

WHITHER DIRECTING OUR COURSE?

Pro Grand Master, Lord Northampton

I start with the disclaimer that the views in this paper are my own and not necessarily those of Grand Lodge. As Pro Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, and therefore the most senior representative of the Grand Master, I am conscious that one of my responsibilities is to try and steer the Craft during my tenure of office in a direction which I hope will be beneficial for its future - hence the title of this paper.

I begin with the premise that with nearly three hundred years of experience under our belt we must be doing something right, so why should freemasonry in, say, twenty five years be any different from the model we have today. Well we may be by far the biggest Grand Lodge in the world with a membership of 272,000 individuals spread over the four quarters of the globe, but something is wrong with Anglo Saxon freemasonry. Having said that, I know an enormous amount of effort has been invested in our future both in London, our Provinces and Districts, and many brethren are working hard to recruit, retrieve and retain our members with various schemes designed for that purpose. But the overall picture is not a satisfactory one as the following figures will show.

Although statistics were not available before and during the 80's, it is clear we have lost at least 40% of our membership in as little as thirty years. Our recent losses are often blamed on the fact that we consecrated 1000 lodges in the five years following the second World War to accommodate men returning from active service and wanting to join a fraternity. But that is not the whole story as most of those brethren have long since passed to the Grand Lodge above and we have continued to shrink at the rate of between 2-3% every year. While the decline has lessened in the past two years we are by no means out of the wood and with an aging membership we face an uncertain future. It is interesting to note that while our membership numbers have shrunk so dramatically, the number of our lodges has actually increased. The result is that we now have a very large number of lodges that are struggling to survive with very few members. The situation is made even worse when you factor in low attendance figures. It is not easy to see how we can correct this situation except by encouraging lodges to consider closing or amalgamating when their numbers drop below a viable level.

The danger of having too few members in a lodge is that in their desperation to survive brethren may accept candidates regardless of whether or not they fulfil the conditions for initiation laid down in the ritual. Worse still, because at best they only manage to attract one new member each year, they rush the poor candidate through the three degrees without giving him any time to pause and contemplate what it all means. Candidates are often stewards before they are master masons and on the officer's ladder as soon as they are raised. Six years later they are either in the Master's chair or have made some excuse to drop out, never to return. A recent survey in Buckinghamshire showed that 30% of all master masons ceased attending their lodges within three years of being raised. I don't blame them. The pressure of having to learn so much ritual in such a short time, before you have bonded fully with your peers and without any real understanding of its meaning, must test even our most committed candidates.

This is not freemasonry as it should be practised, and only slightly better than the mass one day classes we all deplore in America. If lodges start to initiate men regardless of their suitability because they are desperate to increase their numbers, then we should be worried about any long term future for the Order. I have often said that the quality of our members is more important than their quantity, but it is of course possible and preferable to have both. There are plenty of 'just, upright and free men of mature age, sound judgment, and strict morals' in society, if we could only attract them to join us. So until we can find ways of increasing the size of our lodges, thereby giving more time for progression to the chair and more time to learn and understand the rituals, we must make do with encouraging lodges to share out much of the work among the master masons and past masters. In fact it often makes for more variety and therefore more enjoyment, and involves many more of the lodge members at every meeting. No brother should be made to feel he has let the side down by not doing as much as the past masters did when they were in the chair. A good mason does not necessarily have to be a good ritualist as long as he participates in the affairs of his lodge and his heart is in the right place.

The final statistic we must add into the equation is the number of certificates issued by Grand Lodge. In the past ten years alone the number of men we initiate annually has fallen by 30% from just under 12,000 to 8,400. It does not take a rocket scientist to work out that within the next twenty five years English

Freemasonry could well have shrunk to as little as half its present size. This means one in every two lodges will have disappeared and even then we will not have increased the low numbers we may have in the remaining ones. The extra financial pressures on our members will become intolerable and there will be a corresponding knock on effect on our masonic charities and the 800 or so masonic halls we have in England and Wales. It is clear, therefore, that doing nothing now is not an option, but knowing what to do and how to do it is something on which we should all concentrate our minds.

