

“The Times They Are A Changin”

By

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This vignette is intended to represent another of the types of research papers that our Research Lodge will accept and publish – “for the good of the order”. I have previously offered vignettes that dealt with Masonic history and symbolism and book reports but the term “for the good of the order” may be a little unclear to many so I chose that to illustrate in this vignette. This represents only my interpretation of one application within that genre.

The title of my little research vignette today comes from the 60s song of Bob Dylan. Probably many of us, at least those of my age and background, do not have fond recollections of the headlines of the 60s era, reflected in the title, “The Times They Are A Changin’”. Many of us probably associate that era with sexual licentiousness, pot smoking, riots in the streets, burning and looting of our Capitol City, evasion of military duty, and other “do your own thing if it feels good” activities diametrically counter to our valued Masonic virtues. Perhaps our antipathy to the events of the 60s may have caused us to dismiss them as temporary societal aberrations that we would like to forget and to believe, rightly or wrongly, that they were only temporary and had no impact on today’s worldview. I hope that you may be wondering how this introduction relates to my announced intention to discuss “the good of the order”. As I discuss some other events, this may become clearer.

The front page of The Style Section of the May 21st issue of the Washington Post contains an article, headlined “The Jockey Club’s Last Lap” about its closing.. For those of you who haven’t eaten there, it is a long-time, highly respected restaurant in Washington, D.C. It had dark paneling and leather furniture and excellent service and menus, much like the Gentlemen’s Clubs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was pricey as well. It was Nancy Reagan’s favorite restaurant and was patronized by the well-to-do. It is to be replaced by a Baja-California-style restaurant that will be more open and airy with several large windows being opened up. The demise of The Jockey Club is being

bemoaned by those who looked upon it as an institution of the Washington restaurant scene. The Jockey Club manager said, “When you say ‘Jockey Club’, people say, ‘Oh, I love that place. I go there all the time.’” But then I ask them, “When was the last time you were there?” And they say, “Four years ago on our anniversary.” Can anyone now see why I have told this story? Is that a metaphor for our Fraternity? How many of our customers say, “I love Freemasonry!” but might answer “Last year on my Masonic birthday.” if asked when they last attended? Should we, like The Jockey Club, give up what many of the public perceive to be *our* late 19th/early 20th century atmosphere and open up more windows? Like The Jockey Club’s diehard fans, most of our members would resist this change I believe.

R.W. Paul Bessel has recently published on the internet Mas-Ed list the results of a survey he conducted of Masonic membership statistics. Several years ago, S. Brent Morris did a study of membership statistical trends across time for Freemasonry and other social organizations. As I understood his conclusions, he found that membership is cyclical and noted that a great many of our members joined immediately after World War II. He deduced that they missed the fraternal fellowship they had enjoyed in the service and sought a similar support group in Freemasonry. He reasoned that those post World War II members are now dying of age related causes at a rapid rate and that this accounts for our rapidly dwindling numbers. R.W. Bessel’s survey, however, indicates that, even discounting deaths, our numbers are still declining due to, in Paul’s words, “a large proportion of Masons who are choosing to drop their membership.” In other words, more are quitting than are joining. Also on the Mas-Ed List, Brother John Blythe, in Australia, tells of hiring a professional polling organization to evaluate what they term “unaffiliated Brethren” and which we called demitted Brothers. He identified 14,700 unaffiliated Brethren in Melbourne, a metropolitan area of about 3 million persons. Of this group, he found 3% under

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40 years of age, 5% between 40 and 49, 21% between 50 and 59, 25% between 60 and 69, 29% between 70 and 79 and 17% over age 80. 78% were Master Masons and 21% were Past Masters. (I personally found this number of Past Masters surprising.) The average membership time for the group was between 12 and 20 years each. He interviewed 100 of these former Masons and found they said they left the Fraternity because:

- (1) They felt excluded from the management process in their Lodges,
- (2) Where they had decided not to take an office, they felt they were less valuable to their Lodges than those taking offices,
- (3) Little consideration had been given to their needs, (especially social needs), and age differences in needs were not considered,
- (4) They wanted access to activities they may not have had access to as individuals, (e.g., water skiing, sailing, travel group activities including partners and families),
- (5) Limited opportunities to meet other Master Masons,
- (6) Poor return on time invested in light of limited leisure time,
- (7) Lack of Masonic thought in any areas but ritual,
- (8) Usual politics, personal disagreements.

80% of those interviewed said they would consider re-affiliation if they were convinced that Lodge operations had improved in these areas of their concern.

Although Brother Blythe's study did not address the details of lengths of membership, a prior study of Freemasons in Australia and in one U.S. jurisdiction who had left the Craft noted a steady decrease in length of memberships over time. In other words, those who joined in 1945 and subsequently demitted may have remained members for an average of 20 years but this membership length has steadily decreased to about four years for those demitting now. The numbers of years cited here is from memory and may be in error in magnitude but they are illustrative of the trend identified.

A recent e-mail posting to another list recapitulated the total Masonic membership of U.S. Grand Lodges taken from the Pantograph List of Lodges Masonic. (I have appended a copy of the report to my paper.)

2001 figures totaled 11,252 Lodges with a total of 1,931,520 members. Realize that members who belong to more than one Lodge are counted more than once and that number is considerably reduced. This was a loss from 2000 of 92 Lodges and 59,264 members. No Grand Lodge showed a gain either in the number of Lodges or in membership during that year. The loss in membership was greater than the total membership in Virginia and in each other Grand Lodge except the 10 largest.

