

Crafting the Mason

by **Sir Knight Thomas Jackson**

The following opinion piece is a speech given by Sir Knight Jackson to Benjamin French Lodge in Washington, DC on Feb. 9, 2005

I have been asked to speak to the application of change as it can apply to North American Freemasonry in making the initiatic experience a value when introducing one into the craft. Brothers Robert Davis and Kirk MacNulty are far more qualified to address the idealism of the historical application of Masonic philosophy than am I. However, with twenty years experience as a Grand Secretary, I suspect that I am as qualified as anyone else to analyze the obstacles we must face in Crafting the Mason in the future of North American Freemasonry.

My brothers, it is important that you understand that when I speak, I speak as one who has spent the last twenty-six years of his life working full-time in Freemasonry. Twenty-two of those years were spent as an officer of the Grand Lodge. Therefore, you must realize that I have full commitment to the structure of Grand Lodge operation. What I have to say, therefore, is not a criticism of the system but of the direction that we have taken with Freemasonry in North America.

It is a sad commentary, my brothers, that North American Freemasonry has been de-emphasizing the significance of the initiation ritual as the foundation of first exposure of the candidate into a new dimension of life. Indeed we have been de-emphasizing the significance of all of our ritual. So why should we be surprised when we see the lack of quality of the ritual that exists today. It would pay us to not forget the old adage that says, "You have only one chance to make a first impression."

For over thirty years I have been expressing a great concern about the future of North American Freemasonry. For many of those years, there were very few of the North American leadership who wanted to listen to anything I had to say concerning that subject. Today, it has become the dominant subject of Masonic discussion. Now, the future of North American Freemasonry is seriously clouded, and even its survival must be brought into question.

An observation I made several years ago was that if we continued on the pathway we are following and fail to recognize a need to adapt to what society needs, that we would probably not exist in North America in 25 years, at least not in any form that we recognize today. Please note that the adaptation must be for what society needs, not what society wants. I suspect that this character of the craft might well be paramount for our past success. Our efforts at adaptation in the recent past have been to change into what we feel society wants rather than what society needs. The practice of the philosophy of Freemasonry should always direct that we bring others up to meet with us not climb down to meet with them.

Very few, if any, Grand Lodges in recent years have failed to institute some type of a program designed for the purpose of increasing membership. Indeed, very few Grand Lodges have any other type of major program other than raising money to give away to charities. If other types of programs do exist, they have the ultimate end of increasing membership, even with the raising of money to give to charity. My brothers, that is not the purpose of Freemasonry. This Craft did not impact the world by crushing it with large numbers or through supporting charities, even though much of our leadership seems to think that to be the case, or at least necessary today, in order to be successful.

Even with all of these programs, however, we have failed in almost every way to even slow down the rate of decline in membership numbers. And yet, we continue year after year to beat the same dead horse. Unless we begin to realize and acknowledge that we are failing to succeed, you can bet that we are going to fail, period. One of our glaring weaknesses as leaders today is our inability to see the big picture of the Craft. We have become so enmeshed in issues of lesser magnitudes that we ignore the great ones for which the craft is known, and we have become so engrossed with issues that are not paramount to the purpose of Freemasonry that we have ignored those that are.

It is imperative, if we have any hope of succeeding, that we must once again develop a long-range vision of where we are going and where we want to go. If we are going to develop that vision, then our leadership must once again begin to comprehend the philosophical purpose of Freemasonry. We must decide whether we wish to remain simply a funnel for monies into charities or to once again participate in the evolution of civil society. We participated in that evolution in the past by accomplishing our goal of making a good man better.

Please do not feel that my evaluations amount to a condemnation of our present-day leadership. They are simply representative of what amounts to the culmination of an evolutionary process that changed North American Freemasonry from an elite, philosophical, learned, highly respected society into a less than elite, almost ignored organization devoted to charitable objectives.

More than fifteen years ago, I began looking at what was taking place in Australia and suggesting that we should seriously consider a similar program in North America. I made an observation at a Landmark's committee meeting, "that we will never change our old lodges, and if we cannot change the old, there is only one thing left to do, and that is to create new". I am convinced today that creating new lodges of a different style is perhaps our one hope for survival, and that is the intent of an organization that has been created for the purpose. Both Brother Davis and I serve on the council of the "Masonic Restoration Foundation." The MRF is structured to promote the study and understanding of traditional Freemasonry and to provide education and support for Traditional Observance Lodges in recognized jurisdictions in North America.

When discussions first began several years ago regarding a "Foundation for Masonic Reconstruction", we were referring to adopting a European Concept style of Freemasonry. We found, however, that there were those within the leadership of North American Freemasonry who opposed this change, using the rationale that North America

had its own style of Freemasonry and that we should not change to the style of somewhere else.

Well, my brothers, we can argue all we wish against changing to a different style of Freemasonry, but like it or not, we are rapidly showing the characteristics of a dying organization while most of the world's Grand Lodges are continuing to thrive. Is it not time that we begin to recognize that all of the programs that we have instituted in the last twenty years to solve our membership issues have shown no major significance in the direction that we are going and begin to study and emulate a style of the craft that is succeeding? I have made the observation during my many years of travel to Masonic jurisdictions around the world, that even though the philosophical purposes of Freemasonry are universally the same, the operational philosophy varies depending upon the environment in which it exists. Thus far I have placed European Freemasonry into a philosophical style, South and Central American Freemasonry into a sociological style, Mexican Freemasonry into a political style and North American Freemasonry into a charitable style. There are probably other styles that exist but I have not been able to pinpoint enough specifics in other regions to define it.

