

. . . Within Our Power

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Once upon a time the labors of the Craft came to a standstill. There was confusion in the temple. A trestleboard, which had long displayed the designs of a master workman, was blank. Like sheep without a shepherd, the workmen wandered about idly. No longer was there a sense of direction; order had given way to chaos. A noble Tyrian, in whose mind the designs had been conceived, had been stricken down in the performance of duty – not by enemies from without the temple – but by foes from within.



Mt. Wor. Dwight L. Smith

The extent to which a legend may be repeating itself in North American Freemasonry today may be open to dispute, but certainly no man can challenge the premise that the Craftsmen are not at their labors to the extent that they should be. And few, I daresay, will take issue when I suggest that there is indeed confusion in the temple.ⁱ

Suppose I should begin by saying: "Brethren, let us address ourselves to ways whereby we, as Freemasons, can help to bring about the dawn of a better day for ourselves, and, in so doing, a better day for all mankind." You would respond, I daresay, with the most natural of all reactions to a great challenge: "That's all very good – but how?"

Before we consider specific ways in which Lodges can help to advance the dawn of a better day, let us return to another episode in the Legend of Hiram, that beloved allegory which makes the Sublime Degree sublime.

You will remember that King Solomon divided the workmen into groups with orders to travel East, West, North and South in search of the missing Master Builder. One of the parties returned with a report given them by a wayfaring man. He had been witness to an unsuccessful attempt by three men, who appeared to be workmen from the temple, to get passage on a ship about to leave for a far distant country. Thwarted in their effort, they had returned into the mountainous region.

And what was King Solomon's reply? The Indiana ritual has it in these words: *"Your intelligence proves but one thing to me – that the ruffians are still in the country, and within our power."* Let's keep those words uppermost in our minds for the rest of the evening, and for many days and many months.

Here is what Solomon is telling us: If Freemasonry has a stake in building a better tomorrow – and it has – and if Masons are to do their part in bringing about the dawn of a better day, then we must face the fact that the forces against which we shall have to contend are right here at home, in our own districts and in our own Lodges; right here within ourselves. *And they are within our power.* In other words, both the problem and the answer may be found in our own backyard. If we have the will to do so, we can do something about it.

But I still I have said nothing about how I would go about achieving all these wondrous things. Very well, let's talk about how. At the outset, however, I have news for you. I am hereby imposing a moratorium on myself. It will be a moratorium on any mention of the

old familiar excuses that Freemasons like to repeat whenever they get together; the aged scapegoats brought out to cover up the fact that Masonic Lodges, by and large, aren't doing the job that Masonic Lodges should be doing. And so there will be no wringing of hands from me on the declining membership of the last several years; or poor attendance at Lodge meetings; or Master Masons who fail to memorize the catechism of the Third Degree; or that Freemasonry doesn't seem to be attracting young men or professional men to the extent we should like it to do; or how much it costs to operate a Lodge; or the common complaint that men petition our Lodges for the degrees, receive those degrees, and we see them no more.

There will be no talk from me on the subject of competition, whether it be television, or bowling, or fishing, boating, camping, a multitude of other organizations and activities – you name it, and we can tell you how it competes with Freemasonry for the time, interest and loyalty of our Brethren. Best of all, you'll not hear from me even once that Masonry is "hiding its light under a bushel," which is nothing more than a King James Version way of saying that we should seek publicity, be seen and heard and talked about (in a favorable light, of course), going to ridiculous extremes, if necessary, to be in the public eye.

Instead of all these, let's think about how each Lodge, working within its own sphere of influence *and within the framework of Masonic tradition*, can help Freemasonry to do its part in bringing about the dawn of a better day. At this juncture I am faced with something of a dilemma. As a guest in this Jurisdiction, it ill behooves me to be critical of the regulations and practices of my host, or to tell you how I believe you should operate. And so, here is the approach I shall make, with perfect immunity, I trust. Have you ever heard anyone say, "If I had my druthers"? That's what I am going to say: If I had my druthers – my choice – Masonic lodges would fix their sights on some things that are basic, and strive mightily to operate in accordance with those fundamentals.

I

First, if I had my druthers, the leadership of our Lodges in Virginia and Indiana, and all across the land, would start asking themselves some pointed questions – some embarrassing questions, such as this one: "Brethren, do we have our priorities in the proper order? And if we do not, then what can we do to get them back in the proper order, so that first things will be first?"

