

EUROPEAN GRAND SECRETARIES' MEETING

DUBLIN, 9th OCTOBER, 2004

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Have you ever stopped and given thought to exactly what Freemasonry is-and what it stands for? If you do, don't expect to find an easy answer and don't accept some glib definition of the kind we so often hear produced when this topic comes up for discussion. Many, I believe, never really ponder deeply about it, but are nevertheless content and satisfied with their membership, comfortable in the fact that it is meeting and providing some unarticulated contribution to their lives which brings enjoyment and contentment. For many years I found it hard to articulate exactly what it meant to me and to analyse its elements. Then, some years ago, I had a period of enforced inactivity and found I had the time and opportunity to do so.

On his initiation, the Brethren are assured that the candidate is "living in good repute amongst his friends and neighbours". He is therefore, or should be, a peaceable and law-abiding citizen who gets on well with others. A little later on, the candidate affirms that he comes "with a preconceived notion of the excellence of the Order, a desire for knowledge and wishing to make himself more extensively useful amongst his fellow men". Later again, on being charged, he is told that the foundation of Freemasonry is "the practice of every social and moral virtue". He is exhorted to learn how to discharge his duty to his God, his neighbour and himself, to be an exemplary citizen and that, as an individual, he should practise every domestic as well as public virtue and maintain those truly Masonic characteristics, benevolence and brotherly love.

Following his second degree, he is told that he should "not only assent to the principles of the Craft, but steadily persevere in their practice". Finally, following his third degree, he is told that his "own behaviour should afford the best example for the conduct of others".

Later still, at the peak of his Craft career, on being installed in the Chair of his Lodge, he consents to a comprehensive list of instructions as to his attitude and behaviour. All in all, the entire underlying principle is that by entering Freemasonry and by his acceptance and practice of its tenets and precepts he should become a credit to himself and an example to, and benefactor of, others.

It is expected and hoped that Freemasonry will bring about this state of affairs but that, in his daily life, a Freemason will interact with others as an individual and not in his capacity as a Freemason. Freemasonry is therefore an intellectual and philosophic exercise designed and intended to make an individual's contribution to society, and extension of himself, greater than they might otherwise have been had he not had the opportunity of developing his capacities and capabilities through membership of the Order.

Election to membership of a Lodge and initiation into that Lodge are an overt indication and confirmation of one's worth or value; and recognition of such, by the Brethren. In itself, this should increase self-esteem and hopefully generate a conscious or sub-conscious desire to prove worthy of others' confidence and trust. Subsequent promotions through the second and third

degrees are symbolic of the Brethren demonstrating their satisfaction that their original choice and decision was correct and that the candidate is worthy, both innately and by virtue of his zeal, interest and proficiency in the symbolic Craft, for such promotions. These additional and consequent marks of esteem should engender in the candidate further personal satisfaction and self-confidence.

The Lodge teaches many skills often untaught, or not experienced, elsewhere. A Brother must speak in public, think on

his feet, make decisions, vote on issues and finally chair meetings. These are invaluable assets in all other aspects of his life and for many this may well be the only opportunity of learning, practising and perfecting these skills and techniques.

In fact, I think that nowadays much of this list of benefits - the "Masonic Product" - is left to the candidate to work out for himself; and a good deal of the symbolism is lost unless the candidate's mind is keenly attuned to it. Indeed, Freemasonry fulfils many of the psychological needs of the average man. To a much greater extent than women, I believe, men are gregarious creatures who feel the "pack" or "herd" instinct more strongly. They need to belong to something, like a school or a team; and the Lodge takes on that role even providing, like a Regiment, a distinctive uniform which indicates each individual's place in the "pecking order" or his present achievement level. Further the Lodge provides outlets for the indulgence of personal interests which may be denied both at work and even in the home - administration, responsibility, dramatic talents, ceremonial, fund raising, caring - but above all the Lodge provides peace and tranquillity, a haven where the expected is unfailingly found; and the increasing turmoil of outside life can, with certainty, be avoided and forgotten for a time. Batteries can be re-charged and the Lodge's calming influence will help to fit one for the fray once more.

Those who have gone through, or may be going through, some serious mental trauma such as redundancy, or perhaps depression brought on by the stresses imposed by modern living, will know how true this is and can testify to the soothing and calming effect of this unique and invaluable supportive atmosphere, as found within the Lodge.

Freemasonry is not a Charity, but as in any fraternal setting, the need of a Brother or his dependents, will receive the sympathy and support, not always or necessarily financial, of his Brethren. Charity is a natural off-shoot of Brotherly Love and is promoted explicitly in the Masonic ethos, but it is not the "raison d'être" of the Order. I have never come across a better reference to our charitable endeavours than a quotation by H.R.H. the Duke of Kent, Grand Master of England, who in an address to his Grand Lodge in April 2001, said:- "On the subject of the charities, let me remind you first of all that Freemasonry itself is not a charity. Nor indeed does it have charity as its main purpose. Charity is but one expression of the true spirit of Freemasonry, a demonstration to our Brethren and their dependants and to the community at - large that our hearts are indeed 'expanded by benevolence'."

