

Freemasonry's Responsibility to Society

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Worshipful Master and Brethren all,

The rank of Past Grand Master is associated with many happy and delightful experiences, not the least of which is the privilege of having been found worthy to present this paper in a place dedicated to virtue, to benevolence and to Freemasonry.

I hope that nothing I am about to say will be allowed to mask the sense of privilege which I feel of being able to engage with the best minds in contemporary Freemasonry and to address so respectable an audience as this Grand Lodge, which I salute as a faithful guardian of the fundamentals of our noble Order to whom we are bound by every tie of gratitude and for whose virtues we feel every sentiment of admiration and esteem.

This communication breathes that true Masonic spirit which permeates and actuates the smallest group of Brethren just as much as it does the larger assemblies. Let us, therefore, be instrumental in the advancement and education of the Craft, whose work is to bring goodwill into the community, to uplift mankind and to have an impact upon the life and the character of men and Masons everywhere.

Brethren, it is not my intention to enter into an elaborate disquisition concerning Masonry. That task far exceeds the limits of my abilities; I shall only venture to submit to your serious consideration a few observations.

Those words are not an example of 20th century modesty or understatement; and I will hasten to reveal they are, in fact, the opening words of the Oration given by Brother William Preston himself in 1772, when he introduced the first of his famous Masonic lectures. All the same it is this spirit that the following thoughts, suggested by our Grand Master in late October, are offered on the subject of:

"Freemasonry's Responsibility to Society"

and is dedicated to the Brothers of the American Canadian Grand Lodge.

By a long process in which speculative Masons have drawn upon material from former times, from the freestone masons, the Volume of Sacred Law and from ancient sources unconnected with either, is little short of amazing. By a long process of refinement, by adding and discarding system has been developed which despite all the anomalies and anachronisms inevitable in such growth, is nevertheless surprisingly harmonious. We

ourselves compass the structure and the curriculum of our Masonic Temple; let ourselves be the Temple, which shall stand in great proportion unto all eternity. This requires, however, a lifelong educational process to become intellectually fitted to comprehend and practice such alleged responsibility; the rough ashlar must be trued, squared and polished for its appropriate place in the structure of the Masonic edifice. All ethical forces at man's disposal are a Mason's working tools. Morality, friendship and fraternal love are such forces which first unite and then cement goodwill in society. Our task today, as ever, is to make men better, more tolerant and consequently happier.

Word fashions come and go. Slogans are widely used to put across a point, to convey an idea, sometimes to cause a thought. Most of these have political or commercial origins and are used to promote an individual's interest or to sell the public some bill of goods offered by a business. Even Freemasonry is not immune from modern sloganeering. Change sometimes seems to become fetish; some advocate a special Masonic image. And even such serious topics as "*Human rights of the future of our Society*" carry the implication of change and we are in grave danger of being coerced into sweeping changes purely as a sign of the times. They are too self evident to speculative Masons to react ostentatious about their practical application or to proclaim them from the housetops. Yet, the challenge becomes apparent, a challenge toward off approaching danger due to misinterpretation.

I do not construe this as indicating that we should shun all changes, or that we should cease our efforts to constantly seek improvement. But I do believe that we should abandon no standards until we are morally certain that we have replaced them with better and more effective ones, and I pray the basic principles of Masonry will always escape the ravages of changing times.

Webster's definition for "responsibility" is synonymous with obligation, duty and accountability, and encompasses many facets of the way of life which we adopted when we became members of the Order. Wherever Masonry flourished the highest standards of living have been obtained; and wherever it has been cast out, the standards of living have immediately gone down, civilization has deteriorated and the freedom of the people abolished.

I believe the great work of Freemasonry is to raise mankind to a higher realization of the beauty of truth, the importance of human freedom, the building of character, the glory of service in every good and charitable cause. Deeply convinced that the world of tomorrow can be a better one than that of today if the minds and hearts of the people are regenerated, Masonry has ever sought to build not only temples, but also character, thereby strengthening the moral fiber of its votaries. It is in memory of those who made the supreme sacrifice in order that we might have freedom to worship, freedom to think, freedom to live as Free and Accepted Masons.

Our contribution to mankind down through the centuries has been significant, whether it be in the fields of government, education, literature, medicine, music or almost any other area we could name. This is not so much because of any direct involvement, for such would be contrary to our high principles, but rather is the result of individuals practicing Masonic precepts in their daily lives. The precepts and teachings of our Order in seeking tolerance and personal liberty for all and a desire to be better men and citizens have been instrumental in the formation of our free nations, where common duties inculcate commonly shared responsibilities. In this process we never measure our progress by the degrees we have received, rather than the degrees with which we throw our influence into applied Masonic teachings and education. It is not possible for anyone to be great or accomplished great things. But we can all work to the limit of our power, meet and master the problem of the hour, and be thankful for our blessings. The resources are inexhaustible, and "*of whom much is given, of him shall be much required*". This requires a special mental and spiritual preparation, a never ending process, beginning in our heart, to absorb that what we term Masonic Light.

Benjamin Franklin said: "We gave you a republic, if you can keep it"; expressed Masonically: we gave you your working tools, keep and use them wisely. I realize that the trouble with responsibility is that it always comes disguised as hard work. And it begins with our responsibility to the Craft in general and to our own Lodge in particular. "*There is no right without a paralleled duty*". And we cannot practice responsibility without knowing the basic structure and functions of our Lodge, its local problems, its various projects and activities; without realizing the importance of regular Lodge attendance and willingness to participate in Lodge work both within and without the walls of the Temple.

