

Masonic Traditions for the Twenty-First Century

W. Bro. Dennis V. Chornenky
President, Masonic Restoration Foundation

Considering the Craft's current decline in most English-speaking jurisdictions, it is important to consider what is at stake if the organization is to be preserved in its original form and its traditions are to continue to have a meaningful impact on the lives of its members.

Masons should be able to answer three questions if Masonry is to be successful. What is Freemasonry? What is its historical purpose? And what makes it different from other fraternal organizations?

The answer to the first question is that Freemasonry is a traditional initiatic order. While it has taken its modern form during the Enlightenment, its traditions, symbols and lessons, reach back to pre-modern times. If we closely investigate the lives of the individuals who were active in shaping speculative Freemasonry out of its operative roots, and particularly examine their connections to older occult societies and traditions, it becomes clear that speculative Freemasonry was designed to be foremost an initiatic institution through which men could recognize their true spiritual potential.

The courtly philosophical climate of sixteenth and seventeenth century Britain, where it did not follow strictly Puritan or Anglican trends, was strongly influenced by the underground tradition sometimes referred to as Arcadia, which encompassed within its philosophy elements of Gnostic, Neo-Platonic, Hermetic, and Kabalistic thought. As Rosicrucianism surfaced in the early seventeenth century it also showed an affinity to the Arcadian stream of thought.

A close study of the literary works produced during this period reveals a distinct current of symbolism embedded inside seemingly mainstream publications. And to those well versed in Masonic symbolism the central themes of the initiatic tradition become quickly evident upon examination of this literature.

It was precisely out of this philosophical climate, united through organizations such as the Royal Society, and through extensive correspondence that is now well documented, that the most well known proponents of seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Freemasonry emerged from. Men like Sir Robert Moray, Elias Ashmole, Jean Desaguliers, James Anderson, and their numerous friends and counterparts from all across Europe. Even if some of their writings regarding the history of the Craft may appear questionable to us in light of the evidence now available, it is clear that they

viewed Speculative Masonry as a custodian of the initiatic traditions of the past, charged with their propagation and preservation.

The general work associated with the initiatic tradition, and the purpose of Freemasonry, put simply, is to provide an environment where good men can unite together to assist one another in self-improvement and the realization of their true potential. One of the underlying tenets of this initiatic tradition is the belief that if even one individual becomes a better person the entire world profits thereby.

Being part of the initiatic tradition is what distinguishes Freemasonry from purely social or philanthropic organizations. While there are many different organizations that contribute large sums of money to charity, offer fellowship with like minded men or provide education, Freemasonry is unique, in that it embodies all these things, but is actually focused on offering men a traditional initiation into the mysteries of life and death. The initiatic tradition is the core, defining characteristic of Freemasonry, without which, there would be nothing to differentiate Masonry from other social or philanthropic organizations.

Attempts to make Freemasonry as accessible as other organizations by reducing or eliminating the initiatic elements are likely to bring ruin to the Craft. One could call the new organization which would emerge from such a process anything one likes, but it would no longer be Masonic.

Much of our dilemma arises from the fact that too many men that join are not properly educated about the fraternity. Rather than coming to an understanding of the Craft based on diligent study and thinking, new candidates tend to form their opinions based on the behavior of fellow Masons, who are themselves too often poorly educated about the fraternity's history and philosophy. A disproportionately small number of serious and scholarly men within the organization has led to a general decline over the last several decades.

In efforts to arrest the decline in numbers, many jurisdictions in North America have sought to make Masons faster and to make it easier for them to join by reducing the requirements for membership. Unfortunately, in order to appeal to the greatest amount of people possible things must generally be reduced to the lowest common denominator. It must be considered, however, that Freemasonry, is designed to appeal to what might be called the highest common denominator, that is, good men seeking to improve themselves. Selling ourselves cheap is a sad sign of a desperate organization. If an organization is vibrant and has a strong sense of purpose it will attract good men naturally. Based on the facts, we know this to be the case in most Continental European and South American countries, where Freemasonry does not advertise itself to the public yet its membership continues to grow or remains stable.

