

Examining The Premise Of The Way We Have Always Done It

Calculating the Effect of a Pandemic on Freemasonry

Commentary: John W. Bizzack - May 2020

ABSTRACT

It is difficult to find sound prophecy. If there is sufficient data and information, and a balanced examination of past events occurring in similar or identical circumstances as is the event to be foreseen, there exist a better chance at responsible forecasting. Regardless, if there is even the smallest error in the input of sufficient data and information on which to base such a forecast, the entire calculation may be invalid. Failing to measure the inputs to complex systems can easily skew an entire forecast. In these times, the proposition that change cannot take place in our fraternity because we have always done something a certain way is now being held up to the light and tested more than at any time in the past. Committed Masons know the principles and philosophies of Freemasonry have never been the change referred to when change is debated. The change most often debated over the past two centuries or more is most often about the need for each generation to ensure that the delivery of the promise of Freemasonry is offered and performed in a way that best safeguards the perpetuity of the Craft. When we attempt to look into the future and strive to move the fraternity in such a direction, we have too often failed to measure the inputs necessary on which to make such decisions or make sure the information used is as error free as possible. Unfortunately, that is the way we have always done it.

We describe our labors as Freemasons as *speculative*, meaning we do not work with stone but instead work in the more philosophical realms using the tools and skills of operative masons as metaphors for living a good life. *Speculative*, by definition, means "engaged in, expressing, or based on conjecture rather than knowledge."¹ Looking at the varied approaches and methods used in our attempt to offer and deliver the full breadth and depth of the profound lessons of Freemasonry suggests to many members that we more often than not follow the second more than the first of these meanings.

The first case of Corona Virus appeared in the United States on January 30, 2020.² Since then our social norms and ways of life have substantially changed. As should be expected, the Institution of American Freemasonry has no unique immunity to the effects of a pandemic.

¹ John Simpson, *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1884.

² Grace Hauck, Karl Gelles, Veronica Bravo, and Mitchell Thorson, Three months in: A Timeline Of How COVID-19 Has Unfolded In The US: Here's A Look Back On How The Coronavirus Outbreak Began, And How It Has Unfolded In The U.S. So Far, *USA TODAY*, Apr. 29, 2020,

The Institution, dependent on social/fraternal assemblies, is becoming aware of the genuine importance of our Masonic assemblies and events that are now suspended across the nation because of social distancing mandates. The profound lessons and philosophies of our Craft can and should still be applied outside of our lodge rooms, of course. Nothing prevents that. We are now, however, face-to-face with the fact that the historical aim of our Craft is entrenched with many practices that makes social distancing incompatible with the Masonic experience sought from in-person meetings in our lodge rooms.

The now very real idea of conducting our business, rituals, ceremonies, and the varied labors of our fraternity except in a private, dutifully tyled meeting has shaken many members. No matter, the seed of change is being firmly planted across the nation. How will it be cultivated and nourished is yet to be seen with any certainty.

Although two regularly chartered Masonic lodges were already authorized to conduct tyled meetings online *before* the pandemic, learning that was appalling to many members, causing some to opine that any virtual Masonic meeting, tyled or not, was completely unnecessary and a threatening innovation.³

Technology often seems to be considered an enemy of Freemasonry. The fraternity was slow to warm to typewriters to record lodge minutes as it was later to the introduction of fax machines, and also the age of the offering of the early Internet. When closely examined, reasons become clear as to why. When technology is not understood, used appropriately, or applied in ways that constructively advance the aim and purpose of our Craft, it can certainly seem like the enemy to some because it changes things. When it is used appropriately and applied in ways that do constructively advance the purpose of our Craft, it still changes things.



American Freemasonry has lived through multiple decades during which our multiple jurisdictions have had dissimilar rules, practices, and processes. The fraternity has survived ideas like one-day classes, the watering down of standards and qualifications, rushing candidates through degrees, the creeping casualness that make some of our practices appear to be no different than that of a civic club, the annual retreading of worn out programs, the appearance of a “that’s good enough” attitude when it comes to proficiency returns and rituals, relaxing the no-solicitation rule and age requirements, the unretractable decline in membership, and opiate-like addiction to measuring the success of Freemasonry based on the number of names on rosters, along with other changes that took place before the very eyes of members who did not consider these and other matters, at the time, to be *change*. It seems that embracing our declining standards and casual practices is real way *we have always done it*.

<https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2020/04/21/coronavirus-updates-how-covid-19-unfolded-u-s-timeline/2990956001>, accessed May 1, 2020.