The purpose of Masonry is "self-improvement" - not in the material sense, but in the intellectual, moral and philosophic sense of developing the whole persona and psyche so as, in the beautiful and emotive language of the ritual, "to fit ourselves to take our places, as living stones, in that great spiritual building, not made by hands, eternal in the Heavens". Such an hypothetical whole, developed, complete person must, in his journey through life, and in his interaction with others, make a more extensive contribution to society in general, thus realizing

and fulfilling his expressed wish on initiation, to become "more extensively useful amongst his fellow-men".

Every individual, on occasion, is forced to be a little introspective and ask himself "who am I and where am I?" Even an organization such as the Masonic Order must also occasionally ask itself "what are we and where are we?" What we are has, to some extent been already dealt with. We are a fraternal organization, the aims of which are brotherly love, the relief of our distressed Brethren and their dependents and the search after "Truth" which we may express as, and expand into, public and private morality, the knowledge and fear of God and, following on from that, respect for, and love of, our neighbour. This respect includes toleration of his personal viewpoint, his religious beliefs and his political opinions. If we pursue the aims of Freemasonry, our search should widen, yet focus our vision, while ever making us more deeply aware of, and closer to, the Great Architect of the Universe, heightening our spirituality and deepening our insight into that which we may never hope fully to understand. There is so much more to Freemasonry than the shallow depth of today's assessment and its scant inspection by today's society, obsessed as society is with material success for the individual rather than his contribution to society.

In marketing terms we must view Freemasonry as a product. This is what we are "selling", or otherwise providing, for uptake by members and potential members. We must either improve the product or make the packaging more attractive.

Freemasonry is a fairly stable product in itself - very little can be done to alter the product without changing it entirely in both essence and appearance. Its principles and precepts have stood the test of time and are as valid today as ever. We cannot change the product and remain in the same business; and we must be true to ourselves in this. If we want to get into a new line of business it must be accepted and recognized that this is exactly what we are doing; and will it perhaps not be long before somebody decides that the new product is not quite right and needs further adjustment to meet the current demands of society. This, I suggest is not an option which is open to us. What we have and what we stand for will always be right, even if their acceptance rises or falls on the scales of time.

What we can do is upgrade the packaging, and make it look more attractive to potential customers, while also actually making it more palatable to current consumers. In the former case we can -and indeed many already do - actively adopt a higher profile; and gently but firmly "let our light shine before men". The candle in the window is the invitation symbol understood by all; and some will accept and knock on the door. I am entirely against the "go out into the highways and by-ways and compel them to come in" attitude. Hard-sell is not for Freemasonry however you may try to dress it up. Freemasonry is there to be adopted and savoured by those with minds attuned to, or even seeking, its attainment and what it provides. Freemasonry is not for everyone; but within all populations and at all times there will be those to whom it will appeal. By its packaging and presentation these customers may be identified and maximised but they cannot be created. So we must improve the packaging, of which the elements have been identified in our discussion document "Programme for Change - the Way Forward" as - Public Image; Membership; Charity; Policy; Administrative Development and Communication. It is up to us all, from bottom to top, preferably in that order and direction, to decide on the right "mix" to achieve our purpose of creating a Masonic revival for our own and our future generations' benefit.

What I am trying to emphasise is that as we move into this new millennium we must be steadfast in our adherence to the Aims and Principles and not attempt to obtain public acceptance through promoting or pursuing non-masonic activities which can only, in the long term, prove our undoing. We must be patient and bide our time for we will come again. I have heard it said that the pace of life and its stresses will get even more frenetic than at present and that while we may be able to cope with this intellectually, it is questionable if many can cope with it emotionally. In these circumstances with Internet bombarding us with a vast availability of ethical and unethical information in the privacy of our own homes, I believe that Brother Michael Yaxley, -president- of the Board-of General Purposes of the Grand Lodge of Tasmania is quite correct when he writes "Society does have a need for a body such as Freemasonry. I believe that this need will increase rather than decrease. In the present century the work-place will not offer fellowship and camaraderie sufficient to satisfy the social instincts that people have. Many people will work at home, linked to the office by computer and telephone. Others will work in an office with complex but nevertheless inanimate equipment. The irony of the Age of Communication is that people spend, and will spend, more time by themselves".

We must be careful to hasten slowly - "festina lente" - when we are assailed on all sides by exhortations to bring the Craft into the 21 st Century - or to move out of our time-war, as a Brother Robert H. Abel of New Zealand puts it. He refers to another Brother being fearful for the dignity of the Craft - and says that so he should be, for we merely cheapen our Institution by touting it in public. He wants to see the Craft respected for the efforts of its Brethren in the society in which they happen to live - we are all someone else's perception of Freemasonry. He believes that man's spirituality tends to wax and wane in long term cycles; we would do well to ensure that our Craft endures unchanged for future - and perhaps less frivolous -generations to appreciate and enjoy.
