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What Do We Want to Be?

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A Presentation to The Rubicon Masonic Society's Masonic Education Series.
Lexington, Kentucky, Spindletop Hall.

My brothers, I regard it a very distinct privilege to have been invited to speak, as a participant in the Masonic Education Series for this distinguished organization. I consider Masonic education to be a very vital and integral component in the process of the re-establishment of influence of Freemasonry into American society. Therefore, I regard any opportunity presented to me to be involved relative to Masonic education as an opportunity and an honor.

I recall reading many years ago, "It is only Masonic education that will assure us that the brothers shall be more knowledgeable, conscious, and concerned with the canons of Freemasonry. To do otherwise is to fail in our mission to filter and purify the brother with the romance and beauty of Freemasonry."

It is always my intent when I speak, to stimulate thought and I trust that I will succeed in that intent this evening. I never expect everyone to agree with my thoughts and observations and indeed, for many years there were far more dissidents than adherents to what I had to say. However, the pendulum is starting to swing the other way. There are those in leadership positions today realizing that we cannot continue to practice failed procedures and expect them to succeed. There is a beginning of acknowledgement that what we have doing for the past thirty to thirty-five years has been a failure. What we have actually succeeded in doing has been devastating to our image in society and destructive the magnanimous influence we once had.

I will be very candid with some of my comments this evening, but I want it understood that I am not issuing a condemnation against our present-day leadership. We are the current product of an ongoing deterioration of commitment to the philosophical

idealism of a great fraternity. It is, however, essential that our present-day leadership comprehend that it is their responsibility to reverse that deterioration. It is also important that we all realize that we cannot depend upon our past to support our present or our future. That ongoing parasitization has led us into a complacency that is now evolving into apathy. When we became leaders, we assumed the responsibility of committing ourselves to supporting and restoring that fraternity to its former greatness. If any leader today feels that he has not assumed that responsibility, he does not belong in the position he holds.

I have also become increasingly cognizant of my mortality and recognize that the time that I have left is rapidly shrinking. For that reason, I express my concern more forcibly than I have in the past.

Let me also emphasize that tonight I am referring, principally to the Freemasonry of North America and several other countries, not to Freemasonry in most of the world. It is interesting and probably significant that the greatest failing in Freemasonry today has been in English-speaking countries, if measured in terms of decreasing membership numbers and influence in society. This is not in consequence of the language but of an adoption of a similarity in style of Freemasonry. The Craft however, is thriving in a large portion of the world and continuing to impact the evolution of the societies in which it exists.

My brothers, there has been 27 new grand lodges consecrated since the

beginning of this century. That represents perhaps, the greatest and most rapid rate of growth that Freemasonry has experienced since its inception in the 1700s. These grand lodges are already, playing a significant role in the societies in which they now exist.

We in North America, however, have been approaching the day of reckoning and have failed to find a solution to prevent it. We now have some serious decisions that must be made if we are to survive as a significant and influential organization. Decisions, such as: are we willing to accept what we have become, or do we fulfill our obligation to our brothers of the past and to society, to restore Freemasonry to the prominence bequeathed to us? Do we continue to dwell upon the greatness of our past, ignoring the significance of our present, and measure our success by the quantity of members that we deem necessary to support the great material structures we have built, or do we begin again to concentrate on the quality of our members to support the great mystical and intellectual structures that our brothers of the past built for us? Is it our intent to persist in ignoring the intellectual qualities for which Freemasonry has been historically known, to violate the protocols upon which we have thrived for centuries and surrender our ethics to the demands of the present-day world or do we restore those qualities through a commitment to succeed and to a revamped educational process?

It is no great mystery as to where, when and why we have failed. However,

there is no one mitigating factor that has caused the dramatic loss in numbers. Multiple factors certainly played a role, such as increased number of deaths, sociological changes in the environment, and self-centeredness of the populace.

But, I would suggest that a major dramatic cause for our loss of significance and influence in society has been our response to the loss of numbers. The visible challenge each brother assuming a leadership role faced, was a declining membership, and herein begins our decline, and herein it continues in both numbers and prestige. Our leadership has simply failed to retain the vision of our purpose. That response not only impacted our influence in society but actually accelerated the decrease in numbers. We need to look back no farther than thirty to thirty-five years to observe the beginning of the staggering decrease in membership numbers along with our impact on American society.

