

Whither Are We Traveling?

By Nelson King, FPS

Grand Abbot, distinguished members of The Society of Blue Friars, Ladies, Gentlemen and my Brethren. It is an honor to be selected to be a member of this Society. Two of my Masonic Heroes were not only Fellows of The Philalethes Society, but also Blue Friars. Allen E. Roberts, [Blue Friar Number 46] and Dwight L. Smith [Blue Friar Number 47].

For those of you who are Masonic Students you will immediately say to yourself he "borrowed" that Title. And yes you would be right. "Whither Are We Traveling?" was written by one of those Heroes. Dwight L. Smith was the Grand Master and then the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Indiana, who in 1963 published his "Whither Are We Traveling?" His self examination on North American Freemasonry is just as valid today as it was in 1963. I have to wonder is anyone listening.

Dwight said and Brethren please, I am just paraphrasing what he wrote.

. . .Can we expect Freemasonry to retain its past glory and prestige unless the level of leadership is raised above its present position? Again and again I have said, "There is nothing wrong with your Lodge, nor with Freemasonry, that good leadership will not cure." I believe that . . .

He also wrote:

. . .How well are we guarding the West Gate? Again, let's face it. We are permitting too many to pass who can pay the fee and little else . . .

. . .Has Freemasonry become too easy to obtain? Fees for the degrees are ridiculously low; annual dues are far too low. Everything is geared to speed-getting through as fast as possible and onto something else. The Lodge demands little and gets little. It expects loyalty, but does almost nothing to put a claim on a man's loyalty. When we ourselves place a cheap value on Masonic membership, how can we expect petitioners and new members to prize it? . . .

. . .Instead of devoting our thoughts and energies to ways whereby a new Master Mason may find a sphere of activity within his Lodge, we let him get lost in the shuffle. Then we nag and harangue at him because he does not come to meetings to wander around with nothing to do . . .

. . .What can we expect when we have permitted Freemasonry to become subdivided into a score of organizations? Look at it. Each organization dependent upon the parent body for its existence, yet each jockeying for a position of supremacy, and each claiming to be the Pinnacle to which any Master Mason may aspire. We have spread ourselves thin, and Ancient Craft Masonry is the loser. Downgraded, the Symbolic Lodge is used only as a springboard. A short-sighted Craft we have been to create in our beloved Fraternity a condition wherein the tail can, and may wag the dog . . .

. . .Do we pay enough attention to the Festive Board? Should any reader have to ask what the Festive Board is, that in itself will serve to show how far we have strayed from the traditional path of Freemasonry. Certainly the Festive Board is not the wolfing of ham sandwiches, pie and coffee at the conclusion of a degree. It is the Hour of Refreshment in all its beauty and dignity; an occasion for inspiration and fellowship; a time when the noble old traditions of the Craft are preserved . . .

. . .What has become of that "course of moral instruction, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols," that Freemasonry is supposed to be? If it is a course of instruction, then there should be teachers, and if ours is a progressive science, then the teaching of a Master Mason should not end when he is raised. I am not talking about dry, professorial lectures or sermons-heavens no! That is the kind of thing that makes Masonic education an anathema. Where are the parables and allegories? Alas, they have descended into booklets and stunts. No wonder interest is so hard to sustain . . .

. . .Hasn't the so-called Century of the Common Man contributed to making our Fraternity a little too common? We cannot expect to retain the prestige the Craft has enjoyed in the

past if we continue without challenge to permit the standards of the picnic -ground, the bowling alley, the private club and the golf links to be brought into the Lodge hall . . .

And finally he wrote:

. . .Are there not too many well-meaning Brethren who are working overtime to make Freemasonry something other than Freemasonry? It was an unhappy day when some eager beaver conceived the idea that our Craft should adopt the methods of the service club, or the luncheon group, or the civic league, or the playboy outfit. Whoever the eager beaver was, he lost sight of the fact that one of the reasons our Fraternity is prized so highly is that it does not operate like other organizations . . .

Brethren – that was in 1963.

Has anything changed? I honestly don't think so. We have the same problems that Smith wrote about. In fact these problems seem, at least to me to be growing.

What are we doing about it?

