

Keynote Presentation

Lexington Lodge No. 1 Annual Festive Board

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Our Grand Experiment

When Amity Becomes Enmity

Mikel J. Stoops, Grand Junior Warden, Grand Lodge of Kansas

In 1716, almost two centuries after the seeds of Freemasonry were sown, there emerged a supposed need to have a body to govern and regulate the conduct of Masonry in Lodges. This idea culminated in the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge of England on St. John the Baptist's day in 1717. And Our Grand Experiment began.

This assemblage immediately began to define acceptable conduct for the Grand Lodge and its subordinate Lodges. Many of these regulations are still recognizable today:

- The Grand Master is entitled to preside over any Lodge under his authority.
- A Lodge Leadership Structure with a Master and two Wardens and giving them the right to assemble their Lodge.
- That a Lodge should be governed by a set of Bylaws adopted by its Membership.
- A minimum age requirement for membership.
- A requirement that the Lodges guard their West Gate.
- The dictate that only by unanimous consent can a candidate be made a Mason.
- That all members should be charitable to their Brothers and always follow the Constitution, Charges, Obligations, Regulations, and Usage of the Fraternity.
- The use of a majority vote system to determine outcomes of questions in a Lodge.
- And So On.....

Let's be clear about a basic and distinguishing fact; that this system was set up so that the Grand Lodge dealt with issues of Lodges and that dealing with issues of the individual Members was left to their Lodge. To that point, of the thirty-nine regulations spelled out by Mr. Payne in 1720, Thirty-Eight of them dealt with Grand Lodge, its officers, or matters at the Lodge level. One of them dealt with the regulation of an individual Mason, which was painted with a broad stroke, that all members should be

charitable to their Brothers and always follow the Constitution, Charges, Obligations, Regulations, and Usage of the Fraternity.

So Our Grand Experiment is off and running with a list of third-nine does, don't, how-tos with regards to conducting the business of a Grand Lodge and basic Local Lodge requirements.

What are the inherent rights and duties of a Grand Lodge and its leaders? One could say it is to govern and in some aspects that is true. But is it not more accurate to say that a Grand Lodge and its leaders are to serve. To serve how and to serve what? For me, I can boil this down to a simple mission statement.

“The mission of the Grand Lodge is to encourage and support Freemasonry by assisting its constituent lodges to achieve success and prosperity as assets to their membership.”

Can it really be that simple? I think it is. Just as every Mason should work to achieve success and prosperity in all his endeavors, so should the Grand Lodge and its officers endeavor for the Lodges that they serve. And again, just as in the original 1720 regulations, the Grand Lodge deals with the issues of Lodges and not of individual Masons.

The business of the Grand Lodge should **NOT** be about promoting The Grand Lodge! Nor should it be about promoting the needs and egos of its officers. How much of our Grand Lodges' time, effort, and resources have been wasted over the last century on “One and Done” programs that were nothing more than an ego boost for a particular Grand Master? On the flip side of that, how many great programs were short-lived because a particular Grand Master wanted it to be “HIS” program, so he never communicated it to the rest of the leadership team? Programs that could benefit the craft for many years are held in secret because of the ego of one man so that they can be claimed as “HIS.” In doing this the likelihood of buy-in by future leaders is diminished, and the program will most likely never even come to full fruition. The work of the Grand Lodge is not about an individual; therefore, its focus should not change from year to year. A strategic and consistent plan needs to be in place, and each leader should understand the necessity of working within that framework. There is no place for a “My Year” mentality in Freemasonry, and anyone who has that mentality or who seek titles, jewels, fame, and /or fortune are not fit to lead our ancient and gentle Craft. Further, we as educated Masons should understand this and not place such cowans in leadership positions.

