

## Acting with Impact

February 25, 2017, Barrie Lodge of Perfection

Ill. Bro. David Boyd, 33<sup>o</sup> TPGM, Ill. Bro. Robert Brethour 33<sup>o</sup>, Grand Secretary-General, Ill. Bro. John Harrison, Active Member of Supreme Council, Ill. Bro. Hugh Donnelly, 32<sup>o</sup>, Reunion Honoree, Ill. Bro. Gordon Hedges, 33<sup>o</sup> MWS of Spry Chapter of Rose Croix, Ill. Bro. Rod Greer, 33<sup>o</sup> Commander-in-Chief of Barrie Consistory, members of Supreme Council, brethren including and most importantly, members of the class:

It is my pleasure to be with you today to bring you greetings from Ill. Bro. Terry A. McLean, 33<sup>o</sup> SGC and to share with you some thoughts on Freemasonry in general and regarding the A. & A.S.R. in particular in this the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of Freemasonry in its modern incarnation. I hope my remarks prompt us to reflect on a rich history of achievement and the importance of each and every one of us in contributing to its continuation.

Contributions come in various forms. All are important. Not all are recognized. It is my pleasure as Deputy to extend my congratulations to Ill. Bros. John Thompson, 33<sup>o</sup> and Ill. Bro. Frank Richardson, 33<sup>o</sup> on receiving the conferral of the 33rd degree at the Annual Session held in St. John's Nfld last September. This constitutes a recognition of their past contributions, by the brethren of this Valley but also by those members of Supreme Council that reviewed and agreed that you both merited the conferral.

President Ronald Reagan cautioned citizens to be careful of people who show up saying, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." Well, I am from Supreme Council and I am here to help, however, I hope my remarks to you today will convince you that the true strength of our fraternity lies within each of us in the commitment of each of us to be a Mason First, in all things.

R. W. Bro. Leon Zeldis, in an article entitled, "England Around 1717: The Foundation of the first Grand Lodge in context," penned a review of society as it existed within and without England in the years surrounding the creation of the first Grand Lodge.

He described the absolute filth of London and its real and present dangers to anyone venturing out at night in a city without streetlights. He mentions an abiding belief in witchcraft, the last execution for which occurred in 1712.

He noted the existence of marked class differences and the existence of a Parliament that could be populated only by the privileged few who could cast a vote. He observed that, "Inside this stratified society voices began to be heard proposing changes, making appeal to reason instead of subservience to dogma, these thinkers regarded society as a living organism, they were aware of its defects and wanted to find solutions to improve it." "This was the "Age of Reason". Rationalism and science would open the way to a perfect society."

This focus would result in numerous scientific societies pursuing studies and research in nature and the natural sciences. European thought was strongly influenced by esoteric thinking, the Rosicrucians, the Cabbala, alchemy and tarot. Hebrew was highly regarded as the sacred language of the Bible. Our Rite draws lessons from many schools of thought and is familiar with these.

Religious wars between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the not too distant past resulted in an English civil war and the execution of Charles I in 1649, the establishment of a short lived republic and the re-establishment of a shaky monarchy. Many of us in 2017 can recall in detail the events of the 1960s and their lingering impact on our society. This strife would be easily remembered in 1717.

It was the golden age of piracy on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Between 1716 and 1726 there were between 1000 and 2000 pirates in the Atlantic at any given time and those with origins in the British Isles comprised about 70% of them.

In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century citizens of London enjoyed no fast or mass means of communication, no daily newspapers and the horse was the fastest means of transport available.

High society met in the mansions, usually keeping to their country estates apart from the season of balls and galas within the city. Public meeting places were just that, public houses or pubs, inns where people gathered to drink, eat, sing and exchange ideas.

R.W. Bro. Zeldis described a typical Masonic Lodge of the day as meeting in a pub either in a separate room or on a second floor. The members would conduct their ceremonies between one course of dinner or another or else, as practiced by some lodges to this day, had dinner after the ceremonial part of the meeting. The ceremonial part was very brief and the symbolism was limited to a lodge panel, the brethren wore gloves and most importantly, were armed with swords. Venturing out to a meeting in the evening was not for the faint of heart.