Well we are making it easier to get all 3 degrees. Why in some jurisdictions you could get the three Craft Degrees, the 32 Scottish Rite Degrees, and become a Shriner all in one weekend. Is this a case of the tail wagging the dog? Oh yes the cost. In one case the cost was to \$100.00 plus the dues for each body. But two of those bodies thought that was too much and underwrote the \$100.00

Grand Lodges are running TV and radio advertisements. They say that is to bring Freemasonry to the public's attention. But is it not just soliciting for members?

What are we teaching our newest members? In most cases nothing other than Ritual!

Why?

Could one of our problems be that we have let the "Ritualists" take over our Lodges? [I used to ask Allen if he knew what the difference between a

terrorist and a ritualist was? – You can negotiate with a terrorist.] Now there is nothing wrong with being a Ritualist, and good Ritual is a joy to behold. But have we not made the performance of the Ritual more important than what the Ritual means. [I first realized this the very first time as a new Mason when I gave what is called the Southeast Angle Lecture in Emulation Ritual. I said, "You now stand to all external appearances a just and upright Fellowcraft." After the Degree a Past Master came up to me and put his arm on my shoulder and told me that I had done a pretty good job with the lecture but the word was appearance not appearances.] Has not the course of moral instruction, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols become just another production, just like a play?

From a perusal of Grand Lodge Proceedings of various jurisdictions there is a disturbing thread that appears to weave its way through many of them. There is a higher incidence of Masonic trials than that which may be considered normal for an institution professing to be so selective in accepting petitions. In many cases the type of activity which give rise to the trial is such that the integrity of the Masonic structure may be at stake. Murder, rape, child molestation, armed robbery, wife beating, fraud and forgery are no longer uncommon charges giving rise to Masonic trials. What has happened to our selection procedures?

What can we do about it?

First there are no easy answers.

Secondly there are no quick fixes

But if we take a look at what I call "Traditional" Lodges, you will be, I think, shocked to find that most, if not all of them are growing. Some at a rate of 10 percent a year.

First these Lodges are purposely kept small, [no larger than 65 members] the dues' structure is such that the Lodge is self sustaining. In some cases the cost of joining can be as high as \$1500.00, and yearly dues are often the equivalent of one or two weeks wages. Now before you say that this means that a good man who has not the financial resources cannot be made a Mason, or that those elderly Brethren on fixed incomes would have to drop out. Let me make it perfectly clear, that any good man who should be a Mason, but cannot afford it, or any Brother that cannot pay the dues, their

dues are then paid by their Brethren. After all is this not one of our Tenets [Relief] and in these Lodges it is practiced.

Brethren are expected to make a daily advancement in Masonic Knowledge. New members are expected to deliver to the Lodge, a paper or statement on what it means to him to be a Freemason. The new Mason can expect it to take at least a year before he is passed to a Fellowcraft, and the same length of time before he is Raised to the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason. No instant Master Masons here!

Brethren are expected to attend Lodge. If you are going to be absent, you will have written the Secretary or at least phoned him and told him why you are missing the meeting. Most Lodges average 85 - 90% attendance at every meeting. This far cry from a Lodge that has 500 members and some nights there are not enough bodies to even open the Lodge.

The Festive Board is an integral part of this Freemasonry, here fellowship that was started in the Lodge Room has a chance to grow and to prosper. The sense of community is once again fostered. Just like it is here today.

And before you tell me that this concept would not work in North America, I would ask.

How do you know?

Have you tried it?

Have you practiced Traditional Freemasonry?

I know that Australia is much like Canada, and I know we Canadians and you my Brethren in United States are also much alike. And I also know that four years ago this Traditional style of Freemasonry was tried in Australia, and in four years this one Lodge has spawned 2 Daughter Lodges and two other Lodges have changed to the Traditional concept. There are now 3 Australian Grand Lodges that have Consecrated Traditional Style Lodges. A number of Traditional Lodges have also been formed here in the United States. The response to this Traditional Style of Freemasonry has been over whelming.

So as I see it, practicing Traditional Freemasonry, accomplishes a lot of good things. It only accepts good men. It really does make good men better.

Good men are lining up at the portals of Traditional Lodges seeking admission. In truth Traditional Freemasonry can be called a way of life.

Can the problems of our Gentle Craft be solved?

Yes, but as I said there are no easy answers and no quick fixes.

Would Allen and Dwight have agreed with what I have just said.

I would like to think so.

And yes Allen Roberts and Dwight Smith were two of my Masonic Heroes.

My Brethren we have forgotten just how basic our fraternity is.