I believe that in order to plan for the future we must first look back at our roots and examine the reasons we were formed and have survived 'the wreck of mighty empires'. We spend too much time worrying about 'when' rather than 'why' we were created. What was in the minds of those men who started Freemasonry and what was the purpose behind it?

Of course we know that some form of what we call Freemasonry was being practised in the late 16C in England long before our first recorded initiate, Elias Ashmole, was introduced to a lodge in Warrington by Henry Mainwaring in 1646. I have brought this chair from my house in Warwickshire which was originally in Canonbury Tower. Situated in Islington, the Tower, was built in the early 16th century and inherited by my family in 1608. The two panelled rooms at Canonbury were carved in oak in 1599. There are many symbols depicted in the carvings including levels and compasses. They are almost certainly connected to this chair, which is dated 1595. The initials, EM, which are visible on either side at the top are likely to be those of Edward Mainwaring, two generations before Henry, as the crest between them is that of the Mainwaring family.

This was a period when certain men of great intellect were planning a future society as an utopian ideal. Francis Bacon's book 'the New Atlantis' is full of masonic symbolism and describes an island where just such a perfect society existed. Unfortunately such a vision could not be grounded in Europe, with its political intrigue and religious intolerance, hence the attempt to do so in America through the Virginia Company - named after the virgin soil on the other side of the world which they believed would provide the perfect conditions for just such a society. Whether Freemasonry was influenced by this ideal of perfection is difficult to prove but it is certainly one of the main themes running through our rituals.

So we can say with certainty that some form of philosophical fraternity existed in the late 16th century and part of its ethos was to counter political and religious intolerance. Freemasonry has retained that as part of its ethos to this day as it refuses still to allow any member, whether in lodge or in his capacity as a Freemason, to discuss or to advance his views on theological or political questions. This fraternity, which stood for freedom of expression and thought, had to be kept secret at a time when men were beheaded for holding different views to the Church and Monarch. Since that time the Order has gone through varying periods of openness and intense privacy but even in its early days the rituals were widely known through exposures of one kind or another. Nowadays we are just coming out of a period of privacy and are developing a more open approach with the popular world.

For too long English freemasons have been criticised for their actions, based on ignorance and prejudice; the perception in some quarters is that we are a secret society who practise strange rituals behind closed doors. It is perceived that we only look after our own, and in a way which encourages profitable deals between masons from which non-masons are excluded. We have also been accused of protecting our members even when they break the law. Over the past twenty years or so we have tried hard to rid the Craft of those who do not live up to the high standards we set ourselves. Every organisation as large as ours is bound to have some rotten apples in its membership but it is quite wrong to blame Freemasonry for the failings of a few of its members. It would be equally wrong to blame the whole judiciary for one crooked judge or the whole medical profession for the failings of a single doctor. Nevertheless we promote ourselves as an organisation which teaches the importance of a high moral code of behaviour and we must expect to be criticised when our members transgress. The fact is that this is a brotherhood which was designed for the improvement of the soul of man, but however hard we try to show ourselves in a true light we are always faced with two questions – who are you and what do you do in your lodges? The answer has traditionally been that our members feel they will be discriminated against if it is known that they are masons, and what we do is private and nobody else's business. Of course there are brethren who genuinely fear they will be discriminated against if their membership becomes known, but society now expects transparency in everything that it perceives may affect it adversely. We cannot hope to change our member's fear of discrimination unless we change the perceptions which cause it and to do that we have to explain to the popular world the good things that Freemasonry stands for, and talk openly about the lessons that are taught in our rituals.

It is now generally acknowledged that the 'secrets' of masonry are only the modes of recognition without which you cannot witness our ceremonies – the grips, tokens and words of the three degrees. They have been exposed on numerous occasions but all masons promise not to reveal them to the uninitiated, in part to keep cowans and intruders out of our ceremonies but also to show that we can be trusted to keep a promise. The 'mysteries', which we also promise not to disclose, are something completely different. Any member of the public can buy a copy of the emulation ritual book and tens of thousands of lady masons have done so over many years. The vast majority of the ceremonies are there in full for all to read, the main exception being those words which relate to the modes of recognition and the preparation of the candidate. So if anyone wants to know what we get up to in our ceremonies why not suggest they buy the ritual book and read it for themselves. Before anyone accuses me of betraying the brotherhood let me stress that you cannot discover the mysteries of Freemasonry by reading the ritual book. You have to go through the process of initiation to realise and unlock the mystery, because it is a felt experience. You can not understand it in any other way than by doing it; just as you cannot learn to swim by reading a manual of how to do it.

