

Freemasonry - Preserving The Heritage, Building The Future: A Call To Action

By

Edmund Cohen, PDDGM

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I. Introduction:

Freemasonry has survived over the years in the face of very significant challenges. It now faces those challenges again.

Today we are buffeted by fanatical, well organized critics who seem dedicated to our destruction. They spread mistruths about us in an organized effort to blacken our reputation, erode our membership, and reduce our appeal and effectiveness. We also face a more silent challenge, the challenge of indifference of a generation of men who are not joiners, who are tuned out and turned off; who are happy to substitute the impersonal and counterfeit intimacy of chat rooms and the Internet for a more personal interaction and face-to-face involvement with their fellows. They do not vilify us; they simply see us, if they are aware of us at all, as a relic of the past and not relevant to their world.

In the face of these twin challenges, some Masons have begun to believe that Freemasonry's best days are in the past and that we have peaked as an organization. They would circle the wagons and draw inward. They have neither the energy nor the will to confront their critics, and they have no clue as to how to communicate with those who are indifferent and uninterested in the Fraternity.

My thesis is that Freemasonry is still relevant, indeed, in many ways more relevant today than it has ever been in the past. And so I want to suggest what we must do to preserve our Fraternity, tell our story, and attract the men who should be joining our ranks. But we need to better understand our critics and detractors, which in turn can help us to better appreciate why we are, in fact, so relevant in today's society.

II. Understanding Our Critics:

It often comes as something of a surprise to Masons that Freemasonry, the "gentle craft," comes in for such virulent criticism. The Fraternity often is portrayed by its enemies as a secret society that must be opposed because it is in competition with existing religions, cultures, and political entities.

First, let us dispose of the charge of secrecy. Opposition to Freemasonry on the basis of it being a secret society is only a subterfuge for the serious critic. They know, as we do, that Freemasonry is not a secret society. Its temples are clearly marked, its members wear Masonic emblems, and its publications are readily available. Its few secrets have long been revealed and can be found by anyone seriously interested in uncovering them. Our strongest critics know our secrets and this not the real reason for their concern.

Indeed, if Freemasonry were just another men's organization or social club, we would face little opposition. But the fact is that we are not just another men's organization or social club; we are an organization with a rich philosophical tradition. And it is the opposition to that philosophical tradition that under girds much of the criticism.

Freemasonry is inclusive rather than exclusive and transcends the barriers of religion, ethnicity, and nationality that separate one man from another. This does not sit well with our critics. Our religious critics accuse us of being a religion. But we know that is not so, and so do they. They know that Freemasonry endorses no creed or dogma and offers no path to salvation. They also know that while not a religion, Freemasonry is essentially religious, requiring a belief in God, teaching the immortality of the soul, and stressing the value and importance of prayer.

So "what's the beef?" It is the nonsectarian nature of Freemasonry and the fact that the Fraternity is open to men of all religious denominations that is the problem. This is because for the religious zealot there is an essential dichotomy between the only true religion — theirs — and all others. And from their perspective everyone must be converted to the "true religion" for their own good, in order to be saved. Thus it is that religious tolerance, which allows each man to worship God in his own way, is as foreign to their thinking, as it is fundamental to ours. And this is at the heart of their opposition.

The cultural true believer also is an opponent of Freemasonry. In many primitive societies the word for "human" and for "man" was the name of one's own people, expressing syntactically the view that all others were not human or men. Today, the cultural fanatic continues this tradition and devalues all those who are not of his own group. This extreme of ethnicity and nationality led to the horrors of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 40s, to the Soviet terror that continued in the 50s and 60s, and to the genocide and tribal strife that now afflicts Africa and the former Yugoslavia.

Freemasons are not by any means one-worlders or internationalists in a political sense. Our Grand Lodges are organized largely by country. We value our cultural heritage and we inculcate patriotism. But Freemasonry joins together men of all cultures and nationalities. Distinctions of politics and ethnicity do not matter, and politics has no place in a Masonic Lodge. The point, of course, is that underpinning the philosophy of Freemasonry is a respect for democracy and support for freedom of thought and expression. And this explains why totalitarian regimes have made it a first order of business to oppose Freemasonry. This was the case in Nazi Germany and behind the Iron Curtain. But Freemasonry thrives in any environment which is open to the principles of friendship, morality, and brotherly love.

