

Communication and the Decline of Our Institution

Dennis M. Roberts on the need to
adopt better ways to spread the message of Freemasonry

B iologists will assert that the opposable thumb is the evolutionary advantage that bought humanity to hold dominion over all the species on the planet. Many assert, however, that communication is really our greatest advantage. All life on this planet communicates, and many species have opposable thumbs, so why are we different? It seems that our true and greatest advantage is the ability to preserve and to share information and communication, across generations.

From our earliest ancestors we have information, left by them, to communicate their stories. From simple cave paintings, like in Lascaux, France, to monuments such as the pyramids in Egypt and South America. Even the bodies of our ancestors convey to us information. From Otzi found in the Alps in the 1990s to the mummies left in the deserts of Egypt, we have learned so much about our ancestors in the past and how they lived, what they thought, what they ate and what they believed.

As we have learned information over the eons, we have been able to add to our knowledge by sharing it with the generations that will follow us. As our earliest ancestors learned what we could eat and what was dangerous, that knowledge was passed to the ensuing generations, thus keeping them from having to learn these things all over again. As we shared and gathered more knowledge, we were able to create much bigger and greater things. Without the knowledge from our earliest ancestors, things like the internet, space travel, and modern medicine wouldn't be possible. From the first crudely scratched animal on a monolithic stone in the deserts of Australia, to the latest report from the Large Hadron Collider at The European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), our legacy as humans is one of sharing, storing, and adding to the communication and knowledge of generations.

Through the ages humanity has changed how information is relayed. At our earliest, we made noises, simple guttural sounds, which became understood by others. From this point traditions of oral communication began.

From here, our ancestors encoded these words and their meanings into songs, verses and even plays; all things developed to help pass along the information they possessed.

From here certain marks or drawings became associated with the sounds our ancestors made. This was the birth of alphabets, systems of letters or pictograms representing sounds and ideas. Our communication techniques stretch from pictographs carved on stone tablets, to books printed on plant pulp, to Gutenberg's press, modern books, all

the way to the series of 1s and 0s that are encoded to create the modern miracle of the Internet.

Humanity has found ways to encode our information, our history, our story, and our beliefs into even the vibrations of energy we call radio waves. Today, we even share this information via beams of light. Think about that! The knowledge we call Light is now passed across the world instantly, encoded in beams of light. The knowledge of humanity has, at last, become light in a literal sense.

Our Fraternity, Brothers, is one such system by which knowledge is passed down. Some of our most revered symbols come to us from the earliest days of humanity. The point within a circle, the types of architecture, the all-seeing eye of providence, the number of steps you take, virtually every part of Freemasonry is rooted in antiquity. The whole of our beloved institution is, at its simplest, a way to communicate ideas to generations yet to come, and to instill in them values, morals, and the timeless laws of humanity which allow us to coexist.

Not only do we try to convey information that humanity has shared since our beginning, but we also have a rich heritage, vibrant traditions, and a glorious past to share. Not only have Freemasons helped shape the world for the better, but we've also greatly participated in the creation and sharing of knowledge since our earliest days.

So how does a Fraternity that is such a vital tradition of sharing human knowledge, now find itself in rapid decline? How does a Society that has had thousands of books written about it, been the subject of movies and documentaries shown on billions of TVs across the planet, and countless rumors and stories told from the lips of humanity, now find its membership dwindling?

It is my opinion that we are in this situation because at some point we forgot what we are. We have failed in communicating our ideas, values, and information to the younger Masons. When someone joins, we give them a degree presented as a play. We give them information to remember, and then they may come back. If they do, we give them the same treatment, until they become a Master. At which point, we greet them with unending business meetings for the rest of their time as Masons.

At some point we became a Social Club, bound loosely by a shared ritual. It became more important to fill seats and bring our friends in, than to fully educate our newest members. Once inside, men are greeted with very little real information. Some lodges do a great job of conferring degrees, while in many, you will see brothers reading directly from their monitors. When questions are asked, they are usually met with, "Read your monitor," or, "Ask so and so," or, "Its secret!" I remember growing up asking the male relatives and friends that were Masons, "What is Masonry?" Mostly I was greeted with, "Can't talk about it," or, "You can't possibly understand yet" and all the silly answers that

we have all heard before. This wasn't because those men were trying to deceive, or push people from the fraternity, it is because many of them were never relayed the information of what Masonry is, nor were they ever fully taught our history, our values, or our purpose. They were made Masons at a time when the social aspect was pushed. Degrees were rushed and hastily conferred, the meanings behind our rituals, and our peculiar ways were hastily explained, if even at all. The new Master Mason was left to continue his education on his own. Maybe he was told to read his monitor, maybe it was told to him that to learn more he should join one of the Rites. Maybe that is why there are still brothers that attend Rite meetings but never darken the door of their Blue Lodge. This lack of information, this lack of communication, this lack of delivering what we promise, is why we are in decline. For years we have had a communication problem. When asked what we do, many couldn't answer what Masonry's purpose is. So, we say things like, "It's a secret. You must join to know," or, "It's a system of morality, veiled in allegory, an illustrated by symbols." Most Masons fail at the next question, "what do you mean?"

Inside of any communication must be a message, or people will eventually ignore it. Think of yelling "fire" in a movie theater. The fire is the message being conveyed. After many times of communicating fire, but none being there, people will quickly learn not to respond anymore. In much the same way, we have promised to make men better. That was our communication, but we haven't conveyed a real message. How do we make men better? As men have found our communication lacking a unified message – substance, if you will – they have turned their back towards our Fraternity.

Further, a message needs an audience, and must be presented in a way the audience can understand and be delivered by means with which the audience is familiar. You can't speak French in a room full of Germans and expect everyone to understand you. You must reach people in their language and engage them in a manner they understand. As well, Brothers, if I sent this message via Morse Code or semaphore, very few of you would understand it. Though we speak a common language, I would not be conferring my message in a way that you understand.

We are very out of touch with how we communicate to the generations we are trying to reach. We talk about books we read or that were written by Masons. We call members or send them mail (physical mail). We take their dues in cash or by check. The youngest generation of men who are of lawful age to be a Mason doesn't communicate in any of these ways. They read e-books (or listen to them). Most will text, but hate talking on a phone. Email is better for every type of communication other than sending physical goods. Also, hardly anyone carries cash, and checking accounts are going away.

All these things, from books to mail, checks, and even telephones were once new to Freemasonry. You can bet that Brothers in the past fought to keep lodges from using them back in their time.

Brothers, the morals, values, and tenets of Brotherly Love are the simple message of Freemasonry. That is the message we were tasked with when we first allowed ourselves to be made ready to be made Masons. The messages of Love, Fraternity, Mutual Respect, and Equality that Freemasonry has gifted mankind, are needed more now than ever. Our decline in numbers is symptomatic of us failing to share and live that message.

To reverse this, we need to communicate better what our Fraternity is – what it is that we do. We, as Brothers, need to relearn that which we have forgotten, and have the desire to pass it along with the fervency it deserves. We must be sure, however, that we pass along our information and message in a way that people can understand it. We must evolve the means of communication to fit a technologically advanced society. We must also demonstrate in our lives the tenets and values Freemasonry teaches us.

Freemasonry has given us so much; we must share it with others. I would like to clarify, I am not advocating for asking people to join, nor changing anything that our obligation forbids. I am simply saying we must adopt better ways to spread our message.

The views and opinions in this paper are merely my own. It is not an opinion of any Lodge, Grand Lodge, nor any group of Brothers.

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