

**Grand Lodge  
Free & Accepted Masons  
Of California  
Grand Oration 1876**

**Grand Orator  
John H. C. Bonte**

MOST WORSHIPFUL GRAND MASTER AND BRETHREN OF THE GRAND LODGE

No one has a right to address an audience like this without adequate preparation, unless he can justify himself in an apology acceptable to his hearers. My appointment came too late in the season to allow of just preparation, and I accepted it, in a moment of generous impulse, to save our worthy Grand Master from farther embarrassment, hoping that some good fortune would enable me to do my duty. But, as fate would have it, illness and an unexpected increase of hard work have robbed me of my opportunity, and I stand before you with only the bare skeleton of a possible address. I fondly hope that these facts justify an apology and authorize me to invoke the charitable judgment of my hearers who, like myself, have often been led into trouble by their generous impulses.

Oppressed as I am with a consciousness of weakness, I nevertheless rejoice in the honor imposed upon me and in the privilege accorded me of speaking about the eternal simplicities of the Craft. My purpose is to define one of the phases of Masonry, and to illustrate the position of the Order as it is related to other organizations. Judged by its fundamental peculiarities, Masonry stands alone among other organizations—distinct in its outlines and sublime in its attitude. Masonry, according to the Old Charges, is based upon and governed by principles that are universally agreed upon; principles which meet with acceptance in all nations and in all ages. Equality, Fraternity, Justice, and Charity constitute the elementary principles of the Order—the four strands of one mystic cord which binds the Craft in silent unity with itself. We admit that the Church and the State inculcate the same principles; but we know that they also add to these other principles not universally received. Masonry makes no innovations upon these eternal simplicities, and has therefore no vexed problems to solve. It is the office of other organizations to solve new and ever-changing problems: it is the glory of the Church and the State that they are ever ready to discuss and scrutinize the complicated and intricate problems which year by year demand solution. But Masonry, based upon accepted principles, having no problems to solve, is not, and can not be, the arena for conflicts of any kind, beyond those incidental contests which naturally arise out of the temporary friction of an imperfect humanity.

Masonry is non-combatant and sustains no propaganda, while it is the duty of the Church and of the State, of political, scientific, and philosophical organizations, to propagate ideas, to make aggressive movements, and to sway and overcome by appeal and argument. The State is grand when she commands just obedience, exacts lawful tribute, and compels all comers to do her reverence. The Church is sublime when she marshals her legions of trained thinkers and teachers; and endeavors, by expensive outlay of money and life, to embrace the millions of earth's populations. But Masonry, in obedience to her centrifugal and centripetal forces, continues in her fixed orbit, silently pointing to results as the sole reason for membership, and seeks to make no proselytes.

Masonry is therefore, by its organization, a place of accord, a point of amnesty, a neutral territory, where all combatants are welcome and where no debatable question is admitted. Nor does Masonry, by this attitude, throw dishonor upon any of the laudable conflicts of other organizations, for the members of the Order stand foremost in all the legitimate conflicts of the day. Masonry is an agreed refuge from all the conflicts of life; a place into which men retire to soothe their ruffled spirits and to soften the asperities of conflict; a place where warriors meet to readjust their relations as men; an agreed refuge where men, mighty in war, terrible in conflict, meet to mitigate the evils of strife; a place where the conqueror and the conquered lay aside their arms for the moment; a place where contending commercial interests meet and unmask their humanity. Dealing only with the eternal simplicities which bind men together as men, Masonry has no evolutions, no revolutions, and is now what it always was.

With this conception of Masonry, we are prepared to understand the Craft as it is related to other organizations. That it is so related no man can deny, and it is impossible to count Masonry out of the coordinated forces of the age, for it exists will continue to move with planetary tread, and perform its allotted work.

The aim of uncultured periods was to comprehend all forces in one organization. The Church sought to dominate all other agencies, and the State has, at times, made the same mistake. But the providence of God seeks to brigade the grand army of beneficent forces and to subordinate each element-net to another, but to Himself; and the nineteenth century has discovered this purpose—has been led to it by the terrors of war and by the light of burning empires—has been driven to it by the agonizing cries of bleeding millions—has been won to it by the pitiful pleas of sorrowing humanity. And the spirit of the age, in terrible earnestness, commands all correlative forces to fall into their respective positions, and to respect the rights and duties of all co-workers. What then is our related position? What is our bearing towards other organizations—other forces? And what is our part in the grand work?