The great American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson lamented the fact that "Things are in the saddle/And ride mankind."ⁱⁱ Hence, when we speak of those forces that "are still in the country, and within our power," we must not overlook *things*. All we have to do is to converse with our Brethren to observe how, to a very real extent, things have ceased to be our servants and have become our masters. We are the servants of our temples, servants of the dollars required to maintain them and of the insurance premiums needed to protect our investment, servants of the new heating plant, the repairs to the roof, the carpet that is wearing out, the taxes.

And so what happens? All too often our priorities get out of order and we become more attentive to ways in which we can stay alive than in following our avowed purpose of creating and maintaining an atmosphere in which men can experience brotherhood as they never experienced it before, and in a manner not to be found in any other place. We forget that we are here to help men improve themselves; to teach rough ashlar how to become perfect ashlar.

The inevitable result of letting our priorities get out of order is that we become preoccupied with numbers and dollars. We need the dollars to keep alive, and therefore we need numbers, and we need them enough that sometimes we lower the bars, pull down the standards, to get more numbers to get more dollars. And when our standards

are lowered ever so little, the entire structure is weakened. Remember Gresham's Law of economics – that when worthless money gets in circulation, sound money doesn't drive it out; that on the contrary, the worthless drives out that which is sound? Gresham's Law applies in Freemasonry also. For when we compromise a bit and use inferior human material, we need not expect that which is sound to eliminate that which is substandard. It can and does work the other way. Frightening thought, isn't it?

Our future, then, depends on our ability to look beyond numbers and dollars to the quality of our membership and the quality of our leadership, and to the basic purpose for which we are here. One distinguished American Masonic leader from right here in Virginia admonishes us never to lose sight of the fact that "all institutions that are devoted to the cultivation of the best that is in man are having troubled times in this period of our civilization."ⁱⁱⁱ Freemasonry does not stand alone. But Freemasonry does have its own peculiar gift, its unique appeal, that will work to our distinct advantage if only we have the eyes to see it and the will to use it.

II

If I had my druthers, our Lodges in the United States would, at long last, accept the fact that it takes time to make a Mason. A perfect ashlar cannot be made out of a rough ashlar in three easy lessons. Becoming a Mason – a real-for-sure Mason – is a lifetime job if we really work at it.

One of the weakest links in our Masonic chain is the reluctance, or downright refusal, of our Lodges to spend the time necessary to give the new Mason good and wholesome instruction for as long as he displays any interest. The strongest indictment I could level against the Masonic Fraternity in the United States of America is that we are in too great a hurry to confer the degrees and get it over.

In the first place, there is a gross lack of understanding as to what constitutes Light, and More Light, and Further Light. Too many of our Brethren seem to think that memorizing the answers to some questions is all that is necessary to make a Freemason. That peculiar idea, I daresay, springs from the fact that we require—and make a great issue over—the memorizing of catechisms for advancement. But what do we do when our eager young Mason, thrilled beyond description at his experience, wants to know more? The reason for this and for that? How did it all come about? What does this symbol mean, and that symbol? And how can all this be applied in the everyday life of a Mason?

What do we do with him? The answer is nothing short of a major tragedy. For the most part, we do nothing. We give him the "brush-off," letting him know, in effect, that we haven't time for him. Hence, another disillusioned Mason looks elsewhere, going to the other bodies in the hope that he will find there what we failed to provide, or, worse yet, losing all interest in the Craft. He asks for bread; we give him a stone.^{iv} Of course I can appreciate the fact that Lodge officers may be devoting about all the nights to Freemasonry that they can spare. But why not enlist the services of Brethren who are not officers? We might be amazed at the contribution they could make to the good of the order.

If Freemasonry has a stake in helping to bring about the dawn of a better day, and if Lodges acknowledge their responsibility in such a noble effort, then here is one of the forces still in the country, and within our power. The greatest service our Lodges could render to Freemasonry in this period of our history would be to make available facilities and occasions whereby interested Masons, young and old, can meet informally for food and drink and conversation and exchange of ideas and Further Light in Masonry. Away with endless memorizing! Away with the idea that learning the answers to a catechism is the beginning and the end of the search for Light! I shall have more to say on this subject before I finish.