Standing four-square in favor of the liberal principles of democracy, toleration, and justice, Freemasonry should be proud to number amongst its critics the religious bigots and the political chauvinists.

But Freemasonry also has its critics on the left. There are many who now believe there are no absolutes of right and wrong. They espouse an ethical and cultural relativism that views rules of conduct as simply the biases and preferences of a particular community or group at a particular time. In their world view, there are no immutable principles or fundamental truths. Values, they claim, change over time within a society so that what is right and moral today may not be viewed in the same way tomorrow. And even more to the point, what is right and moral in one society has no necessary validity in another society.

Well, Freemasons do not believe that good and evil are wholly subjective and that any action is as valid as any other action. We are willing to stand up for certain values that are both timeless and universal.

And so in the end, Freemasonry is philosophically equidistant from a bankrupt ethical and cultural relativism on the one hand, and the tyranny of religious and cultural absolutism on the other. It rejects the "anything goes" philosophy of the extreme left as firmly as it rejects the bigotry and chauvinism of the extreme right.

III. The Challenge of Indifference:

The challenge of indifference is no less pernicious. Our critics at least find us worth fighting; to these others we are virtually invisible. And this points to a serious problem in our society. At a time when people can communicate so much more easily and quickly with others around the world via the Internet, they are becoming more isolated from their families and their neighbors. The sense of community which long sustained us as a nation is eroding.

We live today in a society which is more and more transient and more and more in flux. In the business world, the "company man" is being replaced by the free-lancer. The loyalty of an employee to the corporation, or of the corporation to the employee, has waned to the point of being non-existent in many cases. Neither values the other beyond what is required by a temporary and narrowly defined economic self-interest. And the law of the jungle in business is paralleled by a political environment which has become mean spirited, if not down-right

vicious. These corrosive influences have even carried into the family environment as well. The divorce rate is dangerously high and there is less sense of family. Parenthood is seen as a burden to be avoided, children are too often neglected, and seniors now find themselves ignored, lonely, and isolated.

The philosophy of Freemasonry is at odds, no let me say it stronger, it is at war with this trend toward selfishness, self-indulgence, and self-absorption. And this war cannot be fought by ignoring the changes which have occurred in our society, by maintaining the low profile of the past decades, or by drawing more deeply into ourselves and our Lodges.

IV. Why We Are Relevant:

I think we can all agree on the enormity of the challenges we face, but from where shall we draw our strength? Put in its most simple terms, Freemasonry is well positioned to play as important a role today as it has ever played in its history. It can, if it is bold, play a critical role in helping to shape the very direction our society will take as we move toward the 21st century. With its tolerance for different views and different beliefs, it can be an integrative force in a society that is becoming more fractionalized and divided. With its emphasis on an almost chivalric courtesy and politeness, it can help to re-establish a tone of civility that is so lacking in our social discourse. With its emphasis on the universal principles of brotherly love, relief, and truth, it can exert the moral leadership that is needed in a society in which too many have lost their way. In sum, Freemasonry stands poised to provide the help, the encouragement, and the moral support to individuals, to the community, and to the nation that is so sorely needed.

V. How We Should Proceed:

Having diagnosed the problem and identified our strengths, how are we to proceed? I suggest to you three fundamental elements in what should be for us a call to action. First, we must remain true to our principles; that is to say, we must preserve our heritage while we build for the future. Second, we must equip ourselves to better articulate to others outside the fraternity what Freemasonry is all about.

We must trumpet our values and broadcast our activities. And third, we must challenge like minded individuals in our communities to join with us.

Let me take just a couple of minutes to address each of these points.

A. Preserve Our Heritage:

The serious challenges we face call for bold and decisive action. But in our rush to improve the position of the Fraternity, we must take care not to destroy its very essence. The reason I temper my "call to action" with this caution is because all too often those who would advise us how to better fit into the modern world and get ready for the new millennium, prescribe changes that would turn us from what we are into something quite different. Their suggested "make-over" would give us a new look, and perhaps even a new appeal, but whatever we would become, it would not be Freemasonry.