Don't expect perfection in a man just because he is a Mason. If you do, you will be disappointed. Masonry makes men better, but no human agency makes them perfect. If he is a Mason, you have a right to presume he is a fairly good man, but do not condemn Masonry, even if a few Masons turn out bad. Even the great Teacher himself had a Judas. The aim and purpose of Masonry is to receive none but good men, keep them good, and make them better, judge the Institution not by a few failures but by the average of its successes. The average is high and it consequently gives standards to its members, but it cannot be an infallible guide.

When the world criticizes Freemasonry, it may be saying: "*What you say you are, and what you really are fills me with doubt. Your preaching and practice are unrelated*". Maybe the world is wrong to criticize us. Only you can answer that! *Guilty or not guilty!* Preaching is not enough. Reciting a creed, religious or otherwise, is not enough. We need to go beyond the quoting of old clichés! We need to dream the impossible dream, to be willing to march through hell for a heavenly cause.

There is really nothing wrong with what we preach from the East or from the sidelines. The real hang-up comes from what we are and do, not from what we say we are. I can say I love God and I believe in God, but when I say I have faith in God, then I have strength to move mountains. I can say I love Masonry, I believe in masonry, but when I say, the worlds will be better for this what I do, then I reach the unreachable star; the unreachable star of love and universal Brotherhood; the unreachable star of genuine commitment on the part of the entire Fraternity; the unreachable star of a new world where all men can breath free without fear.

There are periods of time when Masonry goes its way in an atmosphere of calm assurance. The national standard of morality is high. Masonry continues in her pursuance of Masonic teachings and principles, a commitment to excellence.

There is, however, no let down in the eternal search for more light. There is no recess from the work of masonry. But at such times, the Mason labors in a spirit that finds its counterpart in the general national spirit. There then comes a great change in the moral tone of our countries. Old beliefs, tried and true patterns of human behavior are described as old fashioned. Religion itself is challenged. Masonry is training for such conditions. The present efforts of the past must be used effectively against the false philosophy of the present. What we have done in the past is commendable. But conditions demand that we do more; and conditions increase responsibilities. It is imperative that we be more than just members of the Masonic Fraternity. We dare to tackle the toughest of jobs; we pity the sleeper and the indifferent; we pity those who merely join something, those who give up and say that it can't be done.

There is a bit of quotation that I cannot vouch for as to its origin, but I remember Robert Kennedy using it over and over. It is this:

*Some people see things as they are and ask, why?
I dream of things as they are and ask, why not?*

If you want a better world, work at it. If you want a better Lodge, work at it. If you want a better community, work at it. . Why not?

We modern day Masons too are craftsmen and builders, and if our labors are to contribute significantly to that, ideal, philosophical empire which is not only our Masonic dream but the hope of mankind as well, and if our actions are to mark our work with a standard of excellence, then we must pour our devotion and steadfastness into the mortar.

We too must, by precept and example, strive with every fiber of our strength and persuasion to add substance and power to the spiritual aura surrounding our lives and the life of our Brothers, our Lodges and Grand Lodges. There is a need for a revival of spiritual self, a rededication to the unfoldment of inner self, a giving of self and of spirit.

Our life is a single but highly complex cosmic structure and we must look closely and with serious heart at the edifice we have entered, if we listen with understanding we will hear a sound made up of the beating of human hearts, and hear the nameless music of

men's souls. If we look we will begin to dimly see the soaring outline of the building itself of many forms and shadows.

Surely the work of no ordinary builder. Can you see the mighty pillars, cast in the form of the bodies of our Brothers who have sacrificed themselves in the name of truth and justice, and their endless rows forming a bulwark?

Can you see the cornerstones from which all else expands, and see there our Masonic fathers surrounded by our young men, our Brothers of tomorrow? Can you see in the spans and arches above, the joined hands of all men, interlocked and strong, and hear in the heights of the lofty dome the gentle music of the dreamers of the world?

And can you see that the mystic house is not yet finished. It is still building and not being built upon, and we realize that the work must always go forward. The building must be united.

It seems a simple realization, yet the profound feeling of it brought forth a Moses and Jesus Christ, a Buddha and St. Augustine, a Darwin, Anderson and Einstein. These great axial thinkers become creators of transcendent values and created a world of universal thought which today is our most precious human heritage. They speak to us with the sole purpose of helping to create that kind of world, *"of that state of perfection at which, we hope, being the rough ashlar we are to arrive, by a virtuous education, our own endeavors, and the blessing of God"*. It is a rugged and difficult pathway. God will supply the blessings; but we ourselves have to come up with the endeavor.

My Brothers; your individual example as a votary of our Royal Art is one of our free world's greatest strengths. You are members of a lifeline that brings man out of the dark into God's light. If we walk away from the light, our shadows fall before us. The further we walk, the further they extend, the shadows of anxieties, fears, false concepts. If we walk toward the light, the shadows fall behind us and their burden lessens.

Finally, if we stand under the light, they disappear. As you stand under that eternal Light, you set an example and you send a message to your fellowmen of strength and hope and faith that is the ultimate contribution of Freemasonry to the future of mankind.

In closing, please listen to the Masonic confession of the Honorable Brother Benjamin Franklin:

"Masonic labor is purely a labor of love. He who seeks to draw Masonic wages in gold or silver will be disappointed. The wages of a Mason are earned and paid in their dealings with one another; sympathy begets sympathy, kindness begets kindness, helpfulness and tolerance beget the attitude of a true Mason, and these are the wages of a Mason".

So help us God, and make us steadfast to perform the same!

/s/ (Dr.) Hugo Thomas Past Grand Master American Canadian Grand Lodge