III

If I had my druthers, our Lodges would be small in size and there would be many more of them – many, many more. American Freemasonry has consistently run counter to the time-tested experience of the Fraternity in the British Isles and on the European continent in this respect. Some of us insist that it doesn't work to the good of the Craft when Lodges become large and impersonal, regardless of how many petitions a large Lodge may receive or how wealthy it may be. It isn't size that counts, nor is it the number of degrees conferred. What counts is brotherhood and camaraderie, the privilege of close fraternal association in a fellowship of kindred spirits, the opportunity for personal growth through involvement in that which is great and challenging and inspiring, the privilege, perhaps, of presiding in the East.

Smaller Lodges could meet less frequently, and there would be more diversity in the meetings, more opportunities for gatherings of a social nature, more discussions of what Freemasonry is all about, more occasions when the Brethren could assemble around the festive board for physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual refreshment. We might keep these thoughts in mind the next time we are disposed to be critical of a new member who ceases coming to Lodge and develops interests elsewhere. It could be a case of disenchantment; he could be searching for that which his Lodge should have given him, but didn't.

At this point we come to a road block. When we get on the subject of limiting the size of Lodges, many will agree in principle, but few will be prepared to offer an acceptable and workable plan as to how it could be done. Limitation by Grand Lodge legislation would be, in my opinion, a serious mistake. As I see the picture today, the benefits to be derived from smaller Lodges can be realized only over a long period of years and with leadership that is patient and tireless and unshakable in its devotion to an ideal. With Grand Lodge

encouragement, always available but never insisted upon, I believe the seeds could be sown to germinate within the Lodges, so that when the time for action became ripe, it would come from the Brethren themselves.

Do Masons in the nineteen-eighties have that kind of patience? I doubt whether they do in Indiana. The sad aspect of the problem is that economics may force us to do what we haven't the vision to do.

IV

If I had my druthers, American Lodges and Grand Lodges would develop a more acute awareness of the first of the Old Charges of a Freemason, the Charge which pertains to religious universality, or non-sectarianism, "that religion in which all men agree." Any serious student of our Craft must acknowledge, I believe, that the first of the Old Charges is the strength of Freemasonry wherever it exists in the world. As American Masons we miss no opportunity to boast about our universality, at the same time taking great pains to ignore it.

It is a curious commentary on our Fraternity that in England more than a hundred years passed before the first of the Old Charges began to be taken seriously, that is, before some measure of acceptance began to be noted.^v It is even more curious commentary that in the United States, for the most part, the Charge has not even yet become effective. Having no knowledge what the practice in Virginia Lodges may be, I make no comment. You can supply the answer.

I never cease to be amazed at how shocked some of my Masonic Brethren are when it begins to dawn upon them just what religious universality really means. These are the Brethren who have been told that the Masonic Lodge is the "handmaiden of the church";

whose conception of "that religion in which all men agree" can be described as a pleasant, jovial spirit of toleration enabling Presbyterians, and Methodists and Baptists, and Brethren of other Protestant Christian denominations to sit in Lodge together without quarrelling over theology.

Late in 1973 and the early part of 1974 I went into the subject with thoroughness while preparing a research paper. The results of that study were significant, for they revealed many areas in which Freemasonry continues to pay little or no attention to the first of the Old Charges – in ritualistic work, in the lectures, in prayers offered to the Great Architect, in laws, in regulations, in customs and practices. The study yields enough evidence for one to say, if he is of a mind to do so, that, to a great extent, Freemasonry in the United States has an established religion.^{vi} And most of us who are sensitive on the subject are both distressed and outraged at the lengths to which some of our Christian Brethren will go to cram their religion (and mine) down the throats of our non-Christian Brethren.

Is not this a much-needed area for effort by Lodges in Virginia and in Indiana, and elsewhere across the land, setting out on a quiet and low-key, but continuing program to make our Brethren more keenly cognizant of what that Old Charge means? If we are interested in having well-informed Masons and better Masons in our Lodges, thereby to help our Fraternity do its part in bringing about the dawn of a better day, there is no mere appropriate place to start.

V

If I had my druthers, our leadership in the Lodges and on Grand Lodge level would take a long and critical look at the almost-standard Preston lectures used in American Lodges, particularly as to their content, the time of delivering them and the manner of their recitation.

Now I am well aware of the fact that to question anything pertaining to the ritual, or the lectures, is almost the equivalent of desecrating the flag or launching an attack on motherhood.

