

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF FREEMASONRY

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Historian David McCullough, the author of well-received biographies of Theodore Roosevelt, John Adams and Harry Truman, said, “History is who we are, and why we are the way we are.”

I'd like to spend some time with you this evening looking at the components of that phrase, as it relates to Freemasonry.

First, let's examine the question of who we are.

We know that Freemasonry is the world's oldest and largest organization for men.

We know that modern Freemasonry, as we practice it, dates to June 24, 1717, with the founding of the Grand Lodge of England in London.

We also know that Speculative Masonry existed for a significant period of time prior to the founding of the Premier Grand Lodge.

Masonic historians such as Robert F. Gould and Henry W. Coil have produced works that trace the evolution of Freemasonry from the working Lodges of our operative forefathers to modern speculative Lodges.

Knowing the factual history of Freemasonry is important. As David McCullough would agree, it facilitates a deeper understanding of who we are.

But what are we? What is our purpose? Or, phrased in more familiar words, what came we here to do?

The answer to that question defines Freemasonry. And, for all of us, that answer should be exactly the same. In fact, at one point in time, each of us here today should have given exactly the same answer to that question.

No person in this room today, no Master of a Lodge, no Grand Master of a Grand Lodge, no person anywhere, has the right to define Freemasonry.

The reason for that is simple. Freemasonry defines itself.

It does so through its ritual.

In the Entered Apprentice Degree, the Master conferring the Degree speaks to the candidates who have just been taught to approach the East, and who have not yet been obligated, and says to them the following:

“The design of the Masonic institution is to make its votaries wiser, better, and, consequently, happier.”

In the opening and closing ceremonies of a Lodge of Entered Apprentices, the following dialogue occurs:

WM: As an Entered Apprentice Mason, from whence came you?

SW: From the Lodge of the Holy Saints John of Jerusalem.

WM: What came you here to do?

SW: To learn, to subdue my passions, and to improve myself in Masonry.

And there you have it, my Brothers. In those two passages from our Entered Apprentice ritual, Freemasonry has defined itself for our use and benefit.

What is Freemasonry designed to do? To make each of us wiser, better, and, consequently, happier. How is that accomplished? Through learning, through mastering self-discipline (subduing our passions) and by improving ourselves as individuals.

The purpose of Freemasonry is to improve the individual man, awakening his intellectual and spiritual senses that he might live life to his fullest abilities, all the while drawing nearer his Creator, the Great Architect of the Universe.

This reality, being our definition as taught to us through our ritual, ought to be at the center of every activity in which we engage as Freemasons.

Manifestly, it is not.

The true business of the Masonic Lodge is the exploration of Masonry. Our time should be spent in the review of the symbols of Freemasonry and seeking explanation for the lessons of the Craft. More importantly, our focus should be on how to successfully internalize those lessons so that they become apparent in the way we live our daily lives.

In other words, the business of the Masonic Lodge is to teach its men how to apply the lessons of Freemasonry so that they may be wiser, better, and, consequently, happier.

In contemporary Freemasonry, including Kentucky Freemasonry, Lodges have taken on the

character of civic clubs, immersing themselves in countless community-oriented projects. We raise and give away significant sums of money, frequently while our own infrastructure is in disrepair. We hold benefits and dinners for veterans' causes, schools, and PTAs. The list of our laudable efforts goes on and on without end.

Now, to be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with civic improvement projects.

The issue is not in the nature of the activities in which we engage, the issue is that we neglect to engage in our actual reason for being here – and that is the exploration of Freemasonry.

It is not our purpose to be a civic club.

It is not our purpose to be a charity.

It is not our purpose to be a booster club for veterans, schools or PTA groups.

Our purpose is to learn, to subdue our passions, and to improve ourselves, individually.

By the way, is it not true that, ultimately, the greatest civic improvement project in which a man can engage is the improvement of himself? Is there a better gift that you can give to your community than the best possible version of you?

Let's return to David McCullough.

Let's look at how history tells us why we are the way we are.

In the United States, the period from 1880 to 1930 was known as the "Golden Age of Fraternalism." During that time, it is estimated that there were over 800 separate fraternal organizations that came into existence. Those organizations included:

The Knights of Pythias
The Knights of the Maccabees
The Improved Order of Red Men
The Woodmen of the World
The Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks
The Loyal Order of the Moose

The Odd Fellows were at their zenith at that time, actually having more members than Freemasonry.

Add to that mix other civic clubs that were not necessarily fraternal in nature:

The Lions Club
The Kiwanis Club

The Optimist Club
The Rotary Club

The list goes on and on.

At the peak of the Golden Age of Fraternalism in the early 1900s, it is estimated that two out of every five men (40%) belonged to one or more of these organizations.

Here's the key phrase: "one or more."