First of all, we answer, Masonry is necessarily free from the spirit of antagonism to other forces. The Order refuses to regard other organizations as, in any sense whatever, rivals; it grudges no organization its success, but pursues the even tenor of its own way without jealousy, fear, or dread. Other and newer organizations have risen, grafted upon themselves some of the principles and practices of Masonry, and grown to huge proportions; but Masonry, free from ail antagonism, has entered no protest, made no complaint, and used no influence to counteract. And so free is the Order from antagonism that it refuses all controversy, makes no angry retort, throws down and accepts no gage of battle, and declines even to defend itself in speech or pamphlet. Nay, more, the Order refuses to resist even persecution; and when hard pressed by angry, unthinking multitudes, wraps its unspotted robes around its person and gracefully retires to its temples for contemplation and repose.

But let us be understood. While we say that Masonry refuses to antagonize itself to other organizations, be it always remembered and felt that the principles of Masonry are ever and eternally antagonistic to ignorance and despotism of every sort. But it is an unorganized antagonism—the silent antagonism of light to dark-ness, the patient enmity of love to hate, the antagonism of heat to cold; an antagonism free from self-assertion and bereft of virulence.

Again, Masonry throws no impediment in the way of any other organization, either by accident or design. It is said that Masonry is a rival of the Church in its aims and teachings. But this is true only as it is true of the family, the school, the college, the State, and every other organization that has for its object the welfare and comfort of mankind. It is also claimed that our Lodge meetings detain men from church attendance, by occupying time which would otherwise be given to the Church. But the Masonic Order carefully abstains from entrenchment upon times and seasons claimed by the Church, and offers nothing as a substitute for sacraments, ordinances, or doctrines. Nor is it true that Masonry deprives the Church of money. On the contrary, there are but few Masons who do not contribute, to some extent, money for the sustenance of the Church. And Masonry declares that he who is false to his religious convictions, is thereby false to himself and to Masonry. There may be pragmatic Masons who are willing to make the Order a stumbling block to other organizations, but Masonry is no more responsible for their disloyal conduct than is the Church for the misconduct of her unworthy members.

But we are not content with negations, for Masonry is related to other organizations in a kindlier and more affectionate manner. We do not mean that the Order professes to go out of its way with unctuous promises of fellowship, for Masonry promises the world but one thing,— that it will mind its own business. The make-up of Masonry, the principles and practical work of the Order, are pre-eminently co-operative with all other organizations that have the welfare of man at heart. The Order, especially in all new countries, is the efficient forerunner of all organizations. as is proved by the facts of history and the nature of Masonic principles. The pioneers of California left behind them everything not needed for mere bodily sustenance; they stripped themselves for a hand-to-hand wrestle with nature, and grappled with all the difficulties of a life at that time unknown to our race. Both Church and State were impossible things, but the Masonic Lodge was a natural and easy efflorescence.

In this aboriginal state, Masonry taught men reverence for God and filial trust in His providence, and enforced among thousands a recognition of the claims of the Divine

Government. Young men were received into Lodges and constantly reminded of the teachings of sainted mothers, while their hearts were kept fresh awaiting the arrival of the sacraments and ordinances of the Church. The Lodge-room, in camps and canons, in villages and towns, furnished young and old with a place of refuge, a substitute for the saloon and the gambling den, turning thousands from the open gates of social hells. In the absence of thorough organization in the State government, Masonry served as a moral police, remonstrating, persuading—creating a public opinion in favor of good citizenship. Nor did Masonry, in the absence of school and college, fail, by charges and lectures, to keep alive the love of learning. Are we not right in saying that Masonry was the efficient forerunner of the Church, the Family, the State, the School, the College? And when these organizations came, Masonry, with graceful dignity, yielded them all the ground they could occupy, and its members were foremost in the councils of Church and State—mighty factors in the development of educational systems.

But further: Masonry, by its very constitution, spirit, and work gives positive re-enforcement to all good institutions, and is to-day a training-school which furnishes a culture not elsewhere attainable ; a training without which neither Church nor State, science nor philosophy, can further go. The first century of our national life was a reaction against that spirit and method of organization which had over-whelmed individualism and made man a dead cog in a living wheel, .an automaton in the hands of skilled manipulators; it was a revolt against that tyranny of organization which furnished men with principles, opinions, opportunities, and massed them to unthinking toil.

The logic of history, the natural evolution of principles, the providence of God, and the conditions of our people, imposed upon this child of the world's old age, the duty of emancipating the individual personality of man; and the nation was in perfect sympathy with its task from the hour of its birth. In sturdy self-reliance, and with trust in God, our people grappled with the wilderness, to conquer, each for him-self, a kingdom where he might be master. And the pioneers, from the surf of the Atlantic to the shores of the Pacific, raised and trained sons and daughters who rejoiced in their untrammelled individual life. Grand indeed has been the success of this sublime revolt against the despotisms of former ages. All honor to this emancipated personality which absorbs the vitalities of nature and hesitates at no encounter, whether it be with the laws of nature or the battalions of consolidated despotisms.

