

RW Bro. Mason D. Jardine

Russell Lodge #62

Grand Lodge of Manitoba

What is the Purpose of the Masonic Fraternity Now and in the Future?

What is the purpose of a flat-head screwdriver? Its makers designed it to turn flat-head screws, but those of us who do not use flat-head screws and tend to insert screws with drills still keep a flat-head screwdriver around, because it is the ideal tool for opening paint tins. Its purpose has changed yet nevertheless it still has a purpose. So it is and will be with Masonry.

Our traditional history tells us that an organization which was originally designed as a trade guild for operative stonemasons became, as the need for stonemasons abated, a social organization. Just over three hundred years ago, when the Premier Grand Lodge of England was formed, the Lodges were engaged primarily in convivial activities: feasting, singing songs, and parading about the streets. At the same time, as early as 1724¹, the new Grand Lodge instituted a permanent committee to dispense charity to needy brothers. In the same century, Masonry crossed the Channel and the Lodges became, in Europe, a focus for the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment. This was the purpose of the Lodges attended by Mozart, Voltaire and Benjamin Franklin. The general objectives of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth were established very early in Masonry's history.

The manifestation of these principles, however, has changed constantly to meet the needs of a changing society. In the nineteenth century, it was necessary to establish Masonic Orphanages to assist the orphans

1 . The Concise History of Freemasonry, p. 213

of Masons; this is no longer a social requirement and so these Masonic Orphanages no longer exist or have been repurposed.²

More importantly to us today, there was a huge growth in Masonry especially in North America after the Second World War, as returning veterans sought an organization which could provide the same comradeship and discipline as the military. This generation controlled the Craft into the 1960s and early 1970s. But the purpose which Masonry served for them was of no relevance to the generations which followed.

Many Masons continue to look at those days of huge Masonic membership as a kind of golden age which we would like to restore by artificially trying to recreate those membership numbers, through mass initiations, or by lowering standards. This kind of restoration is the art of the taxidermist, repairing the outer shell while there is no living tissue inside. Renewal does not mean restoration. When a plant dies, it is renewed by new growth which recreates the plant. The new plant is not the same as the old one. It grows according to its own rules in the environment it finds itself. Shouldn't we allow the purpose of Masonry to grow and renew itself organically, like a plant?

Being the voice of the status quo was the face of Masonry in the first half of the twentieth century. That paradigm has been slowly dying since the baby boomers came of age. That old plant is dying to make

² . e.g. The Masonic Female Orphan School, Dublin, The Illinois Masonic Children's Home, William Thompson Masonic School in Sydney Australia. The Masonic Home for Children at Oxford N.C. is an exception, although it does not limit itself to children of Masons

room for a new one. Masonic membership has long since stopped being the rule and has become the exception. Being the exception gives us the opportunity to show ourselves to be exceptional men.

We see some of those men in our Masonic members in their thirties and forties. Knowing that it is these men who will be the future of our Craft, I have tried to understand their purpose for joining and contributing to their Lodges. They are genuinely spiritual without being churchy, seeking self-improvement and a dedication to moral values. In some cases they are looking for a way to find their identity as men³. They are often seeking something real, involving real people doing real things; they thrill at the sensation of a genuine handshake, instead of a virtual one. Where an earlier generation would mouth the words of the ritual, then ask, as a candidate of that generation once asked me, “You don’t actually take this morality business seriously, do you?”, this generation loathes that kind of hypocrisy and refuses to make the affirmations required by the petition unless they are sure they endorse them.

It is in exceptional men like these that we will find the new purpose which Masonry will serve. It will be a purpose related to Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth, but it will not be the same as the purpose found by previous generations. With smaller numbers, the massive charity projects which earlier generations undertook will give way to smaller, more personal ones. Lodges will learn how to operate with a smaller number of men who will know each other very well. Study, education, and intellectual discussions will form a larger portion of the Lodge’s time.

We can guess that these might be the qualities of Lodges of the future, but we cannot be sure. If a tree is allowed to grow naturally, we will not be able to predict how it will thrive. Forcing it into a mould which corresponds with our preconceptions of how it will grow may kill or stunt it. Nevertheless we might entertain a vision of the kind of purpose Masons may discover, based on the kind of men our new generation are. They are not the voice of the status quo, but they could be the voice of the way we hope things might be.

In eighteenth century Europe, Masonry was an intellectual élite. In the twenty-first century Masonry could be a moral élite. In a world where politicians and world leaders are increasingly uncivil, Masonry could be the voice of civility, led by men who are exceptionally fair and just, who are the paradigm of courtesy and honour. In a world where we pander to our youth, making many of them feel that they are entitled to have whatever they want whenever they want, Masonry could be the voice of patience, led by men who know that there is no real greatness without self-denial. In a world where many are driven by fears induced by the news media and conniving politicians, Masonry could be the voice of courage and perseverance, led by men who, like Hiram Abiff, genuinely put their principles above personal safety. Masonry could be the voice of those who believe in and actually practise virtue, every day, to every one, and who embody Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice. That will be the purpose of Masonry if that is what we as Masons want.

Works Referred To

Christopher Coombe, "Why I am a Freemason", Ontario Mason Magazine, Spring 2016, p.7

Robert Freke Gould, The Concise History of Freemasonry, (London: Gale & Polden, 1920)