

Views and Observations on Freemasonry

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M.W.P.G.M Robert Coleman presided over the 143rd Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of A.F. & A.M. of Montana, June 25-27, 2009 Glasgow, MT. The following presentation was given the Guest Speaker was Right Worshipful Brother Thomas W. Jackson the Past Grand Secretary of Pennsylvania and Executive Secretary Of World Conferences Of Masonic Grand Lodges.

The Grand Master asked me if I would be willing to attend this Grand Lodge Communication and speak to you concerning my views and observations on Freemasonry and it is a great privilege to do so. I do want to clarify before I begin, however, of my perceived position and purpose in our craft.

I have been introduced over the years in a number of categories, including; as a Masonic scholar, author, orator, and historian. I was even introduced to the President of Portugal as a noted Masonic philosopher. I thought about this introduction for a long time wondering why anyone would refer to me as a philosopher. Then I began to comprehend that a philosopher was one who had developed opinions and I certainly have been known over the years for my opinions. So perhaps, I am as close to being a Masonic philosopher as any of the other categories.

On one occasion when visiting a New Jersey Lodge to speak, a brother greeted me by stating that he realized that I was controversial but that I was welcome in New Jersey and my brothers; I have no problem with being controversial. I realize that I have probably been one of the most outspoken critics of North American Freemasonry for over 25 years relative to the direction it is going and the methods used to alter the course.

A few of you here know that I live on a small farm in south-central Pennsylvania with a stream bordering the farm. A friend of mine across the stream raises prime Holstein cows. He kept several bulls on his farm to service the cows, a big bull, a medium-size bull, and a little bull. Those who understand the pecking order of animals recognize that the big bull got most of the cows, the medium-sized bull had a few and the little bull had just one.

Glenn decided one time that to improve the milk production of the herd; he would bring in a Grand Champion bull. For those who may not understand, the bull has a major influence on the milk producing capacity of the resulting cows through breeding. When word got around the barnyard that Glenn was bringing in a Grand Champion bull, the three bulls got together to discuss it. The big bull said, there probably go some of my cows, the medium size bull said, well there goes most of mine and the little bull said I sure hope he lets me keep my one. When the day came for the Grand Champion bull to be delivered, the three bulls were standing up on a hill overlooking the barnyard when the cattle truck backed in, the ramp came down and this massive, big bull came

walking down off that truck. The big bull said, my God, there goes all my cows. The medium-size bull said there sure goes all of mine and with that little bull started to snort and slobber and paw the ground. The other two bulls looked at him and asked, have you gone out of your mind what do you think you're doing challenging that great big bull? The little bull said, challenge him, challenge him hell, I'm just making sure he knows I'm not a cow.

I use that little story as an analogy to cause you to realize that I am not the cow either. It is significant to know what one is not, and I have never looked at myself as fitting into anyone of these categories by which I have been introduced. One of the primary reasons that Freemasonry became as great as it did, is because it attracted some of the greatest minds that ever lived. Consider for a moment how many great men comprised early Freemasonry and as a result stimulated other great men to want to become part of it. Consider men like Washington, Franklin, Revere, Voltaire, Amadeus Mozart, Sir Christopher Wren, Simone Bolivar, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Joseph Priestley, and we could go on listing literally hundreds of others who have contributed to making this world as it is today. They also, however, contributed to making Freemasonry what it is today in most of the world.

Realistically, however, I realize that I am, have always been and will always be just a little country boy who developed a great appreciation for this craft. I realize that no matter how important I may ever think I am, I will never serve as an example to stimulate great men to want to become a Freemason. I perceive my purpose in the craft as being; to do all that I can do to preserve it until great minds come along again to inspire it.

Chief Rahnamī Abah wrote in his book, *Light after Darkness*, "Even if my thoughts and ideas may be controversial or, in certain respects, open to question, I shall have succeeded in my attempt if these ideas have generated further thoughts on the main substance of Freemasonry in the search for universal truth" and so mote it be with me.

It is always my goal when I speak to challenge you to think, for if I fail to do that, I waste both your time and mine. So today, it is my goal to cause you to think, to hopefully stimulate you to learn a little bit more about this noble institution and to cause you to, as the Grand Master expects, introspectively examine what each of you can do to benefit Freemasonry.

I have been extremely fortunate over the last 20 years or so to be able to travel the world as a Freemason and to experience Freemasonry as it operates outside of North America. In these travels I have been able to observe Freemasonry in many foreign countries and compare it to the Freemasonry of North America. I have been able to see where it works well, where it continues to increase its membership, where it continues to attract some of the greatest men in their jurisdictions, indeed where it remains an organization whose members are the movers and shakers of their societies.