We are the inheritors of an important initiatic system containing universal truths, some form of which has probably been in existence for thousands of years. During that time it has been a beneficial guiding influence on the evolution of humanity and our present day Freemasonry is no exception. The three degrees of masonry are like symbolic rehearsals for those major initiations that we must all take on our journey of Self discovery. Thus Freemasonry is a system which guides man in his search for the sacred. The three degrees equate to body, mind and spirit, the three essential parts of man. In the first degree the emphasis is on the physical and its objective is 'from darkness to light'. It is symbolised by the rough ashlar and the working tools are those implements needed to work on the unshapen stones brought to light from the darkness of the quarries. The consciousness of the first degree is at the level of instinct and its pillar represents physical strength and is therefore crowned with the terrestrial globe.

In the second degree the emphasis is on the powers of the mind and its objective is 'from ignorance to knowledge'. It is symbolised by the smooth ashlar and the working tools are designed to perfect and prove the stone after rude matter has been brought into due form. The consciousness of this degree is at the level of intellect and its pillar represents wisdom and is therefore crowned with the celestial globe. In the third degree the emphasis is on spirit and the objective is to build the Temple, not made with human hands, eternal in the Heavens. Its symbol is the blazing star, its consciousness is at the level of intuition, the voice of Nature, and its pillar is that of Beauty. Beauty depends on balance and harmony. The objectives of the three degrees – illumination through the search for light, wisdom through the increase in knowledge, and transformation through the process of death and renewal – portray the story of the evolution of human consciousness leading ultimately to enlightenment.

For most people enlightenment is a process of imparting or acquiring information or knowledge about something, like 'That was an enlightening speech you made'. Historians call the 'Enlightenment' that period in 18thC Europe when a group of philosophers promoted a rational and non theological approach to the problems of philosophy and society. This is not however the meaning of enlightenment in the Eastern and Western mystery traditions, where light is not an abstract symbol but a living experience that is felt in the heart, the mind and the body. Enlightenment is not just a metaphor but rather an experience of ones own inner essence, and the realisation of the Self with a capital 's'. When defined as the rational acquisition of knowledge it deals with a very limited aspect of human transformation. The enlightenment we are dealing with in Freemasonry is that of ancient teachings. It is a process of seeing more clearly and having a more lucid awareness. This aspect of transformation, through which Freemasonry guides us, is a gradual process of moving from a state of unknowing to an ever increasing knowledge of one's Self and ones true potential.

Enlightenment plays a central role in the sacred literature and art of most religious and spiritual traditions. God's invocation for creation was 'Let there be light', and science believes that the beginning of the Universe was an explosion of inconceivable force and radiance. The Christ is seen as the 'light of the world', and the vision of the Lord in the Bhagavad Gita is of a cosmic being 'brighter than a thousand suns'. Solar deities of light and fire, like the Indian Agni, the Iranian Mazda, the Egyptian Ra, and the Greek Apollo play key roles in all the sacred mythologies. Jung called light 'the central mystery of philosophical alchemy'.

Ken Wilber reminds us in his book 'Eye to Eye' that medieval philosophers made a distinction between three kinds of light and three kinds of eyes. We have eyes of flesh which see with exterior light - lumen exterior - the physical world of sense objects and matter. Then we have an eye of reason, which sees with interior light - lumen interior - the truths of reason, mind, and knowledge. Finally, we have an eye of contemplation, which sees with higher or transcendent light – lumen superius - the ultimate reality of oneness, the ground of Being. It is these three lights that we need to consider in Freemasonry and the rituals clearly differentiate

between them. The exterior light of the body equates to the light of Nature, described in the first degree with the words 'restored to the blessing of material light'. This is distinct from the inner light of the mind which in the second degree is that of intellect. Emmanuel Swedenborg wrote 'it has often been granted me to perceive and also to see that there is a true light that enlightens the mind, wholly distinct from the light that is called natural light. I have been raised up into that light by degrees; and as I was raised up my understanding became so enlightened as to enable me to perceive what I did not perceive before, and finally such things as I could not even comprehend by thought from natural light.' Finally in the third degree the light of contemplation is described as that 'Light which is from above'.