And so, as we prepare for the future, it is critically important that we keep in mind those essential principles that make us Freemasons. And this requires that we remember what we are, and keep in mind what we are not.

We are a fraternity, a band of men joined together by common values and freely-taken obligations. As Masons and members of a Lodge and other Masonic bodies, we build social relationships with men of different generations, of diverse backgrounds, interests, and talents. And these relations endure for decades. What we are not is a lobby or a public interest group - although we are concerned about the important issues of our time. We are not a public service group - although we care deeply about our communities. And we are not an organized charity, like the Cancer Society - although we support with our time and our money many charitable causes. In sum, we are not an organization of people temporarily joined together for one particular purpose; we espouse values and principles that are far broader and more enduring.

This distinction is important because it explains why we should not pattern ourselves on these other organizations. It explains why we are and should continue to be selective in deciding who should be admitted to our ranks. And it explains why we care,

not just about a man's dedication to a cause, but about his moral character as well.

B. Tell Our Story:

But being mindful of our past and our principles is not sufficient. So the second point is that we must tell our story. Today public awareness of our Fraternity has declined to the point that many Americans are unclear about what Freemasonry stands for and what it does. Because of our silence, they get what little information they have about us from lurid and scandalous accounts in sensationalist books that purport to tell about the secrets of Freemasonry. And the sad truth is that we have not escaped criticism by going underground or hiding our light under a bushel basket; we have only become more obscure and more of a target. I submit to you that we can no longer afford to simply lower our heads and try to avoid controversy. We can no longer afford to become more insular and to withdraw to our Lodges.

Instead, we must reach out to the general public to defend Freemasonry. We must raise our profile in our communities and in the society at large. We must publicize our activities and proclaim what we stand for. And to do this, each of us must now become an effective Ambassador of Freemasonry. This has two components:

The first is the requirement that we actually live our Freemasonry. I am reminded that there is often an allusion to knighthood in Masonic ritual. This is not a throwback to a romantic medievalism, but rather the symbolic recognition that in this modern, fast paced, impersonal, dog-eat-dog world, Masons still believe in and stand for the knightly values of courage and faithfulness, courtesy and kindness, honesty and fairness. And these are the values that will continue to attract the kind of men we seek. But we cannot just go through the motions; we have to be walking advertisements for the fraternity by living up to these values. We need to be the kind of persons who inspire trust and confidence in others so that people will say "if he is the type of person who is a Mason, that might be the organization that I would like to be a part of."

And then we must equip ourselves to better articulate to others outside the fraternity what

Freemasonry is all about. All too often, however, when asked about the Fraternity, Masons will say it's a secret or that they can't talk about it. What they really mean is that they don't know what to say. They love the Fraternity, but they cannot put into words why it is so attractive to them and why it commands their time and their loyalty. I strongly suggest that we all obtain and read publications such as *"For Your Information"* put out by the Grand Lodge of Virginia, *"Have You Ever Considered Becoming a Mason"* put out by the Masonic Renewal Committee of North America, and *"Facts About Freemasonry"* and *"What's A Mason?"* put out by the Masonic Information Center. These short pamphlets can help us to explain our Fraternity to others. We ought to have them available to hand out, and we ought to think through for ourselves how we can explain Freemasonry to our colleagues and neighbors in terms that are comfortable to us and understandable to them.

But reduced to its barest essentials, we need to ensure that everyone in America knows at least seven things about Freemasonry:

- We are the oldest, largest and most widespread fraternal organization;
- We are nonsectarian and nonpolitical;
- We are not a secret society; we neither conceal our existence nor our purposes;
- We are a Fraternity, a social organization, but we have more serious purposes too;
- Our great tenets are friendship, morality and brotherly love;
- We are an organization that seeks to help individuals and to play a positive role in the community. Masons are involved in everything from scholarship programs to blood programs, from quiet assistance to individuals in need to well-publicized assistance, for example, to the Shrine hospitals and burn centers, the Tall Cedars' project for Muscular Dystrophy victims, the Knight's Templar eye banks, the Scottish Rite assistance to brain-injured (aphasic) children and its schizophrenia research program;

- Finally although, we do not solicit members, Freemasonry is open to men without regard to race, color, or creed who are of good character and reputation. And there is a Masonic Lodge nearby, ready to welcome men who share our high moral standards and are interested in service to their community.