I have experienced new Grand Lodges being consecrated and extinct or suppressed ones being re-consecrated following the fall of dictatorial regimes. I have watched Freemasonry rising on the continent of Africa and its members occupying some of their countries dominant positions. In fact, two of the presidents of African countries are also the Grand Masters of their Grand Lodges.

At the same time I have watched the struggles of these new Grand Lodge officers in trying to cope with the challenges of operating an organization that promotes the freedom and equality of men in environments where freedom and equality was unknown for decades and where individual struggle to achieve success was, at best, a muted phenomenon.

I have become familiar with the requirements of foreign Grand Jurisdictions for a man to gain membership and to remain a member of our craft, both of which are far more stringent than anything we know in North America. I have become more consciously aware of the universality in Masonic philosophy and precept that dominates Freemasonry globally while at the same time observing definitive differences in the operating philosophies in different sociological environments.

I will emphasize some of the observations that I have made in various areas of the world regarding the evolution of Freemasonry and the resulting differences that characterizes the craft in those areas along with my opinions as to why Freemasonry is declining in North America while it is thriving in many other parts of the world. I will also relate to you some of my personal experiences demonstrating the significance of the fraternity in other parts of the world.

None of us can be unaware of the decreasing interest in our craft and decline in influence that North American Freemasonry has experienced over the last 50 years and especially over the last 25. One of the first Lodge addresses that I gave over 35 years ago dealt with my observations of the decrease in the quantity of our membership. North American membership has gone from over 4 million to approximately 112 million. It does not take much thought to recognize that Freemasonry's future in North America is bleak if we continue with this loss of membership, at least Freemasonry as it is historically known.

I have however, in more recent years been far more concerned with the decreasing quality of the membership

than in the quantity of the membership. The decrease in the quality is a major contributing factor in the decrease in quantity today. Every person likes to be affiliated with a quality organization. If quantity is lost, quantity can be regained, but if quality is lost, it may be lost forever. Freemasonry in North America has been losing its attractive force for quality professional men over the last 25 to 30 years. This is not the case in almost every foreign Masonic jurisdiction. One of the most impressive observations that I have made in my travels is in the quality of the brothers that I meet throughout the world.

In my studies of the craft I have found that the philosophical purpose of Freemasonry is universal and unalterable but the operational philosophies are dependent upon the environment in which it exists. Freemasonry has been driven to evolve into a form that fits most comfortably into the environment in which it must operate. The only exception that I have found of the society driving the Freemasonry is in early Russia, where instead of the society driving Freemasonry, Freemasonry drove the society. This was prior to Catherine the Great closing down the craft. For the last 15 years I have been attempting to classify the variations in these characteristics and place Freemasonry into what I refer to as styles. As a result I have to the present time found four specific styles and probably five. European

Freemasonry has retained much of the basic philosophy and intellectualism that characterized early Freemasonry. There is a continued emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge and programs to stimulate thought. European Freemasonry has not been forced to diverge from its roots by societal pressures that have been found in some other areas of the world.

I put European Freemasonry into what I refer to as a "philosophical style". I have for a long time placed English, Scottish and Irish Freemasonry in the same philosophical style although recently I am tending to place that Freemasonry into what I refer to as a "social style". Although similar to the philosophical and intellectual characteristics of European Freemasonry it also includes the retention of more of the social relationships that tended to characterize the early Freemasonry of the British Isles.

South and Central America although also retaining much of the philosophical and intellectual style of Europe has evolved into a more unique style stimulated by the sociological pressures of the environment. I find it to be more idealistic and perhaps even more intellectually challenging than the philosophical style. It also tends to establish goals that are more difficult to attain. I refer to this style of Freemasonry as a "sociological style" because of its character being impacted more stringently by the sociology of the environment.

Mexican Freemasonry although existing in an environment not totally dissimilar than that of South and Central America, has a tendency to become more directly involved with the political climate in which it exists. For this reason I have placed it into a style all its own which I refer to, for lack of a better term, as a "political style" of Freemasonry.

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There is no doubt that Freemasonry will continue to evolve and although I have traveled for Freemasonry in the Far East and Africa, I have yet to differentiate any specific style. It would be interesting however to look back 50 years from now and observe their style of the craft and its impact on the development of their societies.

North American Freemasonry, excluding Mexico and perhaps Canada, has developed a style unlike that of any other. It is a style that evolved into being to the greatest extent over the last 25 years. In that span of time we have surrendered most of its intellectual and philosophical qualities, eliminating the stimulus to learn and excised the requirements to do so. We have directed most of our energies toward becoming an organization dedicated to raising monies for outside charities. Hence I refer to North American Freemasonry as a "charitable style" of the craft.