This is one of the Masonic traditions that must be considered—Masonry works best when lodges are smaller. Granted, for smaller lodges to be viable economically, they must adopt higher dues, but if quality is to be had, it must be paid for and men should not be afraid to show that the fraternity is important to them.

Unfortunately, North American Freemasonry has taken a different route for most of the twentieth-century. When it swung its doors wide open the organization quickly swelled, but it was filled with men that had not taken the time to learn about the real purpose of Freemasonry. Nor could they have as there was no way the lodges could have so quickly incorporated so many men into the Masonic culture. This is one of the keys to understanding our dilemma—the number of men that any given lodge can effectively initiate and educate is naturally limited.

Initiation is a slow and sensitive process and requires great effort on behalf of both the candidate and the existing members of the lodge. For initiation and Masonic growth to be meaningful and enriching, great care and attention must be afforded to each individual candidate. He must understand that the organization is highly selective, allowing him to feel self-worth and leading him to respect the high standards of the Order. Great time must be spent to educate him about the history, symbolism and philosophy of the Craft if he is to become a Freemason worthy of the title.

Therefore, another tradition that we seem to have lost, that should be emphasized, is the thorough investigation of candidates and meaningful preparatory period. Indeed, this is a demanding tradition that limits the number of candidates that any given lodge can initiate successfully. Doing otherwise, that is, filling up the fraternity with members who have not been properly educated about the purpose and history of the Craft seems only to have led to the deterioration of Masonic traditions and values.

This, along with the rise of popular culture and high-technology, left Freemasonry in North America unprepared to respond appropriately to the social changes that were quickly coming upon the institution. Nor could there have been a proper response as much of the leadership, poorly versed in Masonic history and the initiatic tradition, could not understand what it was that it should be endeavoring to preserve. Even now, much of what is introduced with the best intentions seems too often to result in further deterioration. The monitors warn us against innovations with good reason.

The facts tell us that we are going to become a much smaller organization over the next decade. But rather than accepting this inevitable fact and making preparations for Masonry to succeed with a smaller membership, it seems that we are too eager to adopt anything that could possibly delay the inevitable, that is, anything that has the potential to bring in members in large numbers. In a sense, this is a kind of denial, and unless it is shaken off soon it is likely to leave North American Masonry unprepared once

more for the challenges of the future. But if the right preparatory steps are taken, as Masonry becomes a much smaller organization, it can also become a much stronger organization.

One important thing to understand is that simply adopting one traditional practice here and another there is not going to turn the whole organization around. What is necessary is an all encompassing approach to the way our lodges can be improved. We know that European Masonry has been very successful in working as small lodges. And we know, whether we like it or not, that our own lodges are also going to become relatively small in the near future.

While it is true that we can consolidate lodges as a means of keeping the dues low, this approach is only going to work for a limited time and does not address the more fundamental problem of having lost our focus and traditions. If we want Masonic traditions to continue to have an impact on the lives of Masons, we need to focus on quality and working out viable models for smaller lodges.

We need higher dues and dress codes as a means of returning dignity to the institution. We need festive boards and more engaging Masonic programs in order to provide higher quality fellowship. And we need more thorough investigations and more meaningful preparatory periods for candidates if we are to rediscover our original purpose, uniting good men in the pursuit of virtue. We cannot afford to forget that the initiatic tradition is what defines us as Masons.

Keeping these things in mind, Masonry will doubtless overcome its future challenges and survive for many years to come. But the North American Masonic experience of the last century must teach us that Masonry cannot go wholesale—that the number of men entering the fraternity must be limited to how many men can effectively be initiated and educated. We must learn and understand that Freemasonry, if it is to be true to its designs, does not lower its standards but demands that individuals raise theirs.