



CHANGE - A "FOUR LETTER" Word!

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The 1995 Philalethes lecture by Robert G. Davis 33°, is uniquely interesting and informative and deserves to be revisited. In a fascinating manner Bro. Davis recounts the changes in Masonic and societal history and how these changes occurred in synchrony until the 1960's. He then advances his idea as to how and why these changes diverged and how they might be brought back into alignment. Bro. Davis is also the secretary of the Guthrie, OK Scottish Rite bodies.

"Tellson's was an old fashioned place, even in 1780. It was very dark, ugly and incommodious. It was an old fashioned place, and the partners in the House were proud of its smallness, darkness and ugliness. They were even boastful of its eminence in those particulars, and were fired by an express conviction that, if it were less objectionable it would be less respectable. Tellson's wanted no light or embellishment."

"Thus it had come to pass, that Tellson's was the triumphant perfection of inconvenience. The oldest men gravely carried on the business. When they took a young man into Tellson's, they hid him some where till he was old. They kept him in a dark place, like cheese, until he had the full Tellson's flavor and blue mold upon him."

You may have wondered if this quotation from Charles Dickens' "Tale of Two Cities", was talking about a bank (which it was) or a Masonic Lodge!

Because, in many ways, it tells us about the perceptions and values of the men who ran the bank. They did not care about the needs of the general society, or the needs and convenience of their clients, or even the people who were their employees. Their only concern was to keep things from changing.

It seems the directors at Tellson's were very much like the power structure in many Masonic Lodges today—out of touch with their world.

The central question that I want to raise and discuss is this: What is Freemasonry in the context of how Masons and Society perceive it, and has this perception changed over time?

It is an important question because, if the fraternity's perception of itself and the public's perception of it indeed changes over time, then perhaps one of the keys to Freemasonry's survival is that it can only thrive when it moves on a path which is compatible with the perceptions and expectations of the general public. And, could it be that Freemasonry thrives when it is in a state of change?

Let's look at a bit of history in relation to this idea. If you were to ask an 19th century Mason who Masons were, he would tell you they were a great philosophic order which took simple lessons in morals and ethics as guides for personal and spiritual growth.

And if you were to ask the Man on the street who Masons were, he would say "oh they are a great secret society, perhaps the father of all such societies."

We had a match. At the turn of the century it was popular to belong to secret societies. And the great 19 th century deist religious movement, along with the philosophic debates which centered around morals and ethics were the themes that excited the Victorian mind.

But, Freemasonry was around before it was popular to be a secret society. If you were to ask the 18 th century Mason who Masons were he would say they were a group of men whose intellectual and creative abilities molded the basic tenants of the craft into a greater and richer source of wisdom and understanding. This period evolved from the simplistic ritual stages of the early speculative days to a system of formal lectures which have not been equaled or bettered in over 200 years.

And, as for the Man on the street, he would tell you 18 th century Masonry was a social club which exacted political and social influence in many endeavors of public and private life. Certainly, in the early days of America, the assemblies had more to do with the practices and ideals of the Masonic Lodges than any other group not organized for partisan purposes.

Again, we had a match. It was popular to be involved with an organization that had a unifying language of power, that demonstrated ordered behavior, and with an overlying ideology of improvement in things moral and material. Ethics in tandem with self interest. It was a powerful idea, indeed.

But, Freemasonry was around before it was popular to belong to a formalized school of ritual. If you would ask the 17 th century Mason who Masons were he would tell you, "Oh, they were the merchants, traders and artisans who met for mutual protection, economic security and socializing. The Man on the street would have said they were a group of men who met in organized drinking clubs on a regular basis for the purpose of fellowship, feasting and conviviality.

Any brother who has looked into Masonry of this period can tell you that there was no regularly adopted ritual. In fact, prior to the 18 th century, there is not a single reference to Masonic degrees in any minutes in any Lodge in existence. A young man who aspired to be a Mason was simply made one. The process was not much more then the simple taking the oath, along with learning the "passes" and signs. There was no memory work, no formal instruction and little Lodge protocol. Very little was communicated in the way of moral and intellectual truths. Lectures were a matter of each brothers personal knowledge about the history of the "old charges", and symbolism of the emblems and several moral virtues. The Master would usually ask the questions and the brethren would answer them, with the candidates listening in. Candidates were simply "entered" on the rolls and the men met more for fellowship and security than for intellectual improvement.

Once again, we had a match. Membership was available, on recommendation, to all sorts of men — all of good repute, sharing the benefits of fellowship and brotherhood together with simple entrance ceremonies and few secrets. It was hard not to enamored by the opportunity.

Of course, Freemasonry was around before it was popular to be a social club. If you were to ask a 16 th century Mason who Masons were he might tell you they were men of the operative crafts, or builders guilds, formed to provide mutual protection and job security. They were also scholars, teachers, scientists and men of knowledge, formed together to teach and bring enlightenment to the non-ecclesiastical world. And the Man on the street would have noticed the guildsmen and perhaps been associated with the educational movement. It was revolutionary in its mission and reforming in its political structure.

Again, we had a match. Masonry was an organization representing the economic strengths of the culture, in tandem with men determined to bring knowledge and enlightenment to their families. Once again, Masonry was a unique and respected movement.