Tragically, the result has been an erosion of our image in society and ironically we evolved into this approach in an attempt to buy back the respect and admiration along with that image we were losing. As a result we have surrendered the qualities of Freemasonry that made it such a unique entity. There are hundreds of organizations dedicated to specific charitable objectives but there are precious few that were dedicated to improving the man and this constituted much of the uniqueness of Freemasonry. Our uniqueness is what made the craft into what it is; probably the most outstanding and significant organization ever created by the mind of man and in turn, Freemasonry made this world what it is today. It made it by taking the best men it could find and improving the man. By so doing, it changed the direction of civil society. Freemasonry was one of the primary enclaves that provided the environment during the age of the Enlightenment that attracted great minds and laid the framework for a democratic society. The United States of America is one of the results.

The more I study this craft the more impressed I become with how much its presence meant in the development of civilization. And now I look with great sadness to the loss of both quantity and quality in North American Freemasonry. I look at the results of our early leadership with their magnanimous long-range vision that produced what we have inherited and then observe not only the lack of that vision today but even of the understanding of our significance in the world. The vast majority of our Grand Lodges have not produced a major program over the last 25 years other than programs designed to increase numbers or raise monies to give away to charities, both of which have been detrimental to us and my friends that is not the purpose of Freemasonry. I emphasized to the Grand Lodge of Russia several years ago while speaking in Moscow, that we did not make this world by rolling over it with vast numbers. We made this world by making good men better, one man at a time.

Unfortunately for Freemasonry we live in a country that is the great equalizer. In the name of political correctness today, we have developed an attitude that everyone deserves the same as everyone else regardless of ability, desire, initiative, or work ethic. As a result, the stimulus for one to rise above the level of mediocrity has been

diminished in our society and Freemasonry has bought into it. We refuse to raise initiation fees and dues because we feel that the average American could not afford it, the same average American who would spend at least an equal amount on something to smoke or drink or on entertainment and not give it a second thought. It is not a matter of cost; it is a matter of priority.

We in North America have absolutely no concept of what it means to be a Freemason in the rest of the world. The financial cost to affiliate with this organization in most of the world is in the thousands of dollars and the time requirement to become a Master Mason is measured in years, not in months let alone in days. While we in North America are lessening our requirements to be Freemasons, much of the world is increasing theirs or at least not decreasing them.

I was in Brazil about 10 years ago and I asked what the dues were in their jurisdiction and they told me \$50.00. When I expressed surprise that their annual dues were that cheap, they told me it was \$50 a month not \$50 a year and there are some jurisdictions where the dues will run as high as several thousand dollars a year. Several months ago I asked a Scottish Freemason what the cost was for initiation in his lodge and the annual dues. He told me that he paid 3000 pounds to join and the dues were 1000 pounds a year. Keep in mind the British pound at that time was almost double the value of our dollar.

I was speaking at a symposium in Argentina about eight years ago and following a Lodge meeting, we retired downstairs for the customary toasts then went to a restaurant for dinner. Following dinner the Grand Master spoke and the floor was open for discussion. Around three o'clock in the morning they finally took me back to my hotel and after they dropped me off were walking across the street and I asked them where they were going now and they said they were stopping for a drink and to continue their discussion. The next day I asked the Grand Treasurer how late their meetings normally ran and he told me that sometimes they don't get home until it's time to go to work the next morning. Can you imagine how that would fly in our country?

I also found that after receiving a petition the Lodge will conduct an investigation for a period of a year before bringing it up to ballot, and if approved the first degree is conferred. Prior to receiving the second degree the initiate will have, over the period of a year, presented at least three learned papers on Freemasonry and then be questioned on the floor. If he passes he may receive the second degree when the same process will take place prior to his receiving the third degree. In many parts of the world it takes a period of 1, 2 to 3 or more years to receive the 3 degrees. Indeed, I was talking to a brother recently; I'm not sure which Grand Lodge and he told me that it took him nine years to complete his three degrees. At this stage, these brothers know more about the craft than most of our members will learn in a lifetime of Freemasonry in North America.

In addition, attendance at meetings in many jurisdictions is not an option, it is a requirement. A dozen years ago when I was attending the second World Conference in Portugal, a Portuguese brother told me that their Lodge met every week. Three of those meetings a month were for the purpose of Masonic education and one for the purpose of conferring ritual and conducting business. The average age of a Portuguese Freemason at that time was approximately 29 years. The Grand Lodge session was delayed for almost an hour so that they could expand the size of the room at the hotel to seat all the brothers attending. When at the Grand Lodge of Iceland I learned that they had a six-year waiting list to get into a lodge.

The National Grand Lodge of France rejects approximately 60% of the petitions received and their membership has increased an average of 10% a year for the past 12 years. The rate of rejection in almost every jurisdiction in the world far exceeds anything we know in North America and most of these Grand Lodges are increasing in membership while facing far greater challenges to their existence than we have ever known. Keep in mind, that tens of thousands of Freemasons have been put to death over the years simply because they were Freemasons and we have not even known restraint.

