

FREEMASONRY AND THE MAN BROTHER RAYMOND H. COPLEY

1. The Institution and the Individual: A woman is sometimes a lady, but a good Freemason is always a man! While Freemasonry helps make the man, it is the man who makes Freemasonry. The man perpetuates Freemasonry as a living institution, and the Craft is indebted to him. However, with so many great changes in thought and attitudes over the past twenty years, has a point been reached where perhaps Freemasonry is beginning to take more from the man than it is giving back to him? In some ways, there appears to be a heightening wall between the institution and the man over which neither is now able to obtain a clear view of the other.

2. Declining Interest: It may surprise some brethren to learn that Freemasonry in Victoria has suffered a marked decline during the past decade. This is a cause for concern; however, the manner in which this decline has occurred is a cause for alarm. Membership of our Fraternity has fallen not because the intake of candidates has failed to keep up with the normal loss of members; it has fallen as a result of an increasing number of members, often of many years' standing, who have lost interest in the Craft and dropped out. Even more disconcerting is that the majority of these drop-outs have not been through resignation, but through suspensions for non-payment of dues.

This leads to the disturbing conclusion that, while Freemasonry continues to have the appeal to attract initiates, there is something seriously wrong in that the Craft is failing to retain the interest and loyalty of members.

This lack of interest also clearly shows itself in the considerable number of absentees from almost every lodge meeting. I have endeavoured to discover some of the causes of this unhappy malaise in our affairs. My purpose is to draw the attention of brethren to the existence of a serious problem, to stimulate full and constructive discussion, and to prompt lodges in general and Grand Lodge in particular quickly to set about measures to counteract it.

3. Declining Membership: In 1961 the Victoria Constitution had a membership of 118,000. Today our membership has fallen to 100,000. This represents a drop of 15 1/2 percent. When measured against the increase of 60,000 in Victoria's population during the same period, the decline in our membership represents a per capital fall of 30 percent.

If Freemasonry were a corporation faced with a drop of 30 percent in its share of the market, there would be serious concern in the board room and among shareholders. Our board room, Grand Lodge, is concerned, but we the shareholders are still largely complacent. As we cannot call in an outside firm of management consultants, it is ourselves who must fathom the cause of this major fall in business and apply remedies.

Should the problem of declining membership be allowed to continue unchecked as a result of conservatism, lethargy, and indifference, then there is no reason why Freemasonry in Victoria should not eventually lose its place as a great institution and subside into relative insignificance.

4. Freemasonry's Competition: Freemasonry is today in a very competitive market, the market for men's time and interest. It is competing against church, school committees, Rotary and other service organizations, golf, hotels, clubs, all sorts of associations and societies, family, television, and, above all, the every increasing demands and pressures of the man's employment.

Once, Freemasonry gave a man a special and prized prestige. This status is today shared with other bodies such as Rotary, Lions, and Apex, which enjoy a justifiably high respect in the community. Not only do these organizations give a man social standing, they have a direct and often very worthwhile public involvement in community life. Some men can feel a greater sense of personal fulfilment and achievement by participating in the activities of these bodies than in the narrower and unpublicized affairs of Freemasonry.

5. Community Involvement: I believe that Freemasonry should play a considerably greater role in the community; nor should this be left to Grand Lodge and its committees. Lodges in general need to be brought in, thus directly involving the mass of members. Why can't lodges donate a bus shelter, build a seat in the local park, help the elderly citizens' club, maintain a bed in a public hospital? Wouldn't it be possible for each lodge in Victoria to undertake one community project each year? Of course it would.

I am sure such activities would stimulate interest and engender pride of participation among our members. They would also serve as visible to the public - and the families of members - that Freemasonry was performing good works.

6. Publicising Freemasonry: How many people outside of the Craft know anything of Freemasonry's broad principles, aims, and objectives? Everyone has

heard the name and perhaps a little misinformation, but that is about all. So effective has been our self-effacement that the only picture Freemasonry presents to the community is one of generally austere temples and men in evening dress carrying black cases.

There must be many fine men who would join our ranks and be worthy brethren if they knew anything about us. I once worked with an organization for a whole year before I found another Mason on the staff of 250. During the next three years, I discovered another ten Masons, mainly by accident. If we are so secret among ourselves, what hope for the uninitiated man in making contact with Masons with a view to joining the Craft?

