

Unity in the York Rite

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Virginia Research Royal Arch Chapter No. 1753

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It is a real joy to be able to share this very unusual convocation. Congratulations are due to Research Chapter No. 1753 for the foresight that it has displayed in arranging a program to honor the leaders of the York Rite in Virginia. In my almost 50 years of Masonry I have never before had the opportunity to sit in a tiled meeting in which the Grand Master, the Grand High Priest, the Grand Commander, and the Grand Master of the Grand Encampment were all asked to be present.

It goes without saying that I am duly impressed and grateful for the privilege you have afforded all of us to participate in what is nothing less than a truly unparalleled opportunity to advance the cause of Masonic unity in Virginia. We should get together more often like this to promote the interests of our Craft and to consider our personal roles, great or small, in the noble work that we have undertaken in the name of Freemasonry.

We might begin by recognizing that the concept of unity has commanded the attention of men of stature throughout history. Lincoln, for example, proclaimed that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Marcus Aurelius, many centuries earlier, observed astutely that men are made for cooperation, "like feet, like hands," making action against one another "contrary to nature." I particularly like Etienne Senacour's discerning observation that union, when it is perfect, can do everything.

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Underlying these and other like observations pertaining to the concept of unity is a basic but seldom recognized truth — that often it is out of a lack of unity that unity evolves. This is well illustrated in Masonry by the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England, the Mother Grand Lodge of the world, an 1813 action which settled what had been a very contentious matter and united English Masons who had been seriously divided for the better part of a century.

Thus our English forefathers, perhaps without intent, not only established Masonic harmony in their country, but by voluntary and conciliatory action, they also created the foundation upon which the parameters of York Rite Masonry were subsequently established worldwide. That act of unification became, in reality, the fundamental law of the Craft, a merging agreement whereby Masons, from that time on, would commit themselves to the cause of cooperation. The impact of that agreement is clearly evident in the evolution of Masonic law, ritual, customs, and programs, not only in England but everywhere else, including Virginia.

The process of creating unity out of disunity is not confined to Masonry alone, however, as any cursory review of the pages of history will reveal. Our forefathers established this nation in consequence of dissatisfaction with the political environment in which they lived. It was also dissatisfaction with the status quo that led to the establishment of such organizations as the League of Nations; the successor to that organization, the United Nations; the European Union, NATO, and hundreds of diverse associations, political, economic, and military, that have been established in consequence of need during our lifetime.

Nowhere, however, has the necessity for unity been more fully appreciated than it is among those who have dedicated themselves to securing a better world through

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Freemasonry. It is thus not unusual for us to attribute our successes to "unity" and our failures, of which there may be too many, to "disunity." Hence, in the Freemasonry that we practice in Virginia, we invoke with purpose the 133rd Psalm early in the initiation of our candidates in the Entered Apprentice degree. "Behold," we remind every initiate, "how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity."

Further, when we install our Worshipful Masters, we implore all the other brethren of the lodge "to please each other and to unite in the grand design of being happy and communicating happiness." In the achievement of such ends we endeavor to harmoniously organize our Craft, to educate our members, and above all, to continually focus attention on the beneficent aims of our Order.

While contemplating these underlying principles of Masonic unity my thoughts took me back the Southwest Masonic School which met for many years on the campus of VPI. That school was convened, in its later years, in Ambler Johnson Hall where, in the disaster of last April, a madman assassinated the first of his many victims. For a number of years this school offered Virginia Masons – Symbolic, Capitular, and Chivalric – an unparalleled opportunity to come together in a setting which nurtured cooperation and understanding.

The Southwest Masonic School was really three schools in one, offering Masons instruction and networking opportunities in all of the degrees of the York Rite. It was an educational experience, ritualistic and philosophical, presented in a delightful social setting and organized to serve both the individual Mason and his family. Although each of the York Rite bodies was assigned a meeting place somewhere in Ambler Johnson Hall, it was easy for those in attendance to move from one school to another, a practice that was encouraged.

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Attendees always included the officers of each of the Grand Bodies, all of whom considered it mandatory to pay official visits, on an agreed schedule, to the sessions sponsored by their counterparts. The evenings were, by design, ecumenical in nature, with social activities, including bingo and watermelon feasts, card games, and animated and enlightening conversations between old friends and new acquaintances.

Usually, on one or two afternoons at the school, there would be wide-ranging discussions of Masonic issues in a designated lounge within the Ambler Johnson dorm. All Masons were welcome to listen or to speak, as Archer Gay, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge, presided over open-ended discussions, an honor afforded him by virtue of the respect and affection in which he was held by the brethren.