Furthermore, I think it likely that you are about to say to me, "You may be right, but what are you going to do about it?" And that is, indeed, a logical question, for although I do not know the practice in Virginia, I do know that in Indiana the lectures must be recited in full each time a degree is conferred and before the Lodge is closed. Every word of the official lecture must be repeated, and then sometimes there are extra-ritualistic additions that happen to appeal to the Brother who is doing the lecturing.

Nothing is missed if the Lodge follows the law, and every time it must be the same. We unload the whole load as if we were never to see that exhausted candidate again, and in all too many instances we don't see him again. That fact of life shouldn't be surprising to us, but it is.

In expressing these thoughts, I speak as one who has a deep affection for the ceremonial ritual of making a man a Mason. I wouldn't change it in the least, except possibly for just a few words. I speak also as one who has delivered every one of the Preston lectures, not once, but many, many times. They also contain material of which I am exceedingly fond – but not all of it, and certainly not all of it every time a Lodge confers a degree. Long ago I began to have doubts. "Is this a practice that does something *for* Freemasonry?" I asked myself, "or is it doing something *to* Freemasonry?"

The late Myron K. Lingle, Past Grand Master of Masons in Illinois, said it so very well: "It is the lecture that is emptying our Lodge rooms."^{vii}

I find myself in complete agreement with Brother George S. Draffen, of Scotland, who writes:

William Preston's lectures, as opposed to his ceremonial ritual, were written for another age. If we are to instruct our candidates in the tenets of our Craft, some other Preston must arise and prepare for us a series of short educational talks which can be delivered either in Lodge or in a Lodge of instruction.^{viii}

Sadly enough, this is not a question that is likely to be viewed objectively and dispassionately. But it could be, and should. Certainly the Ancient Landmarks would not totter and crumble into ruins if some other Preston were to arise with new and better lectures suited to the new audience that already is here. If lectures as we know them should be recited at all, they should be brief. And in my humble opinion, they should be designed for occasional use as material to stimulate discussion at a time other than when a degree is conferred, never as a mandatory addition to it.

Lest temperatures and blood pressures rise above normal, let me hasten to add that I'm realistic. There will be little or no abridgement of the Preston lectures soon. Not in America. Someday, yes; but not now. In the meantime, though, we could at least make some much needed improvements. We could do something about inaccuracies and inconsistencies. There are too many of them, and the fact that we persist in repeating them does us no good. I am not familiar with your Virginia monitor, but if it is anything like most of those in the United States, I'll be hoping for the day when those horrid visual aides and printed illustrations can be discarded forever and new ones, dignified and artistic, used in their stead. We deserve something better than the illustrations we have. Here again is a place where Lodges with imagination could institute programs featuring brief "capsule" type lectures dealing with one subject only, never at the conclusion of a degree, perhaps in a relaxed atmosphere outside the tyled Lodge and offering opportunities for discussion.

It might be worth the effort. "Some other Preston" within the membership of your own Lodge might amaze you with the presentation he could prepare, provided such brief talks and discussions were encouraged and regular provision made for them. I shall have more to say on that subject in a few moments.

VI

If I had my druthers . . . but there are so many that I would not think of discussing all of them. Some of my thoughts would stimulate so much discussion that you would forget everything else I have said and remember only those controversial suggestions that question some of our "sacred cows." Let this be the "catch-all" in which I mention very briefly some other subjects that I should like to share with you sometime; and after that, the concluding "druther."

- I wish American Masons were not so hypocritical on the subject of class Lodges. The idea appeals to me, and I should like to see such Lodges encouraged. In my opinion they would contribute much to our Fraternity. I suppose that in the dear old U.S.A. "class" should be a dirty word, but I do not so regard it. "Common interest" Lodge might be better. In any event, why be so sanctimonious about class Lodges when we have scores of them – hundreds of them – all over the country, made up of workers in a factory or employees in a business enterprise? What is so reprehensible and undemocratic about Brethren of the same profession or business, of common backgrounds and interests, who dress up for Lodge? That is an oddity of American Masonry that I simply do not understand. I wish all Brethren took pride in their appearance when they meet on the level and part on the square.
- I wish our American Lodges would establish qualifications for being Worshipful Master that are higher and of greater importance than the winning of an endurance contest. In other words, I am not an advocate of automatic promotion or the long progressive line.
- I wish our Lodges could all create the office of Almoner; that the officer thus selected always be one who is not advancing to Master, but who works at the job, actively

performing the duties of that office week in and week out. The good will that could be generated the right kind of Almoner is incalculable.