The most recent Masonic Services Association Short Talk Bulletin is titled, "Investing in Freemasonry". The author, Brother Richard Curtis, editor of "The Northern Light", the magazine of the AASR Northern Jurisdiction, notes the sharp reversal in the stock market in the past year and he comments that the general public tends to invest in stocks when the market is booming and to withdraw from the market when stocks plunge. In other words, the general public tends to do the opposite of the advice, "Buy low, sell high". He asks if the reader, knowing of the present membership trends in Masonry, would be willing to invest in it today. This was, to me, an eye-opening question that caused me to reflect. Would we invest today in Freemasonry, knowing what we know now, or are we just holding on to my prior investment hoping that it will turn around, as I am doing with a couple of my technology stocks? Has Masonry lost its positive luster to members and prospective members? Is it just in the eye of the beholder or is it a reflection of an organizational lethargy?

Most Worshipful Richard Fletcher gave an excellent presentation on the issues of membership losses. Among the works he cited was the book *Bowling Alone* in which the author, a sociologist found that the number of lines being bowled in league bowling has dropped dramatically over time but that the total numbers of lines bowled has not reflected the same dramatic decrease. He notes that this trend parallels the trends in membership losses in community organizations such as fraternities and mainline Churches. He reasons that the population is less interested in social interactivities, less likely to make time commitments to others, and more interested in individual or family activities than in a wider scope of social engagement and commitment.

However, sociologists also tell us that those who have a solidly established network of interested friends and social contacts are better able to survive all sorts of trauma from serious surgery to bereavement. Exercise physiologists tell us that those who work out with a buddy are much more likely to be able to maintain a regular, scheduled commitment to their fitness routines than those who work out alone. They also tell us that those who maintain a regular schedule of workouts will statistically have not only more years of life, but, perhaps more importantly, more life in their years, having a reduced risk of disabling diseases and strokes.

The journalist, George Will, gave a graduation address to the U.S. Naval Academy. During his talk, he noted that many military leaders have said, in effect, "Our military is a reflection of the society from which its members are drawn." He also noted that the Army has changed its slogan from "Be All That You Can Be" to "An Army of One." His answer to both: "Wrong! He stresses that our military answers a higher calling and must observe higher standards than we demand of other members of society." He pointed out that our society may place a very high value on individualism and personal choices and rights. He stressed, however, that military *esprit de corps*, organizational pride and mutual dedication, is founded upon self-sacrifice, uniformity and group commitment, a very different paradigm. He concluded that it is the role of military leaders to inculcate in all their troops through mutual reinforcement and adherence to the same high standards, the ideals that made us victorious in prior wars. Those of you who have read Tom Brokaw's best selling book, *The Greatest Generation*, should agree with his conclusion, I believe.

Illustrious C. Fred Kleinknecht's article in the June 2001 "Scottish Rite Journal" also uses a military analogy, "holding the center". He notes that in classic historical infantry tactics, the center of the line had to be held at all costs or all was lost. He uses the term "holding the center" to refer to the equally vital duty of Masons to "hold the center" morally and ethically in our communities and nation and for each Mason to "hold the center" morally of his own ethos and conduct. This center, he says, consists of shared values and ideals that must be

defended or catastrophe ensues just as on the battlefield.

Wor. Sean O'Neill recently published an article and presented a talk for a meeting of the Alexandria Valley of the Scottish Rite in which he challenged Masonry to consider many new avenues to the membership issue including selective invitations to prospective members. He pointed out that the jurisdictions where selective invitations are issued are experiencing growth rather than losses.

Now, have you been able to connect my allusions to Bob Dylan's song, the closing of The Jockey Club, R.W. Bessel's and Brother Blythe's analysis of membership losses, the MSA Bulletin "Investing in Masonry", the findings of sociologists about our need for support networks, and George Will's commencement address to my type of paper "for the good of the craft"? I hope that the reference to the 60s era changes and the statistical analyses of our membership losses may have convinced you that things really have changed and are continuing to do so. We ignore that change at our own peril. I hope that you do not think that I am following in the footsteps of my Great Grandfather, who was named Jeremiah for the Biblical prophet, and that I am a lone prophet, wailing of doom in the wilderness. M.W. Perdue hit the nail on the head for me when he said, "If we keep on doing what we've always done, we'll keep on getting what we've always gotten." If we want to reverse our membership losses, I hope I have convinced you that we need to consider doing things differently. I hope that the interviews performed by Brother Blythe may provide some guides as to some changes, or things to emphasize, that we should consider in our craft Lodges:

- providing each member, commencing as soon as he is raised, a meaningful way to participate and contribute to the Lodge success and a sense of pride in, and reward by recognition for, his contribution, even if he is not an officer;
- planning social and hobby activities tailored to the desires of groups of members rather than a one-size-fits-all approach;
- providing intellectually stimulating experiences;
- stressing our historical tradition of Brotherly love and affection and of protecting a Brother's welfare and reputation both within and outside the Lodge.

I suggest that these are four pillars that can sustain our Lodges.

I believe that our Fraternity is much like the military envisioned by George Will and alluded to by Illustrious Brother Kleinknecht in that it must adhere to higher standards of conduct than the society from which it is drawn. I believe we must find ways to build the *esprit de corps* envisioned in the former Army slogan “Be All That You Can Be.” That is not that very much different from our age-old purpose of “Taking Good Men and Making Them Better”. To help make others better, each of us must first “improve myself in Masonry” as we promised as Entered Apprentices. Just as in the military, the family, or any other organization, leadership by example always works best.