

Can Freemasonry Remain Relevant to Attracting Younger Generations? The Story of the Old Man and the Bridge

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Let me share a story with you...

An older gentleman is traveling through the woods. He has been walking for many miles to get to his destination. He carefully calculates each step over the rough terrain. Past the thick grass and sprawling brush, he comes upon a clearing, leading to a rushing river. He knows that in order to continue, he must cross the swift water. But, the man is unsure how far upstream he would have to journey to try to find where it narrows.

The man decides to build a bridge. He spends several months building the bridge from the abundant trees and rocks surrounding him. On the final day of construction, the man re-packs his belongings and begins to cross the bridge he masterfully built. At this moment, a younger man traveling the rugged trail happens upon the older man making his way over the new bridge.

“Old man!” the younger traveler shouts. “Did you construct this fine bridge?” Humbly, the older man answers, “Yes.”

Looking at the skill and design it took to build such a sturdy bridge, the younger man again questions, “How long did it take you to build it?”

“Several months,” responded the older man. “Months!?” exclaims the young man in astonishment. “Why would you want to spend several months building something that you will walk across in a matter of minutes?”

Patently, the older man turns and says, “Young man, I didn’t build this bridge just for me...I built this bridge for those who will be traveling behind me. Those who will be walking this trail in the future will need this bridge I finished today.”

ANALYSIS

My father (a 3rd generation Master Mason and U.S. Navy Chaplain) shared this story with me when I was a teenager. It is based on a poem called “The Bridge Builder” by Will Allen Dromgoole in 1900. It carries an important message, as it shows how thoughtful the older man was in providing for the future of others. He freely gave the bridge he built with his own labor and talents so that others may benefit. In the same way, Freemasons have been the builder of bridges that others have been able to cross.

Remember, each one of us was young once. There were elder Masons who built and added to the bridge long before us impressionable and inquisitive Masons came searching for a crossing. We were no different in facing challenges as the current generation.

Yet for the current generation, they are living in a world where their ethical barometer and moral compass are many times tested. They are truly facing a new set of challenges. How we reach them should not be looked upon as impossible. Rather, this context becomes evident that we as Freemasons have been given an outstanding opportunity!

You may recall in the 1995 movie “Apollo 13,” three of our brave astronauts—Jim Lovell, Fred Haise, and Jack Swigert—were fighting for survival in their crippled space craft. Back at mission control, the mood was tense and emotions stretched. The fate of these astronauts was in the balance. A famous line came from the film when Mission Control Operator, Gene Kranz, was scolded by the NASA Director. The NASA Director despairingly stated “This will be the worst disaster NASA has ever faced.” Without hesitation, Kranz retorts, “With all due respect sir, I believe this is going to be our finest hour!”

As Freemasons, welcoming a new generation of candidates is our “finest hour.” This is not a crisis of elder attrition coupled with a lacking number of younger candidates that we seem to fixate upon and often discuss at our lodges. This is instead, our greatest opportunity to reach and teach. We can and will realize our finest hour by expressing our devotion to the craft through our action and deeds. What a marvelous blessing to bring these young men into the light.

No matter the age group or vocation, we are all to meet “on the level” with equal footing. This equality is a bond that shows no one member is greater, but that we all meet in such fashion that support and undergird one another. This “bond” therefore, is the message of promotion that we need to spread to other generations. It must be shown by how we conduct ourselves both in action and deed (even when we think no one is watching, because they always are aware). We then become the girders to the grander bridge that binds us as brothers and invites younger candidates to cross. It’s not just the talk...but rather, it is the walk across a bridge. And yes, Freemasonry is even more relevant, and more important than it ever has been in welcoming a new generation. This is after all, our finest hour.

REFERENCES

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