain lobbies, to publish aims and objectives, to conduct drives and campaigns, to strive to get into the headlines and on the airwaves, to write checks to everything that sounds benevolent and has a board of directors. In general, to have a finger in every pie."

Then Most Worshipful Brother Smith goes on to say: "Freemasonry does none of these things."

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Where will our committee on Long Range Planning focus its attention? Instead of fixing our attention on all the reasons the Fraternity is declining, I hope we will come up with some guidelines to help the Fraternity get back on its feet.

The membership statistics from the Masonic Service Association came in late July. Fifty Grand Jurisdictions, as well as the Grand Jurisdiction of Puerto Rico, are listed and not a one of them show a net gain for the year 1986. The total net loss in members: 74,459. That is a great lose and this committee is going to ask WHY?

We hope to knock down some of the fences and take a look behind the scenes and all for the purpose of helping. If we can focus on the deeper issues before us, I believe we are going to get a handle on constructive ways to help. Of a positive nature, we are looking at not only what Virginia is doing but what other Grand Lodges are doing to meet these challenges.

Many of us take comfort in the belief that Masonry never changes but take a look at the changes here in Virginia in a brief three years. We now vote on moral fitness just once. We ballot on proficiency in the degree from which the candidate seeks to be advance; and Executive Order No. 4 this year contains a statement to read to each candidate when he is being prepared that the penalties are symbolic. So the mechanics are changing.

We understand that seven jurisdictions now accept petitions for 18 year olds. The Grand Lodge of England removed the penalties but is considering putting them back. We find that several Grand Jurisdictions report minorities in DeMolay Chapters with no problems. The Grand Lodge of New York has published an excellent pamphlet entitled, Q and A, or Answers to Questions, about the Masonic Fraternity.

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The September issue of the California Freemason includes a membership opinion survey and a return envelope for the answers. It is interesting that their survey asks some of the questions we have discussed today, questions such as: What is the most important thing you have gained as a member of a Masonic Lodge? Are you getting as much from Masonry as you originally expected? How often do you attend Lodge? What keeps you from attending more often? Wouldn't it be interesting to see the answers California Masons give on their survey?

The survey struck me as being Hamlet's question in a little different language. "To be, or not to be - a Freemason - that is the question." The Grand Lodge of Maine is about 3,000 miles from the Grand Lodge of California, but their Grand Secretary at the Conference of Grand Secretaries in 1986 talked to us about - eliminating the continuous drop out of line officers - and the dismal record with suspended Brethren, NPD's and Demits, and on and on it goes.

The Grand Master of Masons in Illinois gave permission to the Worshipful Master of each Lodge, in his discretion, to permit candidates to advance without writing for a Dispensation from the Grand Master. He, that is the Grand Master, said that he had asked the Worshipful Master to assure himself that the candidate had a knowledge of the passes and signs, as well as a reasonable knowledge of the teachings of Masonry before he permitted a candidate to forego examination.

A great deal of thought and energy have been expended in surveys, studies, discussion groups, concerned Masons working together for explicit proof that Masonry's beneficial effects must again be at the forefront of this century, and Hamlet's question may thus be answered in a glorious affirmative. The solutions are not going to come overnight, but

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committees like ours search for definite means to help our fraternity go forward. "We will build no monuments; we hope to build Lighthouses."

The Long Range Planning Committee of the Grand Lodge of Iowa has been working on enhancing the "image" of the Fraternity. The Statue of Liberty project was a big part of the Masonic image what that Grand Lodge chose to reflect.

We find Grand Lodges doing something about the challenges. Generally speaking, it is too soon to determine what the effect of some of these programs is going to be. You are familiar with the "Solomon II Program" sponsored by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. We are certain it made Freemasonry more visible, but actual results leave much to be desired. Many Grand Lodges are making Masonry more visible through their scholarship programs.

We in America are trained to place great value on numbers, on quantity, how much? How big? How many? Yet Most Worshipful Brother Conrad Hahn wrote in 1960: "There is grave danger in counting heads."