But, alas, we have shot beyond the mark, we have overleaped ourselves, and produced an excess of individualism that threatens us with the loss of all our gains. This excess of individualism is the very essence of disorganization—disorganization in thought and work; and disorganization is death. Crowned with success in gigantic enterprise, this excessive individualism ventures in speculative thought where trained intellects dare not tread, and raises the question whether there is any value in human experience, any truth in aggregated thought, any growth and coherency in principles. This self-willed individualism declares that it is competent to inaugurate new and original systems of science, religion, and philosophy; it knows no ancient landmarks, but claims creative power in every department of thought.

As a natural result of this revolt against the historic connections of thought, the fundamental relations of principles, we have, as a people, no longer fixed convictions in politics, religion, morals', or science. In other words, this rampant individualism has lost its way, wanders in a white fog of profound uncertainty, and is the forerunner of decay. And still further, this excess of individualism threatens us with a universal insubordination and inability to co-operate in the affairs of life. Our young men too often recoil from business because unwilling to be subjected to the exacting laws of trade. Husbands and wives are discordant and divorces are frequent because of an excess of individualism. At the same time the increasing density of our population and the decrease of individual opportunity, exact of our people a degree of associated effort which requires the drill and training of a soldier in the ranks. Can we train this excessive individualism to just subordination to the laws of thought and the requirements of associated effort, without weakening that grand personal vitality of which we are so justly proud? This is the problem of the second century of our national life.

As Free and Accepted Masons we boldly claim that our Order inculcates principles and practices that are pre-eminently corrective of these excesses; that its very essence is just subordination; that Masonry is a training-school which drills personality without affecting its just independence. As a matter of fact, the Order receives men from every department of life, trains

them to co-operative habits, and sends them back to their work, capable of knowing their place and station, capable of manly obedience. And thus we find that Masonry is indeed co-operative in its character; that it lends a helping hand to every human organization; that it gives a blessing to all associated life. Aye, Masonry is a training school for an age which needs training more than it needs vitality—an age whose vigor outruns its power of combination. If we are right in our premises and facts, Masonry is one of the civilizing forces of our age, and stands as a co-worker with other organizations, helpful to all, antagonistic to none.

A few words more, and I shall leave with you these rudely framed suggestions, and deposit in your hands this rough ashlar, trusting that it may become, by your own patient elaboration, a perfect stone, fit for some place in the temple of Masonic thought.

Most Worshipful Grand Master and brethren of the Grand Lodge, we are living under conditions unknown to our fathers, and not fully comprehended by ourselves. The populations of the earth constitute, in this age, but one nation, for humanity is now governed more by occult principles, good and bad, than by hierarchies. Systems strongly pushed in America, touch the life of the world; principles broached in one place, penetrate the center and circumference of human existence; ideas which once wrought among isolated nations, now invade the whole compass of human thought: and to-day, all the systems that the world has ever known are engaged in subtle conflict everywhere, each with all the rest.

These occult forces, while they are obscure and untraceable in the steps of their movement are more stealthy in their progress than the growth of continents. The coming age will be the enfolding, not of State-craft, but of conquering systems and principles. And we may be sure that all things are mysteriously wheeling into line for some grand conflict which will end either in gigantic progress or retrograde as deep as perdition. The universal heart of humanity, weary with the failures of the past sore with fruitless conflicts, listens to the heart of things, feels with barometric sensitiveness the coming storm clouds, staggers up against impending events and waits with bated breath the developments of time, of law, of Providence. And this subtle, prophetic instinct of humanity, "all hushed and solemn as a thought of God" is feeling with terrible earnestness, for a safe readjustment of related civilizing forces ready to seize with devouring fury any and every agency that will not work in subordination to the universal welfare. In this sublime presence, extravagant eulogy of Masonry, or of anything else, would be but proof of our imbecility; and weary humanity, sitting beneath its heavy burdens with drowned eyes and dripping cheeks," would cry out in bitter anguish against our heartless vanity. Deference to suffering humanity, the dignity of the Order, loyalty to the Supreme Architect of the Universe require of us as men and Masons, modest and unassuming appreciation of our principles; deep and profound sympathy with man; that we be ever ready to strike defiant wrong; quick to succor the weak; earnest and active in cooperating with every influence that seeks to impose a benediction upon man.