In North America we have recognized that our numbers have been on the decline since our peak membership in 1959. At that time, we had 4,103,161 members. However, I observed with increasing concern for twenty years, starting in 1980 as a Grand Secretary, the rapid decrease in numbers that was occurring, and this rapid decrease has continued through the past thirty to thirty-five years.

I did some research in preparation for a paper that I delivered to the Masonic Restoration Foundation two years ago. It supported the observation I made back in the early 80's. If we continue to destroy the perceived value

for a man to say 'I am a Freemason', we ran the risk of losing the 90% of our members who we acknowledged are not active participants in the Craft, yet pay their dues annually for the perceived value. My brother that is exactly what has been taking place for the past three decades.

From 1959 to 1979, the twenty-year period following our peak, the loss in numbers was 18.10%. The loss from 1979 to 1999, the next twenty-year period, was 42.16% and the loss from 1979 to 2009 was 41.45%. Our total decline in membership over the fifty years from 1959 to 2009 is 64.78%. Our loss to the present time is now three quarters of our peak membership.

Suspension from the craft for nonpayment of dues thirty-five years ago was almost unthinkable. Now it takes place in the thousands annually. We continue to make excuses, blaming the increased rate of deaths of our members as the principle cause for the decrease in numbers but discount the marked increase in suspensions and resignations. The suspensions and resignations must be in consequence of our own members losing respect for the craft. The time is long overdue for us to stop making excuses for failure and begin seeking causes for success.

However, the catastrophic loss of our image in society is both a cause and the result of our continuing emphasis of the need for quantity of members instead of the quality of the member. As our numbers declined we have been willing to sacrifice the prestige of the fraternity to regain the numbers. Along with the

prestige, our influence in society diminished. With the loss of prestige, the perceived value of membership was lost with it and the numbers plummeted.

This observation is not to be taken as a disapproval of those members accepted over the last thirty years who have become deserving brothers. One of the major factors for the success of the craft has been its willingness to accept men from all social strata of society. However, we cannot ignore the marked increase in Masonic trials that have taken place over that span of time for un-Masonic conduct. All “social strata” does not mean all “classes” of man.

During my first years as a Grand Secretary, Masonic trials were an extreme rarity. Now they are a routine occurrence. I recall a quotation I once read, “The Craft can do much in the transformation of character, but it cannot transform material. Hence, you will appreciate that the craft will give a brother what he has not, but it cannot make him what he is not.” Our failure to guard the West Gate has impacted us far more than we would like to admit. We have simply failed to use enough black balls and now we are paying the price.

Nor can we fail to note the decrease in the number of professional men who have affiliated during that same span of time. Both of these factors must be accepted as having an impact on our numbers and our image, reducing the attraction to Freemasonry. Society will always judge on the worst, never on the best, nor even on the average.

Some years ago, the minister of the church to which I belonged,

challenged our premise to accept only good men and ignore those, according to him, who needed our help the most. I responded, “Fine porcelain cannot be made from bad clay”. It was not our responsibility to reform men. That was the responsibility of his occupation. Our purpose was to make good men better.

Over thirty years ago, I raised the question, why are we trying to imitate organizations such as, social clubs, civic clubs and family oriented fraternal organizations, when they were declining more rapidly than were we? Why do we not study the Freemasonry where it is thriving to see what they are doing differently?

My Brothers, we are the most unique fraternal organization that has ever existed. We are also the oldest and most successful. We should not be imitating other organizations. We should be building upon the uniqueness of our own. Many fraternal organizations were created and structured on the Masonic fraternity. Today most of them no longer exist and if we study these fraternities and the road they took to their demise, we will find great similarities on the road that we are currently traveling.

And why do we continue in our attempts to buy back our prestige by raising large sums of money and contributing it to public charities. We cannot hope to achieve the success of those charities whose entire goal is for the specific purpose of the charity. The charities will get the credit for the use of money and we become regarded as a collection agency for them. Charity has

historically been a core value of Freemasonry, but it was not the core value of Freemasonry as we in North America have made it.

Many North American Masonic leaders have unfortunately bought in the political correctness attitude that permeates our society, wherein every citizen has the right to have what everyone else has regardless of ability, initiative, or work ethic. This attitude supports our willingness to lower our standards or acceptance and has proven a disaster for our craft. My Brothers, Freemasonry is not for every man. For those who have ears to hear, let it be known; not every man deserves to be a Freemason. Again, I recall reading more than twenty years ago, "We should tilt the balance of admission in favor of the quality of a few than the quantity of the undeserving."