The vast respect the Fraternity enjoyed two centuries ago was not due to numbers but because members actually practiced what we preach. Men of the caliber of Washington, Marshall and Franklin were respected because they lived by the tenets we have in Freemasonry.

Today our guideline is to do something, and perhaps the crying need is to be something. We don't want to change men coming to us of "free will and accord," so we don't have membership drives, and when we get down to the nitty-gritty, we, that is the members

of this committee, are going to look at our ancient customs to determine whether any of our modern-day methods are scrapping these. Advertising, highway markers, television spots, are for the masses. Freemasonry is not. We were drawn to the Craft for reasons known to each man individually.

We went to it, and that idea of choice is a big part of Masonry. When I was privileged to serve in the Grand East, my slogan or theme was - Freemasonry by Choice.

We have chosen Freemasonry and now we must ask ourselves can our ancient fraternity hold its place in the scientific, technological society in which we find ourselves? We must not flinch when change is needed, but we must bring the line up to the standard. Masonic scholars are few and far between, and in the main they agree that Freemasonry must remain Freemasonry. We must insist on dignity and decorum and respect and remember that it behooves us to keep our priorities clear.

A woman named Lynn Dumenil wrote a book entitled Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930. This lady is a professor of history at Whitman and the book is published by Princeton University Press and sells for \$30. The author examined the many problems that existed during 1880-1930, such as declining membership, poor attendance at Lodge, and the anti-Masonic position of some religious groups. Does it sound familiar? This lady notes that too much stress was placed on the glories of the past. She also notes that the time is coming when men will discard the useless things of life and she asks: Can Freemasonry stand this test? The author points out that Masonry is not sloppy sentimentalism or a church pink tea, but a practical, workaday system. This lady writes that Masons have grown extravagant in the matter of their dining room service just as they have in all things.

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She expresses it: "Brethren used to be satisfied with a good old oyster supper and a cup of coffee, but nowadays the oyster supper is merely the first course." Finances are an important topic under review. We may not be surprised to know that some of our Virginia Lodges have difficulty paying their Grand Lodge assessments. Loss of members means loss of dues. The Long Range Planning Committee is looking at the interrelation of all the factors adversely affecting our fraternity today. Certainly funding for our programs is a big concern.

Now we have discussed the Who, What, Where, When of this committee, and we come to the question, Why? Why are so many dilemmas surfacing in the late eighties? The whys and wherefores should be fairly obvious from my remarks to you this morning. Looking at the picture of Freemasonry in the world today, we probably realize that the problems are not going to disappear magically, but we realize, too, how little our members know about what Freemasonry is. As members of this fraternity, our aim must be to make it more effective than it has ever been. Most Worshipful Brother Dwight Smith says that the solution to Freemasonry's problems is Freemasonry.

A well-known general was asked if he has a real passion for anything in his military career. He answered: "Yes. Peace on our planet so my grandson will never have to see the horrors of war." Now, there's a motive, a goal, an objective, worth working for. Our ancient, honorable and gentle Craft is a peacemaker. It is the still, small voice of harmony in all that the Mason does.

The Long Range Planning Committee will seek to fulfill its assignment. It will seek the vision of the young lad who cried, "Bring the line up to the standard." It will seek to awaken a new spirit of growth in understanding what it means to be a Freemason. The committee will work to know that the worst times will pass and that the brotherhood of

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man under the Fatherhood of God is a present possibility. It will explore the ways to make Masonry more visible individually through the practice of the tenets of our Craft. We believe a spirit of renewal is closer than we imagine and the committee will work with enthusiasm when erroneous and negative interpretations of our fraternity are directed to our attention.

The Reader's Digest of December 1982 has a wonderful piece of philosophy entitled "Anyway," and it addresses some directions we might take to heart: "People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Love them anyway."

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

DO GOOD ANYWAY.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.

DO GOOD ANYWAY.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

BE HONEST AND FRANK ANYWAY.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

DO GOOD ANYWAY.

The biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest minds.

THINK BIG ANYWAY.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.

FIGHT FOR SOME UNDERDOG ANYWAY.

What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight.

BUILD ANYWAY.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth

GIVE THE WORLD THE BEST YOU'VE GOT ANYWAY.