³ NOTE: Two jurisdiction who conduct stated communications online: Endeavor Virtual Lodge 944 in Victoria, Australia, chartered in 2018 by the Grand Lodge of Victoria, and Castle Island Virtual Lodge 190, is a regular, recognized Masonic lodge chartered in Canada by the Grand Lodge of Manitoba.

The first time I heard a member suggest coordinating an assembly of members online was almost two years ago. The idea was met with predictable opposition couched with concerns of privacy, the problem of many older members not being familiar with or having Internet access, along with the fear that a password or another closely held feature of Masonry would be unintentionally disclosed to the world. Those concerned expressed serious doubts that members would participate at all, revealing the extent to which they were out of touch with how the Internet and social media had already consumed the daily habits of many members. One thing, however, was expressed that was wise counsel, and that was that no such assembly should be offered or construed, if held, as some sort of substitute for a stated communication since it would not be compliant with the constitution of the jurisdiction.

The original suggestion did not promote substituting online assemblies for stated communications. Those who quickly spoke in opposition were simply following the unwritten “rule book” that triggers some Masons to resist anything that is not in step with the status quo. Had those opposed allowed time for the idea to be explained, then discussed, the likelihood is most would have at least better understood the purpose and value of using the technology appropriately. Instead, the automated knee jerk, replete with an overtone of indignation, more than significantly dampened the discussion as well as the spirit of the member suggesting the idea.

Interestingly, each of those members who voiced opposition have participated in more than one virtual Masonic meeting that has taken place since late-March of this year.

Those authorized by their jurisdiction to hold stated communications via Zoom or other similar platform, may not meet with widespread approval by jurisdictions that do not do the same. If they are conducting their meetings in accordance with whatever rules their jurisdiction prescribes, what business is it of another jurisdiction as long as it does not cross the line that places that jurisdiction’s recognition in jeopardy? We have operated that way for more than couple of centuries now about a number of things in Freemasonry.

There is another factor at play when it comes to virtual gatherings of Masons. If a virtual meeting carries a carnival atmosphere or devolves into the typical casualness that some virtual meetings in every realm has proven capable of doing, then yes, that does reflect unfavorably on all Masonry. There is nothing wrong with men getting together online for fraternal reasons, cutting up, and behaving as they might do when meeting for some other informal gathering or back yard event, however, if that is the atmosphere attendees prefer, then perhaps it should be called something other than a *Masonic* meeting.

An attendee at one recent Zoom meeting of Masons commented that since all present were Masons, they should be free to act as they do in lodge. Do with that statement what you will. Seeing some attendees wearing hats, one shirtless, several making faces into their cameras or at each other, talking over others who were speaking, playing disruptive music leading several to stand up and dance, blowing cigar smoke rings into their screens (followed by applause), offered enough reason to declassify the meeting as “Masonic.” There were over forty-five in attendance. Ages ranged from men in their twenties to sixties.



In a virtual meeting from another location, a brother spoke about how the generation after the First World War was shaped by that conflict and the Spanish Flu pandemic. He went on to say that those two world events seemed to strengthen many men of the time to take on the Great Depression and the Second World War. He posited the question that since succeeding generations have not faced the equal of those four historic events in their lifetime, does this current pandemic and all its life-changing

effects become the anvil on which the strength of our current and upcoming generation will be tested or broken? A mature, pensive, and captivating discussion took place for the next hour. Fourteen men were in attendance. There was not a hint of sophomoric behavior. Ages ranged from men in their twenties to sixties.

The technology enabling virtual meeting platforms has been available for some time. Today, the wider spread interest to explore the technology has emerged as it has in Masonry mostly because of the temporary suspension of Masonic assemblies during this pandemic. More Masons today see the value of this type of Masonic assembly. It is a legitimate way of keeping members connected, updated, and a vehicle through which Masonic education may be highlighted and advanced. While few are calling for such assemblies to evolve into stated communications where ritual is also performed, the idea is often tossed around and debated.

Our Institution was not in the forefront of exploring what value virtual technology offered. The awakening to this particular technology is now accelerated by external conditions, thus adding to our historical track record and further affirming that many features of American Freemasonry reflect the thinking and influence of our national culture and society more than initiatives that come from within. No matter the influences, our focus should remain on preserving, practicing, offering, and passing on the core principles and tenets of the historical purpose of Freemasonry.

If American Freemasonry is to advance without impairing the value of the time-honored principles and tenets of our brotherhood, the time we have to reflect, learn and educate ourselves is now: a time when we should be responsibly testing the conventional thinking behind the worn out notion that we cannot do anything that changes how we can appropriately deliver the core promise of Freemasonry.

No matter our position on the assortment of issues related to our fraternity and Institution, a new age is upon us. Our actions will define us in this period just as past actions have defined previous eras of our Masonic history.