

**“Concept of Masonic Renewal –
What does it mean to you now and in the future?”**

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IN THIS POST-MODERN ERA, with all of its social and political upheaval, is there still a role for an age-old ritual brotherhood?

Masonic leaders will insist there is, and they may be right, but only if we are willing to embrace realities of the 21st century. Business as usual is not an option, nor is hoping for better days.

The critical question facing us today is this – How do we maintain the essence of Freemasonry while adapting to a world vastly different from that of previous generations? America in 2017, for example, is a far more mobile society than that of the 1950s when Masonic membership was more than double what it is today.

Tradition thrives when men follow the examples of their fathers, live in the same community, demonstrate loyalty to the same institutions, and share in a continuation of experience that binds the generations together. When those factors no longer exist, Masonry becomes the poorer, along with churches, service clubs, and community organizations of all types.

College placement officers estimate that today's graduates will have eight to 10 jobs in their working years, and most of those will involve a change of address. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that nearly 12 percent of the population moves every year, and in some years that figure has been as high as 20 percent.

According to the Pew Research Center, church membership in America has steadily declined since 1992, with a corresponding effect on groups requiring a belief in a Supreme Being. Millennials, those born between 1982 and 2000, say that, for the most part, religion is unimportant to them. On the plus side, they also say they ponder the meaning of life, and, according to the Gallup Poll, 90 percent of Americans say they still believe in God. All these factors contribute to the troubled and confusing world in which Masonry now finds itself.

RENEWAL, BY DEFINITION, calls us to be imaginative, to take creative steps to achieve a better future. With that in mind, let us look at where we are and where we might head.

The list of Masonic traditions which should never change is a short one: belief in God and immortality, the Volume of Sacred Law upon the altar, symbolism of the Great Lights, legend of the third degree, and a commitment to the uplifting of humanity. Without these guiding principles, our fraternity would be unrecognizable.

Apart from these fundamentals, however, we can and should adopt new methods of operating, in order that we might offer to contemporary society something which it sorely needs – a bastion of timeless and enduring values.

As a step in that direction – and I know this will seem heresy to some – we should bring our ritual into the modern age. Our lectures, for example, are lengthy and rambling, difficult to deliver and even more difficult to absorb. Abbreviation would be a blessing.

Identical questions and answers in the degrees need not be constantly repeated, nor do opening and closing ceremonies need to be so drawn out. And, once and for all, let us do away with the ancient penalties!

At the urging of the Duke of Kent, Grand Master of British Masons, the United Grand Lodge of England eliminated the bloodthirsty oaths in 1986. Massachusetts and New Zealand, among others, have done the same and with good reason. As relics of a bygone era, the old penalties serve no worthwhile purpose in today's world. By removing them, we affirm there is no such thing as a “symbolic oath” taken on the Holy Bible. We either mean what we say, or we don't.

The examination of candidates also calls for new ways of thinking. Asking a man to memorize page after page of archaic language and then to recite it in open lodge defies logic. In this age of the ever-present computer, with a world of information at one's fingertips, there is little need to memorize anything. The more we insist on this outmoded custom, the more we divorce ourselves from the norms of how young men learn and demonstrate their learning.

Instead of parroting a standard litany, we should ask a few thought-provoking questions, and allow the candidate to answer in his own words. A few examples: “What did you come here to do? . . . What does the cable tow mean to you? . . . What is the meaning of the lambskin apron?” This approach would allow the candidate to think creatively and, thus, the catechism would be more meaningful to him and to the lodge.

John McNaughton, then the head of the Scottish Rite's Northern Jurisdiction, debunked over-emphasis on memorized ritual in the February 2015 issue of *The Northern Light*, calling it “an irrational devotion.” He wrote in the same magazine (May 2017): “Our members stay home rather than endure meetings which include too many edicts and decrees, and a continued emphasis on the importance of memorized ritual.”

IN OUR MASS COMMUNICATIONS SOCIETY, Americans are bombarded every day by countless messages, generated by radio and television, print publications, and, increasingly, by the internet and social media. These messages compete not only for our attention, but also for our willingness to respond in some overt way.

Masonry's role in this media blitz has been minimal at best, the result being that our profile is much lower than it should be. To turn this around, every Grand Lodge should hire a public relations professional. His task would be to develop clear, consistent messages, to convey them to

targeted audiences – current members, potential candidates, family members, and to those who influence public opinion such as clergy and educators.

A public relations director would be responsible for news releases, speech writing, website content, magazine production, and event planning (such as public cornerstone laying ceremonies).

A key element in any public communication effort is a memorable slogan – think Coca Cola's "The Real Thing" or "The Few The Proud, The Marines." For a Masonic theme, we might consider "The Freemasons: Ancient Customs, Timeless Values" or "Seekers of Light, Lovers of Learning."

The tie between Masonry and education is vital. Historically, the old operative lodges were the first schools of the building arts, and that tradition has been carried on by symbolic lodges for centuries. Drug and Alcohol Resistance Education, Scottish Rite Learning Centers, Adopt a Teacher, medical research, and college scholarships are but a few of the ways we support education, and this should be a constant theme.

A prime illustration of the Craft's intellectual reach is in the Freemasonry and Civil Society Program at the University of California at Los Angeles. Established in 2010 as part of the university's history department, it provides academic support for the study of the origins and influences of Freemasonry in America, Latin America, and Europe.

The World Conference on Fraternalism, Freemasonry, and History, held in 2015 at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, is another example of the Craft's relevance in the academic world. These are the types of programs we should emphasize in a public relations campaign, in order to identify the fraternity with matters of the mind.

All of the points mentioned above are in keeping with the highest ideals and aspirations of Masonry, and all are within our reach. We need only to move beyond obsolete routines, and to be creative in our thinking about tomorrow.

Now is the time to take action – to refine our ritual, to expand public communication, and to emphasize our relationship to education at all levels. If we do these things – and do them quickly – the Ancient Craft can look to a future that will be worthy of its storied past.

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