Unfortunately in North America and again in light of political correctness we have determined that elitism is a dirty word and yet when Freemasonry stated that their goal was to take good men and make them better we became elitist and my friends there is nothing wrong with elitism. Elitism played a major role in bringing together the great minds of the age of the Enlightenment. It was these men with great minds and capable of great thoughts that made it an influential segment of society. Remember my friends; fine porcelain cannot be made from bad clay.

There is no question but that quality will attract quality and if we wish to be a quality organization then we must have quality members to attract more quality members. I do not mean by this observation that there is no place in Freemasonry for the average man. Indeed, a second reason Freemasonry became as great as it has was that it was able to take men from all classes, occupations and social structures and place them in a Lodge room as equals.

The third major reason that caused Freemasonry to excel beyond all other organizations, however, was that it remained selective on the quality of the man that it would accept. My brothers, this is perhaps the major difference that I have found in other jurisdictions. We, in North America have become willing to accept almost anyone in a failing attempt to increase our numbers. As a result the public now sees a different image of Freemasonry and society will always judge on the worst, never on the best.

Yet, we must be realistic. It is doubtful that any of us would ever serve as a major attracting force for those like the great men that I cited earlier but we can serve as an example to stimulate quality men to want to become part of us. How many of you sitting here today

were inspired to petition the craft because of men whom you knew who set an example to you and who were Freemasons? I was! We also must realistically recognize that our greatest hope for leadership will come from the professional environment. They are the men with the training to be leaders before becoming Freemasons.

We may argue all we want that these other foreign jurisdictions that I referred to have too stringent requirements in costs and demands for America but I guess it all boils down to what we want to be. Do we want to be an organization with the capability of impacting the ongoing evolution of our society and being highly respected and admired or do we want to be a dying organization of little note.

Let me take a few minutes and give you some examples of what I have experienced in my travels over the past 20 years. The first time I went to Greece I had a brother who drove me to wherever I wanted to go. He would not even let me open the car door, insisting that he open it for me. Just before I left Greece someone told me that he was regarded as the greatest surgeon in Greece and yet he was insisting to wait on me.

At the final banquet in Abidjan, Ivory Coast an older brother came up to me and told me that if I ever came back to that area of Africa, I never again stay in a hotel. He told me that he had a large home, his children were gone and he would be honored to have me stay with him and that his home was my home. When he walked away, a brother asked me if I knew who he was and I said no. He told me that he was the ambassador to the United Nations.

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At the second World Conference in Sao Paulo, Brazil, a young man was assigned to look after me for nine days taking care of all my needs. He sat behind me at every meeting in case I needed anything. He drove me wherever I wanted to go and insisted on providing for my every want. I found out the day before I left Brazil that he was a pulmonary surgeon and professor of pulmonary medicine at the University of Sao Paulo.

I have been on a speaking agenda with the president of Chile and had lunch seated to his right at the presidential palace. I have been received at both the President's and the Prime Minister's palace in Portugal. I was invited to hunt with the Prime Minister of Romania. I participated in laying a wreath at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris along with the presidents of Gabon and Congo. I have met with members of the royal families of Europe and had several dinners with the princess of Yugoslavia. I was made a chief of the village of Nigui-saff in the Ivory Coast. I had dinner at the home of the Commanding General of the Gabon military and attended a beach party at the retreat of the Minister of Defense. I participated in the dedication of a Masonic monument at Valparaiso, Chili where the monuments of the great Chilean heroes are erected. This would be tantamount to us dedicating a Masonic monument on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Can you imagine that happening in this country today?

These are just a few of the fascinating experiences that I have been privileged to participate in as a result of my affiliation with Freemasonry. It is extremely important, however, that you understand that none of this was for me; it was because of what I represented to Freemasonry and what Freemasonry represented in their country. And by the way, the President of Chile and the President and Prime Minister of Portugal are not Freemasons.

It would be extremely prudent for the leaders of the craft in America to take a serious look at those Grand Jurisdictions that are experiencing the greatest success and begin to consider the logic in trying to emulate their blueprint for succeeding instead of beating the same dead horse. We must stop playing the "numbers game" and trying to buy back respect through charitable contributions and begin to realize that by improving the quality of the craft we will improve the quantity of the craft and regain the respect. We as individual members must set a positive example as to what this craft means to society. We are the living examples of what Freemasonry is.

As a result of the recent publicity that we have received through Dan Brown's books and a couple of movies and television programs, Freemasonry is being

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given an opportunity of resurrection of significance in today's society. Young men are knocking at the door of Freemasonry seeking to pass through the portals of an organization dedicated to priorities of improving the man and challenging the mind. They are seeking something that society is not offering and now we must be willing and able to satisfy their quest. We may never again be given this opportunity. The question is; are we willing and are we able? The world deserves a positive answer as do our predecessors in the greatest organization ever conceived by the mind of man.