Recently I met a man wearing a tiny square and compasses badge in his lapel. My first reaction was: This is a little improper, letting the world know that you are a Freemason. Then I thought: Why shouldn't we? Are we ashamed to be Masons? Everyone knows who the Grand Master is, and that doesn't seem to have caused him any embarrassment. (Of course, the usual caution must be exercised to ensure that a man wearing a Masonic emblem is in fact what he purports to be.)

7. A Masonic Information Centre: I suggest that Grand Lodge establish a Masonic Information Centre where interested men may obtain details of what Freemasonry is all about; however, such a centre would only be of value if its existence were advertised, but this could be done in a dignified and propitious manner.

The Centre would also keep the public informed via the press of the various public activities of Freemasonry, particularly in the area of charity. This would do much to mitigate the unwarranted antipathy to Freemasonry held by some ill-informed sections of the community, an antipathy which not to a small degree has been perpetuated by our own reticence.

8. In the Temple: One thing perhaps more than any other which brings disenchantment with Freemasonry is the manner in which affairs are often conducted in the Temple. It must be appreciated that most brethren arrive at the Temple in various degrees of tiredness after a day's work. It is too much to expect men to sit from 7.30 p.m. until 9.45 p.m. or later and claim their full attention unless the work is of particular excellence or the programme of unusual interest. For those who are not directly participating, alertness and attentiveness begin to sag within the hour.

The need for a high standard of work at all times is positively essential and it is not necessary for me to emphasise its importance; however, I earnestly believe that activities in the Temple should be streamlined. To begin with, the business of lodges should be kept to a minimum. So far as possible, notices and announcements should be included in newsletters and not read in lodge. Except where important items having a real bearing on lodges are recorded, members should have the option of voting to have the minutes taken as read. Not a few officers become tyrants of their lodges and spend long periods each meeting rambling on about what amounts to be a lot of trivia; it is up to Masters to cut them short.

A lot of time is wasted through needlessly drawn-out procedures. For example, the time taken for balloting could be cut by a third by simply having the Senior Deacon with the box walk behind the Junior distributing voting material.

The working of each degree should be carefully planned and timed. I contend that no degree should last more than 45 minutes.* Any longer and the audience becomes bored, restless, and disinterested. Certainly the candidate -- and is he not the most important person to consider? -- cannot absorb any more.

*This may be possible in Victoria, but certainly the Nova Scotia Master Mason Degree takes longer. Many lodges start the M.M. Degree in the late afternoon, take a break for supper, and work the drama in the evening.
Editor GL Ed Committee

Our ceremonies can be made more interesting by not performing the complete ritual of each degree. Better that a portion be omitted on one occasion and included the next time when another section is dropped; for example, the tracing boards. Thus, unvaried repetition is avoided and the audience's attention is held because each time the particular degree is worked, it will "seem" a little different from the last occasion.

9. The Ritual: Many men, intelligent men, go through their Masonic lives without gaining more than a smattering of Masonic knowledge. They attend lodge regularly and attentively, but get no more than a distant glimpse of Freemasonry's bright fields of enlightenment. Little wonder that interest wanes, attendance falls, and brethren leave the Craft.

The cause of this lies in the man failing to comprehend much of the ritual.

Some of the fault rests with the individual, but not all of it. In its present form the ritual requires extensive and concentrated study if its message is to be fully understood. Not all men have the capacity for such scholarship, but this does not make them any less worthy members of our Craft.

In historical terms, the ritual of the Victoria Constitution is not relatively old. It was compiled less than 90 years ago and is an amalgam of English, Scottish, and Irish rituals going back to the early 18th century.

It is beautiful in language and has served Freemasonry well, however, I feel that the time has arrived for the ritual to be re-examined. This should be done with a view to giving it greater clarity, emphasis, and comprehension.

Much of the real message of Freemasonry is hidden by the sheer verbosity of the ritual. It is over-written to such a degree that, in its spoken form, essential detail is submerged in a torrent of words and is lost to the listener.

Without in any way detracting from the grandeur of its style or the nobility of its message, I believe that the ritual could be greatly improved - with the removal of excessive, needless, and mind-dulling verbiage. Furthermore, archaic words and expressions which are no longer understood or can be misconstrued should also be eliminated.