It is clear that if Our Grand Experiment is to succeed, Grand Lodges and their officers must understand their roles. They are to encourage, support and serve. Yes, TO SERVE. This paradigm has shifted, and if Our Grand Experiment is to continue, it is time it shifts back. Too frequently I attend events where the Grand Lodge leaders are first in line, get the best place, or are first to eat. Brothers, where I come from, leaders serve; therefore, it is those whom we serve who are first in line, get the best place, and

are first to eat. Did you ever wonder why, in a traditional Masonic procession, the highest ranking officer goes last? I think that there is much to learn from that simple observation.

Along with the shift away from leaders who are true servants to the Craft came a shift in who we select to lead. Or maybe it was the other way around. That Our Grand Experiment started to shift because we started placing importance on arbitrary accomplishments such as:

- How many membership cards you carry.
- How many years you have held a membership card.
- How many fancy hats you wear.
- How many fish you have fried.
- How many pancakes you flipped.
- How many made up “Fun” degree you have taken part in.

All of these have just as much bearing on one’s ability to serve as a leader as would your waist size or how much hair you have left. Though let me be clear that list is also not an indication that you do not have the ability to serve in a leadership capacity. Unless, of course, you believe that the things in that list are truly what Masonry “IS.”

Allow me to expand upon this idea of what Masonry “IS.” Though this is not a direct topic associated with Our Grand Experiment, I believe it is a parallel and closely linked to the issues at hand. Masonry is an initiatic fraternity based on a system of self-knowledge, with lessons in philosophy, spirituality, and morality. If this system is followed, a transformation of the Mason will occur. That is what Masonry “IS.” Through study and understanding, he will become a better man, Mason, husband, father, and citizen. He will gain a deeper understanding of how humans should interact with each other and with their creator. Out of this growth, he might well become more spiritually aware, charitable, civically minded, and he might be better able to enjoy peaceful fellowship with his Brothers. At the individual level, that is what Masonry “DOES.” Unfortunately, too many of those who hold a membership card are oblivious to what Masonry “IS” and only know what Masonry “DOES.” To them, Masonry is a civic organization, a social charity, or a fellowship club. They have lost the basic knowledge and understanding of what Masonry “IS.”

Too often I find myself in the company of Grand Lodge officers who fall into this group. When asked to talk about the problems in Masonry and what their Jurisdiction is doing to fix them, I hear story after story about child identification programs, working with children in high risk situation because of violence or drug abuse, bike for kids, books for kids, bears for babies, miles of food, scholarships, blah, blah, blah, and blah. Though these might be good and honorable programs, they have nothing to do with the problems in our fraternity and are certainly not a fix for those problems. The emphasis of even the top level of leadership has, in some cases, shifted away from Masonry to something that is no more than a service organization or social charity, indistinguishable

from the Rotary or Lions clubs. We have placed men in leadership positions who do not even know what they are leading. They only know what Masonry “DOES” and in their uneducated minds, that has become what Masonry “IS.”

There are those that would claim that leadership of Our Grand Experiment shifted because we started to seek leaders that were business savvy and understood the issues of finance and property management. Good theory, but it does not ring true when I hear leaders of one Jurisdiction state that they are running the financial business of their Grand Lodge at a \$350,000 per year deficit and that the Grand Lodge will be bankrupt in six years or less. This is the most extreme case I am aware of, but none the less, it is clear that, in most cases, we are not picking leaders for their business acumen.

Our Grand Experiment is faltering. We have chosen men for leadership positions who do not even understand the simplest notions of our Fraternity. Men who do not understand the importance of ritual, decorum, or appearance? Even in Kansas, we suffer from what I call the “Ample Form” syndrome. In our Bylaws, it is prescribed that the Grand Master, opens and closes Lodge in Ample Form. Some have interpreted this that the Grand Master can shortcut the opening and closing ritual. I am not of that opinion. We have jurisdictions whose leaders use their position to make political, racial, or religious statements and arguments. These people clearly do not understand the tenants of our Craft. How were they raised to leadership positions having so little knowledge of what are some of the first lessons taught to our Entered Apprentice? And as for attire, I am fed up with the “Masonry regards the internal and not the external qualifications of a man,” excuse for a shabby and undignified dress. If a Grand Lodge leader thinks a polo shirt paired with a top hat, or bib overalls, or something that could double as hunting apparel is the proper dress for Lodge, they do not understand the honor and dignity our ancient Craft and in turn that which their position merits.

