

**Grand Lodge  
Free & Accepted Masons  
Of California  
Grand Oration 1865**

**Grand Orator  
Addison C. Niles**

MOST WORSHIPFUL GRAND MASTER AND BRETHREN OF THE GRAND LODGE

At our last annual meeting, the office I have the honor to hold was vacant. The appointment of our Most Worshipful Grand Master had been annulled by the fiat of the Highest. The silver voice that had once spoken to us within these walls—how eloquently, you remember—of Masonic charity and order, was hushed and still. Your Orator had been called to a higher place in the Lodge beyond the stars. He died, as a servant of his master should, in the midst of earnest work for Him.

"The great work laid upon his two score years  
Is done, and well done. If we drop our tears,  
Who loved him as few men were ever loved,  
We mourn no blighted hope nor broken plan  
With him whose life stands rounded and approved  
In the full growth and stature of a man."

I could have wished that the choice of our Grand Master had fallen upon some one worthier to break the spell that lingers here. But I even cannot stand where he stood, and not feel something of the leading principle of his noble life—that al-ways the worthiest thing to do is duty, and that one should bring to the performance of every appointed task the best ability he may.

We are not, brethren, the representatives of Masonry. A representative has power to change, to modify, to reform. In this sense, Masonry has no representatives. It has exponents of its principles and plans. All over the world—on battle-fields, by the side of the sick and dying, by the burial-place of the dead, beneath the roof of the widow and the orphan, close at the ear of the erring, wherever is sin or sorrow—the principles of Masonry find expression in relief or warning. Beyond this, it delegates no powers. We are but watchmen in the outer courts of the temple, placed there to guard its approaches with jealous eye, to keep far away from its portals all save good men and true, to see that none enter its sacred precincts save in the appointed way. Our authority ceases at the threshold. We are instructed, first of all that" it is not in the power of any man or body of men, to make innovations on the ground-work of Masonry." Within the temple are the jewels and ornaments, the altar and the lights, each in the place where it has been since the pile was reared, as sacred from touch or change by us as by the humblest artisan. We have not power to alter the holy teachings of one lesson, the solemn meaning of one token or symbol. In all things belonging to the groundwork of the order, we are powerless to reform. In Masonry, reform is treason.

It must be a peculiar institution, and should be a worthy one, that could make it a prime article of its creed that through all time no change should be made in its organic law; that can say that during its long past, through all the world's marvelous progress, no change has occurred in its principles or plans; that dares to say, in the face of all the glorious probabilities of the future—it shall be as it has been, unchanged and unchangeable.

There are inevitable conditions to the possibility of such a permanency. The institution that would claim it must be from the commencement perfect and complete. There must be in its principles no doubtful balance of rights and wrongs, no mooted point for the keen questioning of 'advancing intellect. Masonry has this qualification. From the beginning it has been but a group of the simplest virtues linked 'together by the simplest symbols.

It teaches Faith, not in creeds, not in forms, but in God; the common faith of manhood, that cannot fail to see in this broad green earth, this brave o'erhanging firmament, in all the grand glories of the universe about us, and the still small voice within, evidence of a large intellect and larger love than we can know—guarding and supporting our weak humanity.

It teaches Truth. Not only to speak true words, but to be true men—to live lives true in act and thought—to be true in our dealings with the world, in our relations with those near to us.

It teaches Brotherly Love; that man was not meant to walk through this world alone. Too many devious ways, bordered by flowers and watered by pleasant streams, but leading imperceptibly from the right; too many hidden pitfalls where the solitary traveler might fall, and come forth sorely bruised and stained; too many wandering soldiers of the Prince of Darkness against whose fierce assaults the prowess of a single arm would be but weakness; too many sorrows falling, how sadly, upon the solitary heart, needing only sympathy to change to consolation.

It teaches Charity—not merely that generous impulse that leads kind hearts always to relieve with material aid the wants of the needy and suffering—but a broader charity—that suffereth long and is kind—that, ever striving earnestly, patiently, to reform, still casts its broad mantle over the faults of an erring brother—that impels us, while as true men we are to stand unflinchingly and to the death by the religion we believe in, and the truth as we have received it—to leave to each one else the determination of his duty and his faith—a question only between his conscience and his God.