C. Attract The Masons At Heart:

And this brings me to the last point. We cannot ignore the developing crisis of declining membership in an environment characterized by both a growing criticism of, and a growing indifference toward, Freemasonry. Although we do not solicit members, we can and we must work actively to interest men in Freemasonry. Freemasonry is a way of life and we all know men who are Masons in every way but one, they have not yet petitioned the Fraternity. We must make it possible for them to ask us for a petition and we must be prepared to answer two questions.

The first is "Why join an organization at all?" This is a serious question because there are so many competing claims on our time today that many good men do not feel that they can join an organization and still devote enough energy to their job, take care of their family, be active in their church, and have a little time left to relax. The answer, of course, is that man is fundamentally a social creature with an inherent need for friendship, love and association with others. Thus, the RIGHT organization can play a very positive role in his life by helping his personal growth, by expanding his circle of friends, and by making him a well-rounded human being.

The second question: "Why join the Masons?" is the critical one that you need to be able to answer, because with so many organizations competing for members, we have to explain why this is the RIGHT organization for him to join.

The answer is that Freemasonry is the one organization with everything. It is a social and fraternal organization with all that implies, but it also has a more serious side. It brings its members together for worthwhile activities, gives them a sense of belonging, an opportunity for personal development, and involvement in activities which

are socially responsible and impact favorably on their fellow man and on their community.

The answer is that Freemasonry is not some flash in the pan, but an organization with a proud history and a rich tradition, and counting many famous men amongst its members. But Freemasonry is as modern as today, providing some of the answers and a lot of the help needed to deal with current issues and current problems. Yet it is old-fashioned in giving to every man the consideration, the help and the respect which he is justly due. It is old-fashioned in its focus on values--the old-fashioned values of honesty and courtesy, simple kindness and compassion.

Freemasonry is a universal organization open to people of all faiths, and to people of different political views. It attracts men from all walks of life, from different occupations and professions, and from different levels of social and material attainment. But within the Fraternity, such distinctions are meaningless--and all are brothers.

The answer is that Freemasonry is an organization with a clear sense of purpose and firm moral foundations. It impresses the principles of friendship and brotherhood, morality and charity on its members in a graphic and impressive way by means of its ritual. It builds character and materially improves the ability of its members to discharge their duties to God, their country, their neighbors and themselves.

And finally, the answer is that if they recognize, as they should, that we live in dangerous times when moral and social advancement has not kept pace with scientific and technological advancement, they should want to play a role in an organization that seeks to redress the balance. If they are worried about weapons of mass destruction in the hands of men without scruples or conscience, worried about scientific advances that may save our bodies at the cost of our humanity, they belong with us in a Fraternal organization dedicated to the propagation of moral values and ethical precepts.

I do not say any of this so that we can be self-satisfied, but because it is necessary that each of us carry this message to those men who we know at work and at church, in our social relationships and in our professional associations. We must educate

those men about Freemasonry, we must interest them in our work; we must lay the groundwork so that they will ask to join. We cannot be passive; we cannot leave it to others. We must, each of us, be engaged in the revitalization of our great Fraternity.

As I conclude these remarks, I know that each of you can point to many other things we need to do. We need to get better leadership in our Lodges, we need to have better programs to energize our membership, and we need to ensure that our Lodges are on a firm financial footing. But these are tactical matters. At a strategic level, we have to get right the three basic propositions I have addressed. We need to ensure that any programs we adopt do not change the essential character of our Fraternity. We need to be role models for Freemasonry so that Masons are universally known as men who live by their principles and take seriously their obligations, who believe in plain-dealing and whose word is their bond; men one naturally would turn to for help. And we need to attract all of those who already are Masons in their hearts, but do not know who we are or how to approach us.

We owe it to our Fraternity to do this. We owe it to the Masons who come before us and who died confident that we would take up the baton. And we owe it to those Masons who will come after us who are counting on us to successfully meet our challenges and bequeath to them a strong and vibrant Freemasonry.