That is enough for tonight's "catch-all." The others would stir some protest. And now, in conclusion, let me describe a "druther" that is dear to my heart.

VII

If I had my druthers, Lodges of Master Masons would begin to take steps, and soon, to reestablish the old traditions of Freemasonry in least one respect, that of providing frequent opportunities for men of like interests (kindred spirits, if you please) to gather in pleasant, relaxed surroundings for no other purpose than refreshment and conversation – physical, intellectual and spiritual refreshment; just talking and enjoying the company of each other. In short, I am pleading for the return of Freemasonry to its original moorings, a voluntary association in which compatible men may find fellowship and experience brotherhood at its best.

My Brethren, it isn't possible, it isn't necessary, it isn't desirable that all Masons be just like us. I am totally in earnest when I say to you that I believe the resurgence of Freemasonry depends to a large extent on whether Lodge officers, prospective officers and Past Masters are able to divest themselves of that deadly notion that unless a Mason memorizes and recites and delivers lectures, or holds an office, or works in the Craft, we have nothing to offer other than sitting on the sidelines, or carrying chairs, or washing dishes. We're going to have to use our imagination a bit; at least to turn our attention to some other avenues of Masonic activity – and please note that I placed strong emphasis on the word *Masonic*.

I am convinced in my own mind that all over the country, with very little effort, we could find scores, yes hundreds, of young Master Masons, all with a tremendous potential, that

may be lost to us if we don't give them some encouragement and find a place for them in our scheme of things. It frightens me to reflect on how many such Brethren might be found – disappointed, disillusioned, yet not willing to assume the initiative and find something to take the place of Masonic Lodges that aren't really doing their job!

Let me share with you some lines from Stephen Leacock that have long haunted me:

If I were founding a university, I would found first a smoking room; then when I had a little more money I would found a dormitory; then after that, or more probably with it, a decent reading room and library. After that, if I still had more money that I couldn't use, I would hire a professor and get some text-books.^{ix}

Be sure to note Stephen Leacock's priorities. The smoking room came first; the professor and the textbooks last.

Like it or not, my Brethren, the ale house, the coffee house, the smoking room have a noble tradition in the history of our Fraternity. They got the Craft off to a good start; our ancestors on this side of the Atlantic banished them as too worldly. But they could yet, if given a chance, do much to pull us out of the doldrums today. Let's never underestimate their importance.

And by all means, let's get away from that old bogeyman of Puritanism that to eat, drink and be merry is almost, if not entirely, sinful. Freemasonry would thrive on it again. Let's get back to the fellowship and conviviality and good conversation and invigorating exchange of ideas that can surround the festive board, and find again that which was lost.

"The ruffians are still in the country, and within our power."

We have the tools. Indiana author Lloyd C. Douglas, in his great book, *The Robe*, has the slave Demetrius say these words to illustrate his conception of the new Christian faith. Let us apply them to our Craft and to ourselves:

This faith . . . is not like a deed to a house in which a man may live with full rights of possession. It is more like a kit of tools with which a man may build him a house. The tools will be worth just what he does with them. When he lays them down, they will have no value until he takes them up again.^x

REFERENCES

ⁱ DLS, *Why This Confusion in the Temple?* (1964), Chapter 1.

ⁱⁱ Emerson, *Ode Inscribed to W. H. Channing* in John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*; Boston, 1955; p. 503.

ⁱⁱⁱ L. Douglas Delano, Grand Master of Virginia (1977 Va. 73).

^{iv} St. Matthew 7:9.

^v J. R. Clarke, "The Change from Christianity to Deism in Freemasonry," *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol. 78 (1965), pp. 58, 62.

^{vi} DLS, "American Freemasonry and Religion Today," paper delivered before the Masonic Lodge of Research of Connecticut, 1974.

^{vii} Quoted in *The Indiana Freemason*, Vol. 53, No. 11 (April 1976).

^{viii} George S. Draffen, "The Making of a Mason," Prestonian Lecture for 1956 in *The Collected Prestonian Lectures, 1925-1960* (Harry Carr, editor); London, 1967; p. 418.

^{ix} Stephen Leacock, *Oxford As I See It* in John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*; Boston, 1955; p. 844.

^x Lloyd C. Douglas, *The Robe*; Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942; Chapter 19.