Simply put, there was cross-contamination between the different fraternal groups. Odd Fellows brought their practices into Freemasonry. If an activity was popular at the Knights of Pythias Lodge, it soon made its way into Freemasonry.

Organizations competed with each other for membership, and the organization that had the most members was deemed the most successful. Organizations experimented with different types of entertainment to attract members, and it was generally agreed that to motivate men to attend meetings, there had to be the expectation of having fun. Far from being immune to this type of thinking, Freemasonry cast its lot with those who sought entertainment and fun.

The best study of this period, as it relates to Freemasonry, is Dr. Lynn Dumenil's book, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880 – 1930*. Dr. Dumenil, a professor at Occidental College in Los Angeles, wrote about how Masonic Lodges drifted from a philosophical and contemplative orientation to community service clubs.

Near the end of the Golden Age of Fraternalism, America entered, and emerged from, World War I. In the aftermath of the World War, another factor found its way into Freemasonry, and that was the idea of "Americanism."

No one wanted to appear to be unpatriotic, so Freemasons adopted the practices that were found in other organizations – repeating the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, decorating Lodges with patriotic banners and enlisting in support of veterans' causes.

Now, to be clear, Freemasonry charges each of us to be patriotic citizens. Again, return to the Entered Apprentice Degree. We are charged to be quiet and peaceable citizens, true to our government, and just to our country. We are not to engage in acts of disloyalty or rebellion.

But that charge applies to all Masons in all countries. Freemasonry instructs all of her sons to be patriotic, but Freemasonry advances no one country over another, just as it advances no one religion over another. Freemasonry is universal, whether in politics or religion.

Masonic writers of the early 20th century wrote at length about the influences of "fraternalism" on Freemasonry. The Builder Magazine, published from 1915 to 1930, included articles by such well-known Masonic authors as Rev. Joseph Fort Newton, R. J. Meekren, and Norman Broadwill

Hickox, all of whom sounded warnings that Freemasonry was drifting from its intended aim and purpose.

The warning was this: the Freemasonry being practiced at the time was in danger of losing its identity, or, if you will, its brand.

The Golden Age of Fraternalism came to a halt with the advent of the Great Depression. Economic hardships caused many of the fraternal organizations to close their doors forever. Freemasonry survived, but membership numbers fell sharply.

The coming of the Second World War brought a new influx of men into Masonry. Over a roughly fifteen-year period, from the early 1940s through the mid-to-late 1950s, so many men came into Freemasonry that Lodges had little time to devote to anything other than degree work.

The Masonic brand was not only lost, but it was entirely forgotten.

American Freemasonry, and Kentucky Freemasonry, had fully adopted the character of a community-service based civic club with an emphasis on public charity. Success was measured by the number of names on a list. Both of these traits have ultimately proved themselves to be injurious to Freemasonry.

Membership in American Freemasonry peaked in 1959 with just over 4 million members. In Kentucky, our membership peaked in 1960, with just over 100,000 members. Today there are fewer than 1 million members nationwide, and just under 25,000 in Kentucky. In slightly over 60 years, we have lost 75% of our membership. If the number of names on membership rolls is an accurate measure of success, then Freemasonry is in a period of abject failure. The good news is that high membership is not an accurate measure of success.

By the time that Freemasonry reached its greatest heights in membership, its mission had become so diluted by the influence of other fraternal and civic groups that it scarcely resembled the philosophical and contemplative organization that it was meant to be.

Dwight L. Smith, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Indiana, 1945-46, recognized the changes that had occurred, and were continuing to occur, in American Freemasonry. Smith, as Grand Master, and, later as Grand Secretary and editor of *The Indiana Freemason*, wrote frequently about the need to recapture the spirit of learning, self-discipline and self-improvement. When asked his advice for Lodges and individual Masons, Smith would reply simply, "Try Freemasonry."

Perhaps William O. Ware, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, was influenced by Dwight L. Smith. When installed as Grand Master in October of 1957, Ware said, "My program ... is very simple – Freemasonry. What does Freemasonry mean to you? And what do you mean to Freemasonry?"

Grand Master Ware went on to say, "...if the brethren of this Grand Jurisdiction would constantly put into practice in their daily lives the teachings of Freemasonry, we would develop such a force for good in this Grand Jurisdiction that our influence would be felt not only within but even beyond our borders."

Reaching the conclusion of his address, Grand Master Ware Said, "Confident that you will join me in this endeavor to awaken our brethren to the true meaning and purpose of Freemasonry, all of us, together with God's help, cannot fail to make Freemasonry in this Grand Jurisdiction what the founders of our fraternity fully intended that it should be – a beneficent power in the lives of each of us whereby we not only further develop 'that Spiritual Temple, that house not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens,' but also, through brotherly love and affection, bring into being that true spirit of brotherhood that should always exist among God's children everywhere."