Archer was, of course, a Past Grand Master and a Past Grand Commander, and he should have been a Past Grand High Priest, an honor which, unfortunately, he was denied. His credentials were unsullied, however, and he was, unquestionably, the most knowledgeable Mason in Virginia at that time.

The sessions at VPI afforded Virginia's Masons an unparalleled opportunity to come together, to work together, and thereafter to return home enlightened, inspired, and usually motivated beyond expectation. In and of itself this school did more to create a real sense of unity among the brethren of Virginia and their families than any other program, official or ad hoc, of which I have any knowledge. Unfortunately time and circumstance eventually had their way, and the Southwest Masonic School is now but a footnote in Virginia's Masonic history.

Since then the York Rite Bodies of Virginia have made sincere attempts to compensate for the loss of opportunity that was inevitable upon the closing of the school at VPI. The

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Grand Officers have undeniably stayed in touch, mostly by attending each other's Grand Sessions and by sharing with each other, via newsletters and electronic media, their personal concerns and those of the bodies they lead.

We still have ritualistic schools, of course, some of which are multi-disciplined, and they are scheduled advantageously in various parts of the jurisdiction. Unfortunately, however, we no longer have a structured opportunity, such as that which we enjoyed at Blacksburg, to encourage ongoing cooperative exchanges among the leaders of our Grand Bodies.

In the absence of formalized activities, other than that of our Masonic Home Day, our Grand Officers have tended to focus, in almost parochial fashion, on those issues closest at hand, almost without realization that the concerns of one body in the Craft are, in reality, the concerns of all.

These practices have, regrettably, induced a modicum of fraternal separatism, thereby unintentionally nurturing the roots of contention, rather than of cooperation, particularly at the subordinate levels of all of our York Rite Bodies. We go on, it seems, from one design to another, oblivious of the need for and advantages of fraternal interdependence.

It almost seems that we are determined to duplicate in the Grand Chapter and the Grand Commandery, much of what is done — and in the same manner that it is done — in the Grand Lodge. Thus each body has its own schools, its own publications, its own area conferences, its own administrative procedures and offices, and its own schedule of Grand Visitations. Duplication is admittedly the highest form of flattery, but does it nurture the unity that should prevail in the Craft?

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The answer to that question, I think, is "probably not." What then can be done to strengthen cooperation among the York Rite Bodies of Virginia? Perhaps consideration of the message, partially hidden in the words of the 133rd Psalm, will suggest a possible course of action.

Many years ago Bruce Harmon Hunt, in a compilation of materials published in reviews written for the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, offered a logical explanation of the Psalm.

In that review Hunt observed that David, whom he designated as "the singer of sweet songs," was deeply concerned about the unity of his people. He claimed that David knew that the tribes were apt to drift apart and become enemies if they were not held together by some strong bond. The preservation of unity was thus made the theme of this psalm.

It was unity, Hunt declared, that the tribes sought, as they participated in pilgrimages or retreats to the same place, at least three times a year. This practice was calculated to bring about the intercommunication of tribesmen with each other. The practice was most certainly one of the chief means by which the unity of feeling and sentiment was kept up among the scattered members of the nation century after century.

The pilgrimages, said Hunt, were to the Israelites what the meeting at the Olympics and other games were to the Greeks, what a trek to Mecca was and is to the Moslems, and, in a sense, what Grand Lodge is to Freemasons. It must have helped greatly the various classes of pilgrims – the spiritual and the secular, the rich and the poor, the citizen and the peasant – to feel themselves united with each other and with the great Jehovah.

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Just as the 133rd Psalm recorded the means by which the Israelites were bound one to the other, Hunt concluded, it should also remind us that genuine unity is the unvarying condition of real success. While temporary success may seem to be attained at times without unity of thought and purpose, real and lasting success can be attained only when unity of heart and mind is the principal ingredient of the effort.

I wonder, in these days when it appears that Masonic unity is less developed than it could and should be, if in Hunt's analysis there may not be a suggestion for an advantageous course of action? Specifically, I wonder if periodic retreats, not unlike those of the ancient tribes of Israel, might not also be advantageous to those of us who make up the "tribes" of York Rite Masonry today. The potential of such a development is sufficient to stagger the imagination.

Believing that it is man's destiny to concern himself with both the "what is" and the "what could be" aspects of life, I would therefore like to suggest that sometime in the future we emulate, at least on a trial basis, the practices of the ancient Israelites by forming an unofficial Grand Advisory Council, with membership being restricted, at least initially, to the elected officers of the Grand Lodge, the Grand Chapter, and the Grand Commandery.

