

## **The Importance Of Research Lodges**

By

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*The opinions presented in this paper are strictly those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Master and Wardens of the A. Douglas Smith Jr., Lodge of Research #1949 or the official views of the Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Virginia.*



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There are few who would disagree with the statement that Freemasonry had its greatest influence, strongest impact, and highest ratio of prominent members during the period of time preceding, during, and after the Revolutionary War. In fact, up to the time of the Morgan incident, one of the proudest achievements a man could reach was to say *I am a Mason*. The President, together with many of the Founding Fathers, and the Founding Fathers of most of our early states in the westward movement were all Freemasons.

It was a time when a Lodge met in someone's home, a tavern, or even on the prairie. Numbers were few but influence was great. As time went on it became so important to be a Mason that our numbers grew dramatically and we were forced into finding larger and more stable locations for our meetings and so began the long and costly road to property ownership. Even today we find it hard to budge from the aura of owning our building, even if we can't afford it.

Freemasonry has, as we all know, had its ups and downs in membership. Tragically we seem to have flourished during times of upheaval and usually show an increase in membership during and immediately following a major war. This is not peculiar to Freemasonry, if you trace membership in mainstream churches you would find the same phenomena occurring.

But today we have reached a point where our membership losses, which are truly staggering, have brought about frenzied efforts to stem those losses and bring in new members. It is not my intent to talk about membership and how to gain new members, but rather: *What has been the effect from a very large membership to one that is rapidly declining, and what do we need to do to make our fraternity stronger?*

To try to understand declining membership, let me put it in the context described by Robert Putnam in

his book *Bowling Alone*. Several quotes are going to be used from this book. The first relates to television. We have long been told that television is a factor, not only in lodge attendance, but in gaining new members. This seems to be born out by Dr. Putnam when he writes:

*People who say that TV is their “primary form of entertainment” volunteer and work on community projects less often, attend fewer dinner parties and fewer club meetings, spend less time visiting friends, entertain at home less, picnic less, are less interested in politics, give blood less often, write friends less regularly, make fewer long-distance calls, send fewer greeting cards and less e-mail, and express more road rage than demographically matched people who differ only in saying that TV is not their primary form of entertainment. TV dependence is associated not merely with less involvement in community life, but with less social communication in all its forms—written, oral or electronic. This simple question turns out to distinguish those Americans, who are most socially isolated from those most involved in their communities. Nothing — not low education, not full-time work, not long commutes in urban agglomerations, not poverty or financial distress — is more broadly associated with civic disengagement and social disconnection than is dependence on television for entertainment.*

The premise of Dr. Putnam's book (and he uses bowling as an example) is that during the 1950's and 60's people joined leagues and bowled together. It is his conclusion that nearly as many people bowl today but, they no longer join a league, they bowl alone. He further goes on to talk about social capital, which is, in part, volunteerism and how we interact with forces outside our immediate personal lives. That is, do we become involved in our schools, in professional organizations; do we interact with people socially? These are all examples given in his book.

His conclusion is that the World War II generation were givers and did volunteer and do so to this day, in the same percentages that they always have. Where we are failing is in our younger generations who do not feel the necessity to give of themselves, particularly in the form of volunteering, the way we used to.

Dr. Putnam sums up why he feels organizations are no longer able to attract new members:

*Let us sum up what we have learned about the factors that have contributed to the decline in civic engagement and social capital.*

*First, pressures of time and money, including the special pressures on two-career families, contributed measurably to the diminution of our social and community involvement during these years. My best guess is that no more than 10 percent of the total decline is attributable to that set of factors.*

*Second, suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl also played a supporting role. Again, a reasonable estimate is that these factors together might account for perhaps an additional 10 percent of the problem.*

*Third, the effect of electronic entertainment — above all, television — in privatizing our leisure time has been substantial. My rough estimate is that this factor might account for perhaps 25 percent of the decline.*

*Fourth and most important, generational change — the slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved children and grandchildren — has been a very powerful factor. The effects of generational succession vary significantly across different measures of civic engagement — greater for more public forms, less for private schmoozing — but as a rough rule of thumb we concluded that this factor might account for perhaps half of the overall decline.*

Put another way: *Why did men join Fraternities in such large numbers in years past?* One of the answers is, again, in a quote from Dr. Putnam's book. This time he is quoting David Beito from his

book *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State*. In this book Professor Beito says:

*By joining a lodge, an initiate adopted, at least implicitly, a set of values. Societies dedicated themselves to the advancement of mutualism, self-reliance, business training, thrift, leadership skills, self-government, self-control, and good moral character. These values reflected a fraternal consensus that cut across such seemingly intractable divisions as race, gender, and income.*

Dr. Beito is discussing fraternities with a strong emphasis on Prince Hall Freemasonry and the need for black people to mutually support each other, because, necessary care, such as hospitals and clinics, was simply not available to blacks. In many cases they had to build, support, and maintain their own hospitals and clinics. His premise is the Federal Government has taken over many of the programs that used to be strongly supported by fraternal organizations. Another of the strong reasons for joining has been eliminated.