Let us move back to Masonry of the 20 th century. If you were to ask the Mason of today who we are, he would probably tell you (if he was inclined to say anything) that Masonry is a great charitable institution — giving away \$ 1.4 million each day. If we have done any thing at all in this century, we can say we have taken the old traditional ideal of personal, private and Masonic charity and turned it into a major public institution of philanthropy.

But, as for the Man on the street, if he was asked who Masons are, he would probably say, ” I don’t have the foggiest idea. Aren’t they some kind of cult”?

WHOA! Wait a minute. What’s happened? Isn’t there a match, like we found in the other 400 years?

Of course there is—but the public doesn’t know it! And the key to our survival depends on our own understanding of the reasons why this is true.

You see, Masonry has always been in the process of change. It has always been popular and respected by the culture because it has always adapted to the expectations and social mores of the same culture. It has always added to the institution the very best of what each generation brought to it.

Freemasonry was enlightenment in the 20 th century. But, it did offer mutual protection and economic security as well. And, it kept that, and added the important ingredient of sociability during the next century. It kept that, and added the important element of philosophical and intellectual improvement during the 19 th century. And it kept that, and then added its great charitable influence during this century.

So, what is wrong? Why aren’t we growing instead of declining at the fastest rate in our history?

The reason is that, for the first time in our history, we have let the culture in which we live pass us by.

Now, how did this happen? I would submit to you that the dynamic began to change after WWII. For the first time we stopped thinking at a time the rest of the culture began a significant self-evaluation of everything. We became degree mills, and stopped our outside involvement.

And then, the most significant society altering event in our century occurred. It was the Viet Nam War! There was something not right about it. It could not be symbolized. People will never accept a war that they can not symbolize. In WWI, it was a “war to end all wars”. People could rally around that powerful an image. In WWII, it was a war to bring democracy to the world. It was easy to endure a struggle for such a glorious cause.

But there was no clear purpose in Viet Nam. No clear threat. No resounding mission that we could create symbols around. The result was that a counter culture arose that was anti-political, anti-government, and anti-institutional. It created the first generation gap our society has ever known. Its impact on Masonry was that the sons didn’t want to follow their dads into the fraternity. And dads weren’t to excited about them joining any way, and for the wrong reasons. Dads thought their sons had lost the basic values and were not devoted enough to family, God and country to be Masons. The sons thought the older generation had forgot

the basic values, and could no longer be trusted to lead America to the loving, caring and peaceful society they wanted it to be. Both were patriotic and had the same values. But they understood and symbolized patriotism and the virtues in different ways.

The impact on Freemasonry was dramatic. A gap was created between the Masonic World and the America culture. We became internally focused and moved into our tiled recesses. There was no risk that the society we didn't particularly trust might some how change us. We didn't know that it wouldn't have mattered anyway because the sixties generation that we didn't trust didn't join anything.

But now their sons are just beginning to enter the work place. Some surveys suggest they are made of the right stuff and that they will join us. And we have a match for them.

The task is not to change the values of Masonry, but to find a way to communicate with this generation which symbolizes differently. It is the very thing we were always good at in the past.

We have to understand that the men who will ultimately make Masonry thrive, are not yet Masons. And we've got to meet our future brothers on their terms. Again, this is a thing which, in the past, we have always done so well. But today, we either have to think like they do, or put them in leadership positions in our place. They will not think like us. They cannot assimilate their culture around our rules. But they can symbolize their needs around our values. They have already told us their needs. We know their expectations of the organizations they will join. They want fraternity, fellowship, community attachment, charitable causes, family involvement and opportunities for leadership. Again, we have a match. The goals of Freemasonry are consistent with their goals. And when we place them in leadership positions, then, we have to let them lead.

And for the fraternities sake, we must give them the reins to make our Lodges relevant to their culture. And then, roll up our sleeves and work right along beside them. Our role can only be one of guidance—not of authority. We will be bringing a culture to our fraternity that does not accept vertical hierarchy as a relevant and valid system of rule.

But for this to happen, we will have to begin communicating with our world again. And, for the men entering our fraternity today, we need to build a much stronger Masonic base under them. Why? Because they lost the connection to us through their fathers. They have not lived in the same house with Masons, grew up around Lodge meetings, or picked up in their culture the intuitive goodness of Masons and Masonry. And they are likely to have heard as much bad, as good about us.

If our future brothers learn up front what Masonry has always offered men who seek self improvement, they will know far more then some life long Masons. And they will bring others to us who agree that these things are important.

We can indeed grow again if we begin to have expectations. We have to recognize that we have always survived because we knew how to make a difference in our culture.

Let us create anew our rituals of ancient significance, with respect for ideas that have borne the tests of time and with an openness to new ideas which reflect the needs of our own era.

So, which will it be—will it be comfort, retirement and isolation from our culture which will

ultimately bring a slow death; or, will it be effort, expectations, vision, cooperation and change, where change is appropriate; which will ultimately bring respect and renewal?

Freemasonry is always in the process of becoming. And the more we enable it to become, the more it will fulfill its true mission. We are temptingly close to rebirth!

“Change” is not a four letter word in my vocabulary. For the sake of our fraternity I pray that it is not in yours.

So mote it be!