Should such a Grand Advisory Council ever evolve, it could fruitfully discuss an almost endless list of unsolved issues. Hopefully, by virtue of the interaction of opinion and critique, such a forum might discover a pathway to enlightenment on matters that have for decades defied solution. While I obviously am without portfolio in any of the Grand Bodies, I nevertheless do not hesitate to suggest, in no particular order, a few of the many subjects that might be suitable for inclusion in the agenda of such a forum.

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In my view a Grand Advisory Council might well delve into the issue of the extension (or development) of York Rite Masonry in this jurisdiction. The population of this Commonwealth is constantly shifting, in consequence of which we now have fraternal outposts in areas that are dying and fraternal barrens in areas that are currently thriving and expanding. It seems to me that a joint Council should therefore strive to determine what needs to be done to achieve an optimum distribution of Lodges, Chapters, and Commanderies, making certain that no Mason, actual or potential, is deprived of participation in all parts of the Order.

In my view a Grand Advisory Council might well also review the status of the prescribed rituals and ritual policies in our Grand Bodies. It seems irrefutable that opinions, attitudes, and practices relative to the ritual are undergoing change. It also seems to some of us that standards, in this respect, have been slipping as we note, with alarm, the growing tendency of degree-conferring bodies to abdicate their responsibilities in this regard by increasingly depending on others to do work for which they are responsible. Is our work in the York Rite going to be done in the future "in house" or elsewhere? Appraisal of this issue is long overdue.

In my view a Grand Advisory Council might also advantageously study the issue of the Grand Visitation, an art form that is wasteful of the time of our Grand Leaders in that it prevents them from applying their abilities and imagination to the creation and implementation of plans and programs that they consider to be the hallmarks of their administrations. I feel for them for I have been down that road. Perhaps the members of the Grand Advisory Council, in full consideration of the costs and perceived benefits of the visitation programs, might be able to cut this waste of valuable manpower to a reasonable level.

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I admit that my opinion on this issue is subjective to a degree, but in the absence of any real evidence of the benefits derived from keeping our presiding officers on the road, I hold to it. I sincerely doubt that the unofficial transformation of presiding officers into what may be more aptly termed, "Grand Visitors and Lecturers," is really in the best interest of Freemasonry. Having presiding Grand Officers spend the evening in a local setting is unquestionably satisfying to local leaders, of course, but do such visits really contribute, in a significant way, to the advancement of the Masonic cause?

In the perpetuation of the chase to achieve the imagined benefits of ever-expanding visitation programs, inter-body cooperation has been given scant attention. There simply isn't time in the overloaded schedules of our presiding officers to pay much attention to what goes on elsewhere. Thus, although without intent, the cause of unity is diminished, and the resultant separation of interests leads inevitably to the intensification of competition for the time and attention of those who are actively striving to achieve spiritual perfection.

In my view a Grand Advisory Council also might profitably review the network of fraternal communications, electronic and otherwise, in Virginia's Freemasonry. It seems to me that the Craft in the York Rite suffers in this respect because the communications that are received from the Grand Bodies are too infrequent; often times they are too narrowly distributed; and, unfortunately, when they are distributed, they are sometimes not forwarded in a timely manner. Perhaps, if there were a combined York Rite communications system, many misunderstandings could be avoided. Is it not time for such an alternative to be at least considered in Virginia?

While the list of interests that might profit from joint analysis is really endless, I will bring my suggestions to an end by suggesting, as I did many years ago, that questions about

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money, members, and mission will continue to relentlessly challenge all of the bodies of Masonry. I stand on that observation as I make this appeal for fraternal unity, in an all-inclusive manner that is suggested by the stones that are placed in the jewel I wear.

By design these stones are intended to remind me that although I may be able to advantageously nurture my personal and specific interests in life, I nevertheless have a greater obligation to my Creator and to mankind as a whole, one that is universal in nature and not subject to any form of confinement.

Let me then thank you for your attention as I try to recapitulate the remarks I have advanced in an effort to establish: (1) that in the beginning, York Rite Masonry evolved out of disunity; (2) that the Masonry that we practice in Virginia is York Rite Masonry; (3) that despite our best intentions, unity in the York Rite in Virginia is not as complete as it should be; and (4) that in an enhanced cooperative effort, if generated at the highest levels of Masonic authority, it might be possible to achieve some part of the promise suggested by the Psalmist, who also directs each of us, even in this day, to behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. May we, I pray, heed David's words?

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