Both authors have a convincing amount of data to support their conclusions. However, as in all such data much of it is subjective and open to several differing points of view. What the data clearly shows is that Freemasonry has not differed from other organizations in its membership decline.

Let's move on to what, in my opinion, poses a far greater threat to Freemasonry. That is: *The retention of our current members*. You can look at the membership statistics of any Grand Lodge in North America and they will all tell you an alarming story. There are almost as many members leaving our Fraternity voluntarily, either through demits or N PD's, as involuntarily through death. Many of our members are telling us they simply do not have enough interest, care, or concern for Freemasonry to even take the time or money to remain a member.

We also know that one of the major problems our fraternity has always faced, even in the so-called good times of high membership, has been lodge attendance. There are many members who seem to be satisfied solely with being a Freemason. Willing to pay their dues but unwilling to make any commitment to the Fraternity beyond simply being a

member. Many of our leaders have said ‘That’s okay, because they are paying dues and we need the money.’ If we truly believe we can have a strong, viable, fraternal organization with most of our members staying home, then it would be my suggestion we are part of the problem and not part of the solution.

Simply put, our greatest problem is disinterest. Far too many members are leaving because they have no real ties to the Fraternity, have never been shown any ties to the Fraternity, have never experienced any ties to the Fraternity. During the period after WW II we had a membership surge in such great numbers that the individual attention usually given to new members could not keep pace. Today individual attention, that used to be so significant, is not only no longer practiced, it is barely even remembered.

The conclusion we have to draw is that Freemasonry, today, is extremely vulnerable because we have far too many members who show no interest in the Fraternity and we have far too many members who know nothing about Freemasonry. This makes us particularly vulnerable to attack from those anti Masons who make false and misleading statements about Freemasonry. Most of our members simply have no idea how to respond. They do not know what to say if their pastor tells them we are Satan worshipers, or Albert Pike is leading us down a path to Lucifer. We only get angry, which further plays into the hands of those who attack us.

We are also vulnerable because we cannot even talk with our own family members, friends or business associates about the Fraternity. We don’t know what to say. When you hear a Freemason say, ‘it’s a secret, I can’t tell you’; what he is really saying is “I don’t know the answer and I am too embarrassed to say so.”

If these conclusions are valid what is the answer? Well, the answer is so simple we won’t accept it because the answer does require commitment and hard work. The answer is Masonic Education, and education does not come easily. All of us remember sitting in a school room, particularly on an early June day, when it’s nice and warm outside and conclude we would rather be out there playing than inside trying to figure out arithmetic. Too often

adults no longer wish to further their education and we meet a lot of resistance. It is my belief that many Masons are in this category. They are saying, “I have gone through all that stuff, don’t bother me with it again. I’m joining a social organization and I don’t care what its past was.” This is an attitude that we have to work very hard to overcome. Is it worth it? Is Freemasonry worth it?

Let’s look at the role of Research Lodges in this mix we call Masonic Education. It seems to me that Research Lodges not only have played a vital role in our Fraternity but should have an even more expanded role, including things that are not presently being done. Let me offer my thoughts on what Research Lodges could and should be doing.

**Help develop new, and strongly support present, Masonic writers and authors.** It is very important that those writing for the first time be given pointers on how to construct articles. Writers of many years need contacts to help them present their papers to various Masonic publications. Research Lodges could and should develop contacts with as many other Research Lodges and Masonic publications as possible. Learn if a Research Lodge is interested in a paper on a certain subject and if you know an author working on that subject place the two in contact. Make contacts with Masonic publications and explain to them what you are doing and that you would like to send papers of interest to the editor for review for possible publication.

### Fact VS Opinion

When you are working with a writer insist on the best research available and also demand of the writer that when they are expressing their opinion they say so, clearly. When they are presenting facts, as best they can be established, say so, clearly. Do not confuse the two. My experience at MSA has been that many writers consider once they have expressed an opinion that makes it so. Insist that any paper handled in your Research Lodge be as accurate and factual as humanly possible.

**Make contact with other Research Lodges.** Earlier we talked about helping writers and giving them an opportunity to present papers to other Research Lodges as well. It is also extremely important for the Research Lodge to be in contact with other Research

Lodges to help each other with research. There may be times, for example, when the Civil War Research Lodge could be of enormous help to a Research Lodge, in another part of the country, by giving them information not readily accessible from other sources.