The purpose of language is to be understood. In the same context, it is essential that our ritual in its spoken form be readily comprehensible and assimilable. If the ritual is not these things, then it is failing in its vital purpose, which is to inform. It thus becomes but a beautiful piece of lodge furniture rather than the motivating force of the Craft.

10. Obligations of Proposers and Seconders: Many a Mason gets off to a poor start in the Craft because his proposer and seconder make no personal effort to assist in his Masonic education. The three should meet regularly outside the lodge to enable the initiate to ask questions and have points of the ritual and ceremony explained. Grand Lodge should give consideration to publishing a booklet to assist proposers and seconders in imparting information to new members.

Unfortunately, today candidates are generally left at the entrance of the Temple like unwanted children and their Masonic education is largely up to their own initiative. This is wrong. We have a bounden duty to ensure that the newly initiated receive sound foundations on which to build their Masonic knowledge and careers. This should be formally recognized by lodges and Grand Lodge, and

specific directives issued to proposers and seconders as to their obligation to candidates.

11. Involving Master Masons: Master Masons form the preponderant membership of the Craft, yet few lodges make any real effort to involve them directly in their activities. I believe this to be essential for the creation and maintenance of vigour and enthusiasm in lodges. There are opportunities for Master Masons to participate in the working of degrees.

This can serve as an encouragement for those who wish to progress, and a real interest for those who, for one good reason or another are not seeking advancement.

The views and counsel of Master Masons should be sought in the running of lodges -- and sought in open lodge. Unfortunately, some Past Masters believe that Master Masons should merely attend and not be heard. This is a narrow and harmful attitude.

12. Absent Brethren: Poor attendance at meetings is an indication of lack of interest among members. I suggest that to counteract this, each lodge set up an "Absent Brethren Committee" to contact members who fail to attend two consecutive meetings. When a brother misses several meetings and no inquiry is made by his lodge, can he be blamed for thinking that nobody really cares whether he attends or not; this can lead to general disillusionment followed by resignation - or, as is now more generally the case, suspension for non-payment of dues. Yet a thoughtful telephone call or letter would let the brother know that his presence was missed and would, I think, be a real encouragement for future regular attendance.

There have been many sad instances where brethren have fallen ill and even died, quite unknown to their lodges. It is not uncommon for men to avoid advertising their misfortunes. Yet, if tactful enquiries were made of absent brethren, lodges would often find opportunities to render that assistance and charity which we Masons profess so much to admire.

13. The South: If the Temple is the heart of Freemasonry, then the South is its soul. The South is intended to be where Masons can meet in a family atmosphere of trust and fellowship to enjoy camaraderies of old friends and make new acquaintances. Yet how often is the purpose of the South not attained. Sometimes it becomes truncated and rushed because affairs in the Temple have been protracted. If a lodge tyles at 7.30 p.m., I believe that the brethren should be in the South not later than 9.30 p.m.

The South can be just as boring as a night of poor work in the Temple. How often are brethren kept silent prisoners in their chairs with almost no opportunity to converse with anyone but their immediate neighbours. Surely intelligent men cannot be expected to sit with rapt attention through South after South listening to trite, dull, and repetitious speeches. If a man has something worthwhile to say, he will have an interested and attentive audience; but, if he has nothing but cliches and waffle, then the interests of Freemasonry let him remain silent.

After all the formal talk of the Temple, speeches in the South should be kept to a minimum and be short. Brethren want the opportunity to converse among themselves. There should be frequent "call-offs" to enable brothers to mix freely. Why not on occasions have buffet suppers and informal seating. Spread the visitors among their hosts and so put real purpose into their visit. Above all, encourage the brethren to mingle.

14. Winds of Change: As a young man living in Japan, I heard an ancient tale of an oak tree and a bamboo bush. The oak tree used to boast loudly of its physique and strength and scorn the spindly bamboo. The oak tree would say to the bamboo: "Why you are so thin that you would move with the smallest wind". One day a terrible typhoon swept down. The oak tree, proud, upright, and rigid, refused to move with the wind and was torn from the ground; but the bamboo bent with the storm, and, when it had passed, righted itself and flourished.

Man made Freemasonry for the benefit of man. It is a great and living testimony to his higher aspirations. However, if Freemasonry becomes so institutionalized as to be the ruler of man rather than be ruled by man, if Freemasonry remains rigid and unbending in the face of the winds of change, then it too may suffer the fate of the oak tree.