The lodge room did not have special furniture. Symbols and lodge implements were drawn on a panel or board, known as a Tracing Board, or on the floor with chalk or coal that could be easily erased with mop and water.

The meetings were convivial and a dinner, music and singing were integral to the meetings. He observed that, "The Masonic Lodge was a refuge of peace and tranquility at a time of political uncertainty, when the memory of religious wars was fresh in the memory of all men, when the first discoveries and inventions were transforming the economy and opening new perspectives of progress, when the hope that rationality and humanism would banish from the hearts of men the evils of fanaticism and intolerance. This was the fertile ground on which early speculative Freemasonry germinated and grew, spreading its branches throughout the western world."

What R.W. Bro. Zeldis cannot determine is moment of Freemasonry's conception, what individual or individuals first conceived of a fraternity and determined the values and tenets by which its members would live. Indeed, we cannot take any theory of the origins of Freemasonry as the absolute truth, including the era in which it came into existence. But it is self-evident that it started with one individual with an idea conveying that idea to another, or others, and inspiring them with its significance. No doubt it started with sharing "heart to heart" and concluded with "hand to hand" as decisions were made and resolutions for the future were formulated.

And we know that the echoes of its tenets as solidified by the creation of the Grand Lodge in 1717 and recorded in its Constitutions still reverberate in our meetings today whether in craft lodges or in Freemasonry's concordant and appendant bodies.

London may not be as filthy but we still wear gloves on occasion, though not to prevent the spread of disease. Some of us wear swords though not of necessity borne by the realities of the time. And the truth contained in ancient philosophies still find expression in our ceremonies, particularly in the Scottish Rite.

And the world we live in still suffers from fanaticism and intolerance, an unequitable distribution of its resources and attempts through piracy and other violence to counteract it. The culprits may change but too often the problems persist.

Think for a moment of a country's upheaval by civil war between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the mid- 1600s and the commitment, while wounds of that conflict were still fresh in 1717, of like-minded men to formalize a structure to perpetuate values of tolerance and inclusion. This was a relatively small group of men of vision who acted with enormous impact. They established a Masonic structure that spread across the globe, not a structure of stone but one of shared tenets and principles that had as its goal the improvement of the individual and thereby the betterment of society.

They did this without the advantages of modern communications, daily newspapers of mass circulation, broadcast media and the benefits of prudently used social media. They did this while not in great numbers and in a time when political and social acceptance were by no means taken for granted. They were builders in the most important sense, and if the ritual is correct they built something that, in time, leading intellectuals and members of the nobility were proud to patronize.

Can we act with similar impact? Of course we can. Whether we do depends on the culture we create by our words and actions. Freemasonry has enjoyed the luxury of high membership numbers in the not too distant past. Lodges and concordant bodies did not have to do anything extraordinary to attract them. In the post war years men were seeking the camaraderie they experienced while in service of their country. The competition for leisure time was low. Work through the day, church on the weekend but evenings available, at least for men, to meet in fellowship. No hardship in doing so. The structure was established by earlier Masons. At some point the importance of inculcating the lessons of the ritual may have been lost –echoes of the 18<sup>th</sup> degree. That is, until declining numbers prompted an urgency to determine why Freemasonry does not attract or retain young men in the high numbers it once did.

It is a sad truth that we get too soon old and too late smart, that self-reflection only seems worthwhile in times of crisis and yet that is the situation that we face. It is important to realize that high numbers, by themselves, did not mean we offered a better experience for our brethren in the 1950s or 60s. Father time has more to do with declining numbers than a superior Masonic experience for our brethren in decades past. But there is a value in paying attention to how past Masons met and interacted.

Brother Danny Thomas once said, "There are two kinds of people in the world; givers and takers. The takers may eat better, but the givers sleep better." He continued, "I was a Freemason in my heart long before I was accepted as a member in this great fraternity. I was an outsider but now I am one of you, and the remaining years of my life will be spent in seeking in some small way to say to all: Thank you for making me a Freemason, I want always to make you laugh but I trust that I will also make you care and that now, together, we will put melody, in the heart of the world that will sing of a better life for all people."