With the change in leadership mentality came a change in governance and emphasis. The original thirty-nine regulations have multiplied like live bacteria in a petri dish. The Masonic code, blue-book, bylaws, etc. of many Jurisdictions have become hundreds of pages of “Thou Shall and Thou Shall Not!” Our Grand Experiments shifted, and now it tries to control every action and interaction of the individual Masons. Remember that of the original thirty-nine, only one regulation had to do with the individual Mason. Today’s Codes are filled with fifty to ninety percent content dealing with the governance of the individual. No longer was Our Grand Experiment content with letting the Lodges deal with Members.

With the explosion of regulations and rules and with the loss of the leaders with a true servant’s heart and understanding of what Masonry “IS”, came the unprecedented belief in the unlimited power in the Grand Master and the Grand Lodge. Some would say that this has always been the way of Our Grand Experiment. I do not believe this to be the case as I want to point you to regulation nineteen of the General Regulations from 1720.

“If the GRAND-MASTER should abuse his Power and render himself unworthy of the Obedience and Subjection of the Lodges, he shall be treated in a way and manner to be agreed upon in a new Regulation; because hitherto the ancient Fraternity have had no occasion for it, their former GRAND-MASTERS having all behaved themselves worthy of that honorable Office.”

So after only three years of the innovation that created Our Grand Experiment in the Masonic world, Masons recognized that the powers of the Grand Master were not unlimited and that he should work within the same Constitution, Charges, Obligations, Regulations, and Usage of the Fraternity that govern all Masonic conduct. Further, I believe, that he should be more attentive to the same. Being a true leader in Masonry required a complete understanding of Masonic conduct, and every true servant leader should understand the importance of leading by example.

Let me tell you a story of what exactly that means to me. To start, you might want to know that in Kansas we have an unofficial progressive line of Grand Lodge officers that starts with an appointment to the office of Grand Senior Deacon. A few months ago I received a phone call from the Grand Master of Kansas, the Grand Master that had appointed me as his Grand Senior Deacon just six months before this call. His words were simple and blunt. “What in the hell am I supposed to do with this?” That “This“ he was talking about was official Masonic Charges filed by me against me and my entire Lodge. The Grand Secretary’s response was, “Can you even do that?” My response, “UMMMM Yep. I just did.”

What precipitated this is that I was Master of the Lodge but was unable to attend a stated communication due to a Grand Lodge commitment. At that meeting, a ballot was to be cast for membership in the Lodge. Prior to the balloting one member stood up and announced how he was going to ballot. Then after the ballot, the entire Lodge entered into a discussion as to how and why the ballot came out the way it did. Needless to say, word of this reached me in just a few hours. So as Master of the Lodge and a Grand Lodge officer, I find out that my lodge, as a whole, decided to do what is clearly spelled out by our Kansas bylaws to be an offense against the body of Masonry. One of only five instances in our bylaws that spell out such an offense. As Master, I am responsible for the actions of that Lodge and my absence does not excuse me from those duties. So I filed charges against the entire Lodge and myself as Master for the actions of the members at the meeting. It did get resolved, but how the charges were disposed of was up to the Grand Master and Committee on Jurisprudence. I hope that this illustrates just what I mean when I say that leaders must be held and must hold themselves to a higher standard.

Our Grand Experiment, now being more than three centuries old, has changed and shifted to something unrecognizable to its creators. Hiding behind the curtain of “Jurisdictional Sovereignty,” and in some cases, even codified immunity, some Grand Lodges and Grand Masters exercise what they have come to believe is their right to rule with unlimited authority and without any thought of being held accountable for their

actions. Often we find them disregarding or discarding time-honored values of our Fraternity; knocking down those symbolic pillars and weakening even further the support of our Craft.