The experience of enlightenment appears to be the sensing, feeling and knowing that the body, heart and mind are being infused, usually from 'above' with inner light of a spiritual nature. When talking about this illumination it is called 'light from above' as a way of describing the process by which it appears to come from a part of our being that is 'higher' than body or mind. Sri Aurobindo describes the process: 'Into the consciousness with a fiery ardour of realisation comes a downpour of inwardly visible light. There is also in this descent the arrival of a greater dynamic, a luminous 'enthusiasm' of inner force and power which replaces the comparatively slow and deliberate process of the mind by a swift, sometimes vehement, almost a violent impetus of rapid transformation'.

With the coming of this inner light the recipient is initiated into a new and higher level of realisation. The light experienced in the different degrees of freemasonry is one and the same, only at different levels of the spectrum of consciousness. The experience of enlightenment often comes after an intense inner struggle, like a breakthrough between the opposites of good and evil; it brings an understanding which embraces both the polar opposites. It is often a struggle between fear and love. When the power of love finally prevails and light dawns in the heart, then the walls of fear dissolve and the heart opens. To lose any sense of fear, particularly that of dying, is to be free, and that of course is one important teaching in the third degree of Freemasonry. As Walt Whitman wrote in *Leaves of Grass*, 'Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you. You must travel it for yourself. It is not far, it is within reach. Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did not know.'

It is self evident that this is what the writers of our rituals had in mind when they developed the Freemasonry we know and love as a progressive science leading from darkness and ignorance to light and knowledge and culminating in wisdom and enlightenment.

So how does any of this help Anglo Saxon Freemasonry in its present decline?

The reasons why men persevere and enjoy their masonry are complex and will be different for each of us. At one end of the scale there are those brethren who are looking for companionship alone and Freemasonry provides them with a friendly and trusting environment; then there are those who value the contribution the Craft makes to charity, and are motivated by a desire to help those less fortunate than themselves, both masons and non-masons alike; some like the chance to perform the rituals and work hard to ensure high standards are maintained in our ceremonies; others make a study of freemasonry from an historical or social perspective; then there are those who choose to explore the inner and more esoteric aspects of the ritual in order to discover more about Freemasonry and themselves. It is for the latter that we need to give a better understanding of the inner meanings of the Craft; partly to encourage a better study of Freemasonry and partly to increase the amount of revealed light in the Order as a whole. The success of such a venture will only be judged by the effect it has on those who are interested in the mysteries, and want to deepen their knowledge of the true nature of the Order.

Anglo Saxon masonry has strayed from its original purpose and no longer teaches its candidates the fundamental truths which underpin the Craft. That is why I support the initiative to start an Orator scheme to provide well written papers describing this masonic journey for delivery in lodges. Educating our members about the purpose of masonry should be a priority regardless of whether or not they wish to deepen their understanding of it. Much continental masonry, which continues to thrive, and Latin American masonry, which is the fastest growing masonry in the world, insists on the candidates becoming proficient in and having an understanding of any degree they have taken before allowing them to progress further. They have to write papers and answer questions on the ceremony they have experienced before they are allowed to move to the next degree. Do we consider the questions our candidates have to answer before being passed and raised really give 'proofs of proficiency' in the former degree? I think not.

However, as well as educating our members I believe it is important also that we educate the public at large. We need to explain ourselves and what we do to non masons who show a genuine interest in us. We must explain in layman's language the lessons we are taught in our lodges. As I have explained previously I do not believe we will be betraying any trust by doing so, nor can we be exposing the mysteries to the eyes of

the profane. What we will be doing is encouraging men to join us in order to experience the transformatory process for which freemasonry was created.