What is significant, however, is that only in the charitable style found in North America has the leadership lost its vision of the purpose of the craft and its obligation to its roots of taking good men and making them better via a stimulus to learn and a commitment of time to the craft. We continue to lower requirements to become a member, requirements to remain a member, and almost any requirement to improve a member.

As a result we have evolved into a form of Freemasonry ignorant of its heritage, its purpose, and its potential. As this self-perpetuating ignorance increased, it has been followed by an ongoing erosion of the general quality of the membership followed by an increasing rate of decline of not only an interest in membership, but of our image in society; a phenomenon that was highly predictable.

I have spent a considerable amount of time over the last dozen years visiting Grand Lodges as well as subordinate lodges throughout the world, and I am greatly impressed with how much influence they continue to have in the society in which they exist. Freemasonry is probably growing and expanding into new territories at a more rapid rate than it has perhaps in over the last one hundred years, while we here in North America struggle to sustain its life, and we, my brothers, must shoulder the responsibility.

I speak now to what I consider our greatest hope not only of regaining our rightful place in society but of survival as a viable institution. We can continue to de-emphasize the significance of the initiatic experience of the new candidate and ignore our greatest opportunity of impacting him in his introduction to what could very well become his way of life, or we can examine its significance in our past or where it retains its significance in the present, and change. I know without the shadow of a doubt that without it, I would not be speaking now. Think back to the impact you felt on that first night that you walked through the preparation room door.

When I began contemplating this presentation, even though I am on the foundation council, I found that I did not fully understand the difference between what we referred to as a European Concept Lodge and a Traditional Observance (T.O.) Lodge. I presented this question to the president of the foundation, and his response was that "it is so named because of an observance of the traditional initiatic elements of continental European Freemasonry". He went on to write that "this means the lodges have a very solemn approach to holding meetings and conferring degrees, the chamber of reflection is used as part of the initiation ceremony, they incorporate higher dues and fees, include festive boards, require a strict dress code, have longer time frames between degrees and required learning, along with other nuances. Most European Grand Lodges incorporate these characteristics into their operations. It is perhaps the other nuances that make the greatest difference. A significant goal of the foundation is to create an atmosphere where the members can learn the lessons of Freemasonry and how they can be inculcated into their daily lives.

Very frankly, I find that the definition and practice of a Continental, European Concept Lodge and a Traditional Observance Lodge to be very similar. Much of what is required in a Traditional Observance Lodge will also be found in a European Concept Lodge. The most significant difference is the emphasis placed upon the initiatic process of the individual.

The foundation also recognized early on, that what we were trying to create must operate in full accordance with Grand Lodge regulations in all jurisdictions. The Masonic Restoration Foundation readily acknowledges the supremacy of Grand Lodge authority in any given jurisdiction. For that reason these new lodges must conform to the operating requirements of Grand Lodge law. Out of necessity, this will mean that flexibility must be an integral part of the goals of the foundation. Each Grand Jurisdiction may show variation in the new lodges created, but in order to be termed Traditional Observance, they will have to meet certain criteria as established by the foundation.

My brothers, this is not an attempt to subvert Freemasonry, but rather, it is a goal to restore Freemasonry to its age of grandeur. Perhaps in the long run the greatest contribution that Freemasonry has made to the evolution of civil society was in providing an environment wherein great minds were stimulated. It was through that environment that it played such an integral role in the age of the enlightenment. Traditional Observance Lodges should be far more suited for that environment.

I have no delusion that I will live to see the impact of what this approach may produce in North American Freemasonry, but I am convinced that it offers our greatest potential to reclaim what our past brothers bequeathed to us.

The greatest challenge that will confront us is that it represents change. We are all familiar with the phrase, "we never did it that way". Well, my brothers, we did. What we have ended up with today is a result of change. What the foundation is looking to do is restoration.

We in North America have excised from the Craft, those intellectual and philosophical standards for which it was known throughout most of its existence. The goal of the foundation is to restore those standards. We have made elitism a dirty word when applied to the Craft. The foundation hopes to restore elitism to the Craft. If we enforce our goal of accepting only good men, then we restore elitism.

We have spent far too much time in recent years in seeking excuses to justify failure. It is far past time that we recognize that our failures are our fault. We are the ones responsible for converting North American Freemasonry into something it was never meant to be, and now we are the ones who must shoulder the responsibility of restoring it. Ask yourselves, my brothers, this question; would I have joined Freemasonry when I did, if it were then, what it is today? I doubt whether I would have, and that is not that long ago.

Now we are being given the opportunity to participate in the reconstruction of the Craft and the restoration to its deserved greatness. My brothers, we can restore our influence to impact the ongoing evolution of civil society. It is going to require change, and it is going to require visionary leadership with a commitment to a higher standard for Freemasonry. We have within our power the ability to change the ultimate destiny of our Craft. I would not want for our generation to become a footnote in some future historian's book that it was we who destroyed Freemasonry in North America.

Sir Knight Jackson is a Past Commander of Continental Commandery #56 in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Tom served for twenty years as the Right Worshipful Grand Secretary of Pennsylvania and now serves as the Executive Secretary of the World Conference of Masonic Grand Lodges having served in this position since its inception in 1998. He is a Past Division Commander of the Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of Pennsylvania and a Knight Commander of the Temple of the Grand Encampment. He resides at 210 Middlespring Rd., Shippensburg, PA 17257, and his e-mail address is twjcowboy@aol.com

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