By the mid-1950s, initiations in Freemasonry were beginning to decline. America was on the brink of demographic change, as families and businesses began to leave city centers and move to suburbia. This societal change had a great impact on Freemasonry, although hardly anyone noticed at the time. Before the rise of suburbia, men generally worked in downtown areas and Lodges were located in those same downtown areas. Men frequently walked to work, then walked to Lodge, and then walked home. As the city centers emptied, these habits changed.

Another factor contributing to the demographic change was the industrialization of America, and the shift away from a rural population. Like the urban core dwellers, those who migrated from farms and country towns tended to choose suburban living. Country towns that had once been able to support a Masonic Lodge (and other organizations), no longer had the pool of men necessary to continue to feed their membership ranks.

In the mid-1960s another cultural phenomenon occurred, which brought yet another demographic change that affected Freemasonry. America, which up to that point in time had been a nation of "joiners," became a nation of "non-joiners." Robert Putnam, in his 2000 best-seller, *Bowling Alone*, described the manner in which Americans, particularly American men, gradually withdrew from civic life. Attendance and membership in churches, civic organizations and fraternal groups shrank in corresponding fashion.

Masonic leaders have been slow to demonstrate any awareness of society's changing demographics, nor have they demonstrated any inclination to link demographic change to the changes in the structure of Freemasonry. In the world of institutional Freemasonry, one might conclude that it is still 1955.

In reality, the America of 1955, or even of 1975, simply no longer exists.

Consider this fact: a recent survey of Americans found that 81% professed a belief in God. Now, 81% is a large number, but that is down from 98% in 1960. That also means that roughly one-fifth of our population is ineligible even for consideration as potential Freemasons.

Consider further, the challenge of maintaining an enlightenment era institution, Freemasonry, in a decidedly post-enlightenment era culture.

The greatest characteristic of the enlightenment era was the emergence of man's thinking being governed by science and reason, as opposed to superstition and prejudice.

For three hundred years, enlightenment era thinking was dominant, and the world saw the greatest advances in science, medicine, industry and transportation in its history.

But the culture in which we live no longer embraces the values of the enlightenment era. Science is valued only when it supports our preferred opinions. Individual responsibility and accountability are considered quaint relics, and in the public forum, incivility reigns.

From where, then, will our pool of potential members come?

Let's consider that question by looking at what it is that attracts men to Freemasonry.

In 2020, William O. Ware Lodge of Research began an on-going research project called, "Voices of Freemasonry." "Voices" operates under the premise that all Freemasons have a voice, and the project provides a forum in which those voices may be heard.

The "Voices" project consists of ten questions that Freemasons may answer, revealing their views about issues related to contemporary Freemasonry. While the questions change from edition to edition, the first question remains the same for all, "What attracted you to Freemasonry?" In just over three years, some 200 Masons from all across the United States and Canada have answered this question. The overwhelming majority of respondents, roughly 75%, said, "I was drawn to Freemasonry by a relative, a friend, a co-worker."

What attracts men to Freemasonry? We do!

It isn't our marching in parades, acts of charity or civic good deeds that causes men to be attracted to Freemasonry. It is the observation of our character by the men with whom we have regular contact that draws men to us.

Men come to Freemasonry with a desire to improve themselves, not to be social engineers.

And here is Freemasonry's unique opportunity.

Men may engage in good deeds or practice charity in any of the many civic clubs that exist in our communities. But only in a Masonic Lodge may they experience Freemasonry.

That is our brand.

That must be our focus.

If we never marched in another parade, never donated another bicycle or never gave another dollar to a worthy cause we could still practice Freemasonry. The art of Freemasonry is the improvement of the individual man. That is what PGM Ware was talking about when he spoke of the “house eternal in the Heavens.”

My friends, if you came to Freemasonry to perform acts of public charity or to engage in civic improvement projects, you are in the wrong place. But, if you came to Freemasonry to improve yourself, to be the best version of you that you can be, then Freemasonry can provide you with the tools with which to build your temple.

Every man in this room tonight has in his mind the idea of the kind of man that he would like to be. Freemasonry gives us the tools with which to build that man.

For one final time, let's return to David McCullough.

The history of Freemasonry, particularly its recent history, helps us understand how we have arrived at this particular moment.

Equipped with that understanding, it is now left to us to choose our future path.

Will we continue to drift along as a civic club that emphasizes charitable works?

Or will we re-discover our brand? Will the focus of the Lodge be on its real business, the exploration of Freemasonry?

How you answer those questions, individually, will shape the course of your Masonic journey.

How you answer those questions, collectively, will determine the future of this Lodge.

Let me close by again quoting the simple advice of PGM Dwight L. Smith, “Try Freemasonry.”