Freemasonry has always been an elite organization. Yet, there are leaders today who feel that elitism is a dirty word when applied to the Craft. We must acknowledge that one of the reasons we became as great as we have was a result of our acceptance of good men, regardless of their occupation or status in society. This was a highly radical move considering the class structure of society of that day.

We must also recognize, however, that an even more important reason for our greatness was that we attracted some of the most prominent and greatest men from those societies. These men were the ones who structured the most significant fraternal organization ever conceived by the human mind. These

men represented and elite segment of society. Elite in the sense of their intellectualism, visibility and influence. Without these men, we would not be what we are today. We are the beneficiaries of what those men created.

We have been failing to attract men of this caliber for the last three to four decades. My Brothers, every man wants to belong to an elite organization and were we to permanently lose that quality of the elite, we lose our greatest visible image to society. When the decision was made that we would accept only GOOD men, we became elitist and we must remain elitist.

My brothers let's face it, you and I could never have structured what we have inherited. These early brothers crafted the foundation of Freemasonry and what they have created; we have no right to destroy. The men who created the early visual image of our craft were of a superior intellectual level than are most of us and they were highly visible in their societies. (Consider how many of the early Masonic leaders were members of the Royal Society). But, it took more than their intellectualism. It took a dedication to creating something that never had existed in the past. It took a vision to see beyond the mundane. It took a vision that in essence, created the concept of democratic society during the age of Enlightenment. I quote Margaret Jacob from her book, *Living the Enlightenment*, "Modern Civil Society was invented during the Enlightenment in the new enclaves of sociability of which Freemasonry was the most avowedly constitutional and aggressively civic". It was these visionary men, in the

ideological conclaves of Freemasonry, who fomented the foundation of the United States of America. These men created an ideal and we must remain idealistic in our goals. However, I look at my purpose in Freemasonry as simply, to do all that I can do to preserve it, until men of this caliber come along again to lead it.

The most idealist style of Freemasonry that I have found in the world today exists in Latin America. They have retained much of the idealistic thinking of the past. It is impressive, what they continue to achieve in that area of the world. They continue to express much of the character we had developed in our past. In some countries, they operate universities. They feed and school significant segments of the population. They operate hospitals and health centers and provide much care for the widows of their members and their expression of the brotherhood of man far exceeds what we know today in North America.

We may rebut with the observation that we do much of the same in North America, and indeed, we do, but on a totally different scale. Recognize the environment in which they must operate; a far more hostile environment with much more poverty than we have ever known. Yet, they have not lost their commitment to the principles and precepts of Freemasonry. They have not surrendered the soul of the Craft for the sake of impressive numbers. They continue to attract the segment of society that we are failing to attract, and they continue to carry the image that we once had.

I suspect that they have thrived with that idealism intact as a result of the ongoing challenges continually faced for their very existence. The prevailing dominant religion of Latin America is Catholicism, a religion that has not looked favorably upon Freemasonry since the 1700's. They also have struggled against oppressive forms of governments and radical societal elements. A Grand Master was assassinated just a few years ago.

Freemasonry in America has never been confronted with these challenges and that perhaps, is a major cause for its ongoing success in much of the world while declining in North America. The only major challenge that American Freemasonry has known, followed the Morgan affair and we survived it as a far stronger fraternity. Historically, Freemasonry has been at its best when it's challenges were the greatest. Now lacking challenges, we have changed from a hugely successful fraternal structure into one of invisibility, complacency, and perhaps apathy.

There can be little doubt that the public image of Freemasonry has eroded considerably, one of going from a highly sought-after organization to one of public solicitation for whomever we can convince to join. We have gone from an organization selective of its members to one of almost begging for numbers.

It is vitally important to the future of Freemasonry, and frankly to the world, that we once again become an attractive force to the segment of society, that has the potential to provide the visionary

leadership to restore Freemasonry to its past prominence; men with not only the vision but with the determination and commitment to something other than for themselves.

