

LIVING A ROLE

Bro. Hardy is a popular newscaster, President of the St. Louis Press Club, and Director for Special Events for Radio Station KMOX of St. Louis. He is a member of Marine Lodge #355 of Marine, Illinois. This Short Talk Bulletin is adapted from Bro. Hardy's remarks at the Grand Master's Breakfast in Belleville, 111. on May 20, 1984.

Our Fraternity reflects our society in general--in that what society is, we are also. If society suffers a failure of conscience, morality, responsibility, dedication, effort; then it is not surprising that we, as members of society, bring those failures to our fraternity. And, it should not be unexpected that as society succumbs to those weaknesses, we too succumb. **AND WE HAVE !**

Our membership is diminishing, aging, and overall, less involved. To be sure, there are a few bright spots where Masonry is healthy at Lodge, Valley and Shrine levels. But, for the most part, it is a struggle at all levels to acquire new members, and for that matter, simply keep what we've got. With dues most assuredly on the increase, and other costs going up, things will not--by themselves--get better. **NOT BY THEMSELVES!**

Ours is a society that has spent the last 15 years tearing itself apart. We have seen our traditions, morality, spirituality, patriotism, and fabric of life questioned, trampled and shattered--our pride of self and country all but destroyed. But one bulwark remains. One thing has managed to come through intact. Bruised somewhat, but unsullied.

Where prayers or pledges of allegiance have been changed, or eliminated totally, what words are the same now as they were 20, 50, 100 years ago? In an ocean of so-called free expressions, immorality, filth, pornography, lewdness, and bad taste, what island of discipline remains, if not to inhabit, then at least to admire?

Masonry. It may be all we have, and if so, then the time has come to merchandise it that way. To sell the patriotism, the religious faith, the belief in self that Masonry offers. And sell it not as just another club membership, but as we know it--**A WAY OF LIFE**. Given the society of today, a way of life just might be a most saleable item.

How best to accomplish this? That's the overriding question, and prompts the following considerations.

It should be remembered that Masonry is a family--a family of building blocks, each aligned by degree, each a step to "more light in Masonry," each a greater understanding of a way of life.

It should be remembered that you don't "lose" a Mason to another body. Contrary to a widely-held but parochial view, Masons remain Masons no matter how or where they choose to participate and contribute.

It should be remembered that Masonry is not "just another club" in which a man holds membership and pays dues. It is vastly more rewarding than that, for it does indeed guide a man's life.

It should be remembered that Blue Lodges across the state and nation are going out of business, that debits are increasing in all bodies, and that we are at fault. Our action, or inaction, is the cause. The effect is widely published. The resolution rests with us.

We can no longer afford the luxury of separatism. We must stop telling each other what we cannot do, and concentrate instead on areas of acceptable cooperation. We must not adopt, as some have already, a policy of protectionism, i.e., one full year's membership

before being allowed to petition the next body. In an attempt to protect our few real secrets, we have become over-zealous and created an identity crisis. Brethren, we do not deserve that anonymity! Especially given our charities, our history, the role our members have played in the development of the nation, every state, city and hamlet.

We have plenty to talk about. And we're only starting to do it! There is no reason large segments of the population should be ignorant of what Freemasonry is, what it stands for and what it does. To many, only Shrine Masonry is recognized. You know why! EXPOSURE! Because of its colorful parades, fezzes and philanthropies for crippled and burned children, the Shrine is known! And publicly accepted!

But what about the stabilizing influence of the Blue Lodges to our communities throughout the land? Our dedication to youth groups? The loyalty and contributions of Masonically-oriented women's groups? The patriotic dedication of so many more Masonic organizations?

It is time for our candles to be brought out from beneath the blankets. It is time for our lodges and appendant bodies to emerge from the role of mutual admiration societies and begin communicating to the press--and to the public. We spend a lot of time talking to ourselves. Let's talk to the world. With all of it's troubles, it could use a little help. Let's make ourselves known. Let's tell others what we believe in. Let's show ourselves for what we are--upright Free Masons. And, let's be outwardly proud of the fact. Let's stop being hypocrites--about what we say and what we really do in the recruitment of new members. Masonry is a family. We are all brothers, and as such owe ourselves allegiance to one another. To that end, may I recommend a joint meeting with the presiding officers of all other Masonic bodies in the State--to openly discuss areas of fragmentations, a method to restore the familial relationship of one body to another, a return to basics, and a rededication to principles. Not singly as Lodge Brothers or York Rite companions or Scottish Rite Brothers or Shriners--but as good and upright Masons.