The days of turning a blind eye while Masonry in this country continues to spiral out of control becoming something unrecognizable to our forefather must end, and I can only pray that we are witnessing the beginning of the virtuous endeavor.

Let me quote a letter that I was the author of in 2017.

“We find that the Grand Lodge of F&AM of Arkansas is operating well outside of the acceptable bounds of legitimate Masonic Conduct. It has willfully violated one of the Cardinal Virtue by having strayed from the principles of Justice for every man. It is in ... violation of at least two of the recognized Ancient Landmarks...; those being the rights of valid representation and appeal....If an individual Brother were to act in the manner as the Grand Lodge of F&AM of Arkansas, its Grand Master and many Past Grand Masters has chosen to act, his conduct would be deemed un-Masonic, and he would be charged, tried and found guilty of an offense against the body of Masonry. We must hold a Grand Lodge and a Grand Master to the same standard as the Membership. Therefore, we must act to guarantee that these injustices do not continue. We must see to it that the Grand Lodge of F&AM of Arkansas and its erring leadership are held accountable for their actions.”

Strong words, but even stronger convictions were needed to follow through on them. And the Leaders of the Grand Lodge of Kansas rose to the occasion to see that action was taken. On Friday, March 16th, 2018, the Grand Lodge of Kanas A.F.&A.M., by a majority vote of its Members, determined that it would withdraw recognition of the Grand Lodge of Arkansas F.&A.M. for exactly those actions previously spelled out.

Instead of abandoning anciently held values and removing our pillars, it is time to re-implement what has been cast aside and return the supports that were meant to hold up our Fraternity. King Solomon’s temple was not saved from war and attack by removing its pillars and knocking it down into a heap of rubble. No, that is how it was lost. And so it will be with Our Grand Experiment and possible even our Fraternity.

It may be that Our Grand Experiment has run its course, and a new structure will emerge. Maybe the increasing intra-jurisdictional and inter-jurisdictional conflicts will precipitate a change. Maybe the financial failure of any number of Grand Lodges will lead to a reorganization. Nonetheless, we must understand that Our Grand Experiment in NOT Masonry. It is an innovation of a governing structure placed upon our Craft. Masonry can and will survive even if Our Grand Experiment fails.

Our Grand Experiment and even our Craft is at a crossroads Brothers. It is within the Islands of true Masonry such as this, that we will decide to correct our course and return Freemasonry to its true intention; and to refocus Our Grand Experiment so that it once again encourages and supports Freemasonry by assisting constituent lodges to achieve success and prosperity as assets to their membership. The time has come to choose true leaders of our Craft.

We must select men that understand that the role of Grand Lodge is to govern the actions of the Lodges and not the individual Masons.

We must select men that know that there is no place for a “My Year” mentality in Freemasonry, and who are not seeking titles, jewels, fame, and /or fortune, but rather want to serve out of a love for our Fraternity.

We must select men who have a true servant’s heart, who understand that to lead is to sometimes go last.

We must select men who understand that to fix what is wrong in Masonry, we must look inside Masonry and not apply external programs to an internal problem.

We must select men who will be good stewards of our finances and assets.

We must select men that understand the importance of ritual, decorum, and appearance.

We must select men that will work within the “Ancient” Constitution, Charges, Obligations, Regulations, and Usage of the Fraternity, that lead by the example of their Masonic conduct while holding our Craft and themselves to that higher standard.

We must select men that are willing to act on the belief that all Grand Lodges and their leaders must be held accountable for their actions.

We must select men that will build up and not tear down our anciently held values that are the very supporting pillars of our Fraternity.

We must select men who truly understand what Masonry “IS”; that Masonry is an initiatic fraternity based on a system of self-knowledge, with lessons in philosophy, spirituality, and morality, and if this system is followed, a true transformation of the Mason will occur.

We must select MASONS.

I will leave you with this quote from Brother Winston Churchill,

“I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone. At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do.”