The greatest challenges with which Freemasonry was confronted in its past has been external to the craft. These challenges were from oppressive forms of government and religious leaders. The greatest challenges confronting us today and in our foreseeable future are internal. They are from a leadership with limited vision and with an ego driven need for self-aggrandizement. The National Grand Lodge of France was almost totally destroyed recently by the actions of a single ego driven Grand Master.

Our leadership today must be able to extend their vision beyond projects which are of little or no consequence to the future of Freemasonry. They must be capable of divesting themselves of any ego dedicated to self-satisfaction and accept the responsibilities they assumed in accepting a leadership position in Freemasonry.

During the past thirty years, I have had the opportunity to travel over a large portion of the world for the purpose of Freemasonry. In those travels, I was able to observe much of the difference between the Freemasonry as practice in the North America and the Freemasonry practice in most of the world. Our requirements to become a Freemason and to remain a Freemason pales to what the rest of the world requires. While we continue to insist upon low initiation fees and dues, (in the

hundreds of dollars) most of the world measures their membership requirements in the thousands of dollars. While we eliminate or reduce the requirements for learning, it is part of the required progression to secure membership in much of the world. While we are satisfied to have ten percent of our members attend our meetings, attendance is required at all meetings in much of the world. Several years ago, I reviewed the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of Paraguay. Written in the Constitution is a requirement of attendance at all meetings and if two successive meetings are missed without a justifiable cause, the brother is suspended.

In preparation for a paper I delivered at a Masonic symposium held at UCLA, twenty years ago, I learned from the writings of Dr. Wayne A. Huss's *The Master Builders*, "the admission fee in these early (Pennsylvania) lodges was equivalent to thirty days wages and over half the estimated annual food budget for an unskilled laborer". In addition, the brother was expected to pay his share of the food, drink, and charitable contributions.

I read recently in the publication, *Laudible Pursuit, A 21st Century Response to Dwight Smith*, in 1897 the average annual dues were \$50 and the initiation fee was \$200. That would equate to \$1037 for annual dues and \$4151 for initiation fees in 2002.

A research paper written by Mohamad Yatim was published in the fall issue of *The Journal*, the publication of the Masonic Society with the title,

“Freemasonry and Your Return on Investment”. He introduced the paper with a question asked frequently by our membership. “Have we cheapened our fraternity?” This is not a new question. I was asking the same one over thirty-five years ago. There is no doubt as to the answer to that question and there was no doubt thirty-five years ago. And yet, we have done the precious little, other than to continue to acknowledge the answer. Whenever proposals are made to increase dues and fees our members act as though we were trying to impoverish them. The same members would think nothing about paying much more for an evening of food, drink, entertainment or even a carton of cigarettes. There is a North American Grand Lodge, for two consecutive years voted down a twenty-five percent increase in Grand Lodge dues. It is simply a matter of priority. With the perceived value gone, it became no longer a priority.

Brother Yatim revealed in his research paper a chart showing Lodge fees and dues in eight lodges in the United States and Canada dating back as far as 1854 and continuing to 1955. The highest initiation fee was \$100 in 1904. Considering inflation and labor prices, the equivalent in today’s money is \$11,500. Eliminating that Lodge as perhaps an anomaly, the average fee in today’s currency, for the other seven lodges was \$3282 and the average per annum dues was \$286.

Of course, the small number of lodges involved in the random sampling created a greater margin of error but even assuming the worst sampling error, it is quite evident that the cost to be a

Freemason was considerably higher in our past than it is today.

A week and a half ago I was attending a communication of the Grand Lodge in Barcelona, when they voted to raise the grand lodge dues from €8 to €9. That evening I expressed to the Grand Master that I was amazed that the grand lodge dues were only €9 per annum. He told me that was monthly dues, not annual. Also, they had a €30 per year assessment for charitable purposes plus a fee for a building fund.

So today, we sit and lament that our past was much greater than our present. We watch those great material structures that we built on the quantity of the membership, being traded for something with far less grandeur and for which we surrendered our intellectual and mystical structures built on the quality of the member of the past. As our subordinate lodge buildings are crumbling and becoming eyesores to the public, we continue to concentrate much of our efforts in raising funds to give away, in an ill-fated attempt to buy back the respect and admiration that we surrendered along with the quality of the Craft.

We continue to place the blame for our failings on everything and everyone but ourselves. We refuse to alter our approach to solving the dilemma. We continue to emphasize the need for numbers and reject attempts to change our antiquated dues and fees structures because of a concern of losing members.