And let's look . . . really look . . . at Blue Lodge Masonry. What is supposed to happen after the conferral of that magnificent Third Degree? We are admonished to return, to learn, to seek more light.

But frankly, how many times can you learn the same lesson--the same lesson you've already learned a hundred times--before it becomes, pardon the blasphemy, A BORE. Yes, you heard me, A BORE.

We are admonished to return, to learn, to take part . . . IN THE RITUAL. And that's great. But--and somebody has to say this--ritual is not for everybody. We have 150,000 Masons in Illinois and only 300 grand lecturers. The should tell you something. AND BEING A MASON IS NOT ONLY BEING A RITUALIST .

Being a Mason has to do with LIVING a role--not ACTING a role once a month in lodge. We can't all be ritualists or floor men. I'm lousy at acting, and totally clumsy with a pole in my hand. A lot of us are. Is there NOTHING at Lodge for US? Except hearing the same words and watching the same floor work month after month, year after year. Is THAT what Blue Lodge offers? In the words of the song: "Is that all there is?"

It would be like renting "Rocky 111" and playing it over and over on your VCR the third Wednesday of every month for the rest of your life. Sooner or later, you'd get bored with it. Is THAT why Masons don't come back often? They've become BORED with it all? Might be. Even the preacher doesn't give us the same sermon every Sunday. Maybe we can learn from him. I appreciate the purists among us who say Masonry survives because it is unchanged down through the centuries. But understand, I'm not suggesting we change anything about Masonry--it's ritual, it's floorwork. I am suggesting we supplement it to appeal to those who are not actors, scriptlearners, potential officers of the Lodge. Something for those who petitioned and were raised because they believed in the life teachings of Masonry--not necessarily the roles to be played in those teachings.

Walk into any Blue Lodge anywhere and watch, as the degrees are underway. Watch not the candidate, but the brothers on the sidelines. You'll see many silently forming the words of the ritual as it plays out. They know the ritual. But many others have not memorized, for all eternity, the sacred words. Are they, therefore, lesser Masons? I think not. For them, Masonry is not the WORDS, but the TRUTHS. Not the PHRASES, but the Meanings. Not the Acting, but the LIVING of the lessons. Are they, as a Past Grand Master of Indiana describes some of us, "unable to comprehend the message?" I don't believe that. I do believe that Masonry can and should be the ultimate source of review, renewal, revival. But it can be more, too, for those who find it the SAME OLD STUFF--the rut of ritual.

There are so many demands on our time. Know now, there's a whole world out there pledged to take time from you. Cable TV, computers, colleges, universities, libraries--all hustling for your spare time. Books, magazines, articles, cassettes, all vie for your time.

And you are forced, yes, forced, to set priorities. Do the same old boring thing? Or experience something new? You know the answer to that, don't you?

Look, ritual doesn't make a man a Mason. Living the Masonic way makes a man a Mason. And to that end, may I suggest the Blue Lodge consider the living Mason, not just the ritualistic Mason.

Why can't the Blue Lodge develop supplemental programs of teaching? Review the test oath, study Masonic history, Masonic paraphernalia. We have a wealth of learned men who can talk on those points alone. MSA has a library of films that I'd bet most of us haven't seen. Why not utilize, instead of simply talking about, our youth groups. Bring a DeMolay team in to present one of their degrees. Bring in the Job's Daughters, Rainbows--let them show their stuff. Masons can learn from them. Review the George Washington Museum, the tools and jewels of the craft. Let your minds run. A wealth of supplemental Masonic material is out there, just waiting to be tapped. Let's get off our well-padded couches and use it--before even our well-padded couches are gone, too.

The perfect opportunity is present. The precepts of Masonry can answer the doomsayers of our time. Our positive action now can result in a stronger fraternity--more attractive to our brothers within, as well as the general society without.

Modern Masonry presents a source of integrity and moral courage where little exists elsewhere in the world. Its traditional influence, properly tailored to today's society, can serve well. And in that service, rededicate our own to the principles in which we believe--the Brotherhood of Man, under the Fatherhood of God.

It is too precious to let slip by with the rest of our traditions. It may be our last, best hope. It deserves our best efforts, this Masonic family. For it has survived, where some among us have not.