**Develop a Research Lodge National Conference.** A conference similar to that enjoyed by Masonic Libraries or Daylight Lodges. Formally meeting with each other is one more way of exchanging information.

**Make contact with Masonic Libraries.** Be sure that your transactions go to as many Masonic Libraries as possible. There are many good articles in Research Lodge Publications that need wider distribution. Send them to major Masonic publications as well. But particularly Masonic Libraries because they oftentimes will know of a subject that needs more research, and working with the library can expand the available information and its distribution.

**Develop Masonic Education Programs.** Every lodge should have a Lodge Education Officer. But nowhere do we have good, solid, Masonic Education Programs being taught, for lack of a better phrase, in a classroom atmosphere. We need to teach Masons without the distraction of the telephone, or conversation, or any other disruptive influence. We need to have them in a classroom atmosphere where people knowledgeable on the subject of Masonic Education can bring to the new Mason, or the Mason of many years, solid information about the Fraternity.

If teachers are available they should be used in this project. But many Brothers are able to communicate and can teach a history of Freemasonry, the purposes of Freemasonry, and how we as individuals can contribute to our Fraternity.

## Website

Be sure you have a website with postings of a variety of articles from your "Transactions." And; link to other websites as well. You should link to your Grand Lodge, other Research Lodges, The Philalethes, MSA, to name a few.

Are any of the things we have just discussed worth doing? That has to be an evaluation of the lodge. Every lodge is chartered to do certain things. The members must then decide if they are going to do those things. We have hard working lodges and we have hardly working lodges, whether they be Research Lodges or regular Lodges. But if the members of any lodge are prepared to make a commitment to what needs to be done then a lot can be accomplished. Research Lodges are no exception. Research Lodges also have a much greater obligation to publish accurate and factual information because you are looked to as a source of knowledge about the Fraternity.

*Let me give you a couple of examples of what / am talking about:*

**Question: Is Billy Graham a Mason?** That is one of the most asked questions we get at MSA. We have stated unequivocally that he is not. That is factual because his organization in North Carolina has stated in no uncertain terms, "Mr. Graham is not a Mason and you must stop referring to him as such". Now, Billy Graham is not anti-Masonic by any stretch of the imagination but he has been referred to as a member of the Fraternity and he is not.

Research Lodges can help by being sure that you know if famous people are Masons or not and can respond when those inquiries come to you.

*Let me give you another example that happened just recently.*

We did a Short Talk Bulletin on Theodore Roosevelt. In one part of the Short Talk the author said:

*In another famous Masonic incident when he was President, he attended his own Lodge in Oyster Bay, sat on the sidelines, and asked the Worshipful Master for permission to speak. It has been erroneously stated that the Master was Roosevelt's own gardener, but in reality he was the gardener on a nearby estate.*

A member of the lodge in Oyster Bay, which was Teddy Roosevelt's home lodge, e-mailed us with an

objection followed by a reference to a paper by Stuber quoting Roosevelt:

*For example, when I was President, the Master was Worshipful Brother Doughty, gardener on the estate of one of my neighbors, and a most excellent public spirited citizen, with whom / like to maintain contact. Clearly I could not call upon him when / came home. I would have embarrassed him. Neither could he, without embarrassment, call on me. In the Lodge it was different. He was over me, though I was President, and it was good for him, and good for me.”*

The lodge member says:

*Brother Stuber’s article quotes Theodore Roosevelt, but did he actually say these words, or even anything similar. / believe the above three paragraphs fall into the same category as George Washington’s cherry tree and coin toss incidents; or Abe Lincoln’s footprints on the ceiling story. No Master of Matinecock Lodge was named Doughty.*

In contacting the author of the Short Talk he sent his source which was an interview at Oyster Bay with John J. Leary, reported in his Talks with TR in the McClure publication of the diary, Houghton Muffin, 1920.

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*Mr. Leary notes: The “Doughty” here referred to was undoubtedly W. James Duthie, a gardener on the Townsend estate nearby the Roosevelt estate. He was a Master of Matinecock #806 at Oyster Bay 1902-3-4.*

Who was right? Well, since all of the parties are long since deceased it’s a story that cannot be checked for complete accuracy. However, the author did do legitimate research and quoted a reasonable source that he could refer to. This is what I was talking about earlier. Make sure you get the most accurate research you possibly can in your articles. No one is perfect and no one is free from making errors. But we have to strive for factual, accurate information.

My conclusion; *There is a vital need for Research Lodges*. Not only in what is being done today but in an expanded role to ensure the message of Freemasonry is carried forth to our members and to the general public in a manner that can be trusted.

Plato observed: *The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life.* It naturally follows then: *The direction in which Masonic Education starts a new Mason will determine his future Masonic life.*