Let me give you a possible case scenario: If a lodge is charging \$50 a year dues and they increase it to \$200, resulting in a loss of three quarters of their membership, they would be receiving the same amount of dues income, they would reduce their operating costs and the remaining brothers are those who truly place a value on membership in Freemasonry.

Much resistance has been offered by some of the leadership to the concept of Traditional Observance Freemasonry, which by the way, is perhaps a misnomer, because they claim we are trying to change into some new form of Freemasonry foreign to America, when indeed it is an intent to change back into something American Freemasonry once was. At the present time, it is possibly the greatest hope that we have for survival as an influential and respected organization.

In Dwight Smith's book, *Whither Are We Traveling?* published in the 1960s, the answers to his first three questions reveal powerful reasons for the failing of North American Freemasonry. 1.) Can we expect Freemasonry to retain its past glory and prestige unless the level of leadership is raised above its present position? 2.) How well are we guarding the West Gate? 3.) Has Freemasonry become too easy to obtain? My brothers, we are failing on all points.

Dwight Smith, a past Grand Master and a Past Grand Secretary, was indeed, a visionary. His observations made over fifty years ago, are no less applicable today as they were then.

I spoke last Saturday at our Academy of Masonic Knowledge, when a brother pointed out to me that it wasn't only Freemasonry that is suffering in our present climate. Most organizations are encountering the same dramatic loss. I readily agreed with him. This decline was being abetted by a societal change in our environment. For several generations, interest in any organization dedicated helping others had become passé in American society. Thus, all organizations with similar character are facing a similar fate. Interesting solutions to their challenges was the same as we are following today; aggressively seek numbers, reduce admission requirements and grant more recognitions for less effort.

However, the losses of most of these organizations were of little consequence to society. Hundreds of fraternal organizations have ceased to exist without a whimper, but most were little known to begin with. However, as a result of the impact that Freemasonry has had upon society, its loss will be far more pronounced than any of the other organizations. We were the largest, the most visible, via impact, and prestigious, via composition. We will also be the most missed.

There is much being written by historians today concerning Freemasonry but you will find very little written about other fraternal organizations simply because of the significance to the world forged by our craft. This significance provides for us a far greater potential for recovery, simply because of the respect that remains in our past. However, that recovery is in our hands.

Now we must decide what we want to be. If we want to remain a little respected and declining organization, almost invisible in modern-day society, all we need do is continue to travel on the same road we have been traveling for over three decades, a road to oblivion. It assures our extinction.

If we want to recapture the vast influence we once had, if we want to again become a highly visible and respected organization in society, if we want to once again become the movers and shakers that helped shape the United States of America and the world, then we must change the road that we are traveling. Our future lies not in what we once were. Our future lies in each one of us and what we can be. Could we do the same?

My brothers, what do we want to be?



Thomas W. Jackson, Past Grand Secretary of Pennsylvania, may very likely be the most traveled Mason today with a long, illustrious career in Freemasonry. During his 50 years of Freemasonry, he has presided over 13 Masonic bodies. His international travels are legendary. His observations are illustrative of the broad variations in the culture of Freemasonry around the world. He makes the compelling case for higher dues, greater requirements, and that quality attracts quality: in short, that there's nothing wrong with elitism.

There may be no formal title as such, but it would be not out of the question to proclaim Thomas W. Jackson to be "Mr. Mason" worldwide. He has been a driving force and leveling influence in our Fraternity as well as a leader and a mentor who is recognized around the world for his dedication to the Craft and his unrelenting pursuit of fraternal excellence, and loyalty to the causes and principles of Freemasonry. His vast experience and views are well documented in his other classic Masonic essays and presentations: *Masonic Education — Looking to the Future*, *The Challenges of Masonry in the 21st Century*, *Freemasonry is Primary*, *What Are We Trying To Save? The World's Freemasonry*.

If the Freemasonry of today was the Freemasonry of fifty years ago, I doubt that I would be a Freemason today. The mystique of the Craft and the men of the quality that I knew then, are gone.

A very proud Filipino Freemason once wrote, "And when the Great Architect of the Universe shall call my number and I shall stand naked and alone before the Great White Throne and He shall ask about my nation and my organization, with my head held high, looking straight into HIS eyes, I would with humility be proud to respond, FILIPINO, Sir and a FREEMASON."