These simple virtues: Faith, Truth, Love, Charity, ask no sanction from the advancing age. They are not light house lamps to be overthrown and quenched by the shifting currents of opinion, but a cluster of stars shining serenely always, because lit and held forth by God's own hand. These lessons could be read as well in the groves of the academy as at the feet of Jesus, or by the broad light of this high noon of the centuries.

There is an evident policy in the prohibition of any change, when we once admit < that the peculiar constitution of Masonry has rendered it possible. There is a special charm in this immutability. It is the same charm that invests all things changeless in the midst of change. But it not only lends a charm to Masonry. It is necessary that an institution, aiming to be both universal and permanent, should be at all times and everywhere identical, not only in its precepts and the form and manner of its teachings, but in the practical exemplification of its principles. It must be able to stand by quietly and calmly, fulfilling its humane and gentle mission, not more in times of peace and pleasantness, than when the fierce passions that attend the birth of new ideas are swaying and controlling men. We have no need to search through history for an example of this power. Standing in the sunlight of the great peace that through the blessing of God has come to us, we can look calmly now upon the terrible past and be proud, as Masons, that the great clamor of war has never drowned the still, small voice of Masonic charity. We all remember how, when the conflict was fiercest, and the tide of victory swayed this way and that, every true heart in the land, wherever its sympathies might be, was wrought to the utterest intensity of hope or fear; so that all there was in life seemed to be involved in the pending issue. And yet, can I not say that, in not a, single Lodge throughout our State has this all-absorbing passion found an utterance? Not a change proposed that would bar one Mason anywhere from the rights of our broad brotherhood? And even in the arena where the terrible drama was enacted, where the Titans strove in wonderful conflict beneath the eyes of the world for the mastery of principles. Masons did not forget that they had registered words not to be unspoken or recalled, antedating, as they will survive, all disturbances among men, and turmoils in State."

We have heard how, when a gallant sailor, a Mason, was stricken down at the post of duty upon the deck of the Harriet Lane, his body was borne to burial at Galveston followed by a sad procession of mourners, victors and prisoners commingled enemies before, but brethren then. Who knows how many a living soldier retains fondly the memory of some simple Masonic charity; how many a dying soldier has found his sacrifice of life made lighter by some unrecorded kindness at a brother's hand?

But while Masonry demands of its votaries an absolute adherence to the rule that it shall not change with any change of creed, or with the varying knowledge or belief of men, it is not conservative in the sense of interposing any obstacle to the advancement of humanity in whatever way. It is no clog upon the wheel of progress.

Because we believe in the exercise of faith, truth, brotherly love, and charity, we do not believe that

" Earth should stand and gaze like Joshua's moon on Ajalon."

Whenever science needs to be advanced or knowledge extended—whenever a larger life requires a newer faith, whenever right is to be defended and wrong re-dressed, wherever in the world's broad field we are called to do God's work for man, whether it be to labor or to fight—we can surely fulfill our calling as well, and with a purer and truer zeal, while we cherish in our heart of hearts the simple, earnest teachings of the Lodge.

Masonry remains unchanged because it is perfect in its simplicity. And so it has stood by—not aiding much, never delaying—while the imperfect world moved on from point to point towards the happy circle of the golden year. It has watched the progress of the nations, the ebb and flow of opinion through the centuries, as calmly and serenely as the Sphinx has sat by Egypt, "watching like a Providence with the same earnest eyes, and the same sad, tranquil mien," the builders of the Pyramids and the wondering travelers of today. And yet, not like the Sphinx—stony-heart-ed, doing no good thing for man—for Masonry is beneficent always. Bather like those mighty currents that flow beneath the surface of the ocean, mingling the waters of all climates, regardless how the sea above may throb and beat, still keeping their appointed course as on the morning of creation—unseen, resistless, but bearing to the frozen poles the breath of summer airs, and planting upon naked coral-reefs the seeds of mighty palms and tropic verdure.

We who have stood within the secret place of Masonry, and received its perfect light, know well the excellence and beauty of its lessons. We can look back proudly upon its course through time, marked with clustered and scattered blessings as the riverbanks with verdure. And for its future, if we fulfill our sacred trust, and pass it unchanged to those who shall succeed us, who can say how many sorrows will be alleviated through its kindly aid; how many sufferings relieved, how many griefs consoled, how many feet wandering in the darkness will be guided to the light; how many hearts, grown weary in the battle of life, will be incited to renewed effort and final victory?