So to summarise, I strongly believe that the way forward for Anglo Saxon masonry is for its members to be encouraged positively to talk about the rituals. There are many men who would join us if they only realised what freemasonry was really about and it is up to us to tell them. Our teachings contain universal truths which need to be promulgated to all those who are interested. The days of reserving knowledge for the benefit of a few are over. I was invited two years ago to address some of the senior boys and monks at Downside, the Roman Catholic boarding school. I spoke for nearly an hour on Freemasonry, its symbols and its principles. I quoted passages from the charge after initiation to give an idea of what a candidate is taught in the rituals. I explained the working tools and how we moralise their uses in building our temple, not made with human hands. I stressed that freemasonry was just a system without dogma and doctrine which leads us through its three ceremonies on a progressive path from ignorance to enlightenment. I pointed out the benefits of the psychological changes that happen to a man as he passes from being an entered apprentice through the various offices to the Master's chair - how he develops his intellect, leadership qualities, self confidence, tolerance, kindness, compassion, service to others, open heartedness, social responsibility, temperance and above all self awareness. By the time I had finished and taken questions I left them in no doubt that Freemasonry is a force for good in the world. Even the headmaster remarked how different my version of the Craft was from what he had been led to believe it was like. The only way we are going to dispel ignorance is through education. If we all made the effort to explain masonry to laymen in suitable terms we could really make a difference to the way we are perceived. Above all we must stress how enjoyable it is. The brotherhood will surely come to an end if it ceases to be fun.

I have read many booklets which have been produced by different Provinces to explain freemasonry to their candidates. So many of them, however, deal with the form and etiquette of the Craft and do not give any real explanation of its purpose and content. As a result they convey knowledge but do not inspire the reader to want to explore further. As Michael Walker, Past Grand Secretary of Ireland, said in his address to our Grand Lodge last year, there is nothing wrong with the content of freemasonry but there is definitely something wrong with the way we package our product. We keep hearing that men today are searching for 'spirituality' in their lives free from dogma and doctrine. Freemasonry undoubtedly has an answer to that search because it is one of the reasons it was founded, but it fails to sell itself on the back of its excellent credentials. The truth is that the packaging of our product has become jaded. Society is very different to what it was even a generation ago but freemasonry has changed hardly at all. Is it any wonder that we appear irrelevant to our young candidates and so many of them subsequently leave us? I repeat my conviction that the time has come to talk openly and freely about our rituals with anyone who is interested, the only caveat being that we take care not to dilute the effect the ceremonies will have on future candidates. If as a result we inspire our members to make a daily advancement in masonic knowledge and attract men to join us because of its exciting message, we will be able slowly to turn the Craft in the direction for which it was founded.

I would like to end by quoting some words I wrote for an after dinner speech during my recent visit to the Grand Lodge of Chile in Santiago. 'We are all brothers on this same journey, a journey leading to self knowledge and ultimately perfection. The American poet, Emerson, described it as a journey of 'ascending effort'. And as we climb higher on the path we are helped by those brethren who are ahead of us and in turn encourage those who are behind. Freemasonry is a system without dogma or doctrine which signposts, through the interpretation of its symbols, the journey we must all make. It is a template for the evolution of human consciousness and as such is a progressive science of becoming – becoming something greater than we are now. It has various set stages for our development. A high moral code of ethical behaviour is the essential condition on which our journey is founded, and that includes the need to be in control of our emotions, our passions and desires. This is followed by the importance of education and the training of our reason and intellect as a force for good in the world. When these conditions are fulfilled and we are truly centred as human beings, our hearts open to the great potential which is at once the birthright and destiny of the human race. For as we climb higher we become wiser and can see further and more clearly what is the purpose of our life, and what the Great Architect has planned for us. That is the great mystery of Freemasonry which all of us are destined to rediscover.

Brethren, it is those inner spiritual realities underlying the outer symbolic forms which this Cornerstone Society was created to promote in our lodges, and long may it continue its good work for the future health of the Craft.