His words echo the conviviality, ceremony, music and singing that characterized the description of Masonic meetings circa 1717, and were so important to Freemasonry's development and growth. Singing requires the total participation of those present. It engages as it entertains and inspires. We need to so engage while also being of one mind concerning the importance of our principles and the need to act with impact in the world by exemplifying them with distinction.

We have a tremendous opportunity to act with impact as individuals in the present time. The Scottish Rite has established a coordinated effort to improve the quality of the leadership it offers to its members. The national membership survey of 2015 was designed to listen to the Scottish Rite Masons and act on their views to improve the experience Valleys and Supreme Council can provide. New Supreme Council members receive the benefit of an orientation seminar to better enable them to assist officers in the administration and work of the Valleys, to lead where it counts most. Deputies are now tasked with taking a more detailed approach to Official Visits, to obtain detailed information about the Valleys for Supreme Council and to ensure that Supreme Council can aid them by responding to Valley needs in a timely fashion. Officers are often schooled in the expectations of their office and supported with mentorship as they advance to the role of presiding officer. And while there will always be those who find things not as they were in their day, often the challenges each generation faces are not so very different from those faced by those who came before, even those of 1717. And in looking back each of us can be inspired to act with greater impact in dealing with present issues.

Our communication structure includes an ad hoc committee committed to identifying ways of making communication more effective, particularly between Valleys. This aids in identifying best practices in crucial areas. Valley newsletters are distributed to the Deputies to aid in this initiative. The remarks of Bro. Thomas came from the Brandon Valley newsletter. The Clarion and Communique are vehicles by which news is shared with most of our brethren. It is open to every Valley to submit articles that will inform, entertain and inspire. In addition, we have the benefit of media forums in our communities that are more than happy to publish articles of interest that highlight Masonic achievements and events. The Scottish Rite Charitable Foundation video and the Scottish Rite membership video are two examples of communicating with impact to the brethren and to the general public through our websites. In the Barrie Valley the Triangle forms part of an integrated effort to bind the brethren together by providing information and education.

The Special Committee on Education and Enlightenment needs little comment here. This Valley is a leader in so many areas and it is a testament to the abilities of its brethren that it is heavily involved in this initiative. And it is in this area that the opportunity to accept good men and groom them to act with impact for the cause of good in all its forms is greatest.

In short, we have excellent working tools, better than our brethren of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. What we may lack is the strength of a deep and abiding dedication to Freemasonry and each other that comes from realizing the importance of personal connections between brethren focused on the great enterprise of showing the world a better way of living.

If we have lost our focus on our central mission as Freemasons, the improvement of men and thereby society, enlightenment is the means to regain it. We need not only to commit ritual to memory but to recall its importance and recognize that inculcating its lessons in our daily life is just as crucial now as it was in 1717. And just as in 1717, or in the deep recesses of our distant past, we need to recognize the value of one individual with an idea, sharing it with others and inspiring all to act with impact in

replicating the conviviality and fellowship our members should share while focusing on practicing outside of the lodge those excellent precepts which, we hope, are cultivated within it. If we accomplish this, one individual and one reunion class at a time, the recruitment and retention of members will look after itself as we all act with impact for the benefit of our families and our society. That alone justifies our existence as Freemasons.

We also have a significant chance to make a difference in the lives of people who know nothing about Freemasonry but are interested enough to visit an open house, ask questions and receive informative answers on Saturday June 3, 2017 at a lodge near them. It represents the most basic meeting of two individuals that can inspire a journey to acting with impact, by becoming a Freemason, in spirit as well as in word. Please remember we are Masons First and therefore need to support this initiative of the Grand Lodge to the utmost of our abilities. Being Masons first, with all that the obligations we took entail, will ensure a vibrant fraternity for another 300 years.

May God bless our children's children with such a legacy.