

**Grand Lodge  
Free & Accepted Masons  
Of California  
Grand Oration 1883**

**Grand Orator  
Henry E. Highton**

MOST WORSHIPFUL GRAND MASTER AND BRETHREN OF THE GRAND LODGE

In an age long past, when oratory and the dialogue were the chief agencies in education, the Greek statesman, PERICLES, in addressing an audience of the people, was inspired to say: "I never ascend the platform of the Pnyx, without secretly imploring the Gods to suffer my lips to utter no heedless words, and never allow me to for-get that I am speaking to Athenians." This passage contains an admonition of peculiar force in the situation in which, through the appointment of the Most Worshipful Grand Master of this State, I now find myself placed. For the opportunity to address the official local representatives of the oldest and greatest voluntary association upon earth, it would be an affectation to deny that I am thankful. But the occasion may also well excite humility and anxiety. We live in times of preternatural activity in all the departments of human life, when action is of more consequence than speech, and condensed thought rushes in electrical channels between the ends of the world. We live in times when the average education of the masses of men has raised them in mere knowledge above the sages of antiquity. We live, too, in a country in which organized freedom has placed its citizens upon the highest plane of modern intelligence. And the duty which has been assigned to me is that of addressing the chosen few of such an era and of such a country, upon a topic on which their learning and their experience render them competent instructors. Well may I adopt the sentiment of the great heathen orator, whose intuitions almost raised him to the skies, and reverently invoke the aid of the true God, whom every Mason worships in his heart of hearts, to fertilize my sterility, and to impart to me the power both to conceive and to express ideas that may be of use and value to the Craft.

It is difficult to be original in the treatment of Freemasonry. Its external aspects, its methods and its objects, have been explained and illustrated in every language in which science and literature address the human race. Its history has been traced and its antiquity demonstrated, until it has been connected with the origin of established society and of systematic industry. Its principles, few and simple, have been broadly unfolded, and their practical effect in promoting the growth of civilization conspicuously exhibited. Its symbolism and its ritual have been described to the fullest extent compatible with the preservation of those deep and sacred mysteries which, while they attest its universality, insulate and protect its institutional structure. Its relation to those architectural monuments of all ages and countries, in which Wisdom conceived what Strength executed and Beauty adorned, has been amply proved and generally acknowledged. Its abandonment of its purely operative features, and its concentration of its labors into those forms of action which, by way of contradistinction, are termed speculative, are part of the records of modern times. Over all these phases of its existence and of its influence, erudition and eloquence have flowed with luminous perspicuity and truth.

But there is one point of view in which it appears to me that Freemasonry has not been adequately considered, and that is, ITS FUNCTION IN MODERN SOCIETY; and, without attempting to deal with this theme analytically or exhaustively, or indeed by any other than a suggestive process, I design to make it the central thought in the observations I have to offer.

In order accurately to comprehend the present attitude of Freemasonry within the limits I have defined—in other words, to enable you intelligently to follow me in the purpose I have avowed, and which I shall at least execute with brevity—it is essential that a certain order and sequence be observed; and I request you, therefore, to bear in mind a few subdivisions of the argument which is intended to support my conclusions. I shall pass then, rapidly and comprehensively, but I trust clearly, through a development of my subject, expressed in these heads :—

First: The true meaning and object of human life.

Second: The actual condition of modern society.

Third: The dangers and necessities of modern society.

Fourth: The extent and manner in which Freemasonry, by its constitution and methods, helps society to avert those dangers and to meet those necessities. and,

Fifth: As a corollary to these propositions, the elevated conception of his duties and obligations which should regulate the conduct of every Mason, who is, first Free; and second, Accepted.

I am not a scientist nor a philosopher, and there may be serious defects in my arrangement, which, to a mind trained in technical logic, might almost be offensive; but I speak to plain and earnest men, imbued with love to God and to humanity, and I believe I shall be understood.

In the first place, then, individuals, communities, nations, races, the world, are all manifestations and expressions of human life, which is at once the invisible force that penetrates the whole, and the outcome and result of the whole and of each of its constituent parts. The life of the individual man, originating with the Creator, is at once the source and the origin, the type and the representative, of all the forms that life assumes. It is in one sense the birth of a destiny—the growth and the development of an immortal and personal existence. It has been poetically compared to the flight of a bird from window to window through the warm and perfumed atmosphere of a banqueting hall. It is in reality a hard struggle through opposing forces, an unending wrestle with the powers of evil, in which defeat entails moral degeneration and death. Its final object, through all the intricate machinery of society, taken in its broadest sense, is the perfection of man. The means by which that object is to be attained, which comprise the substance and essence of all true progress, are the use without the waste of the faculties in the direction of the true, the useful, and the permanent. All intelligence and all labor that are not woven into the one eternal purpose that moves the successive generations of men, that do not leave indelible impressions upon human life and human character, are misdirected, perverted and lost.

These generalizations, though a faint outline, are all I need to introduce the second branch of my argument, namely, the actual condition of modern society. But for the restrictions I have imposed upon myself, by a rigid adherence to the one point I have in view, this would be an almost illimitable topic. Condensation, however, is of the very essence of my purpose. By modern society, mean society in the aggregate, including individuals, communities, states, and nations—the whole progressive family of man. What, then, is its actual condition, as bearing upon the conclusion I hope speedily to reach? It may be defined in a phrase as one of extraordinary and unprecedented activity. Great contests for the recognition of human rights, for the creation of opportunities for the exercise of the physical, mental and moral powers, have been fought and won; and, although liberty is yet far from being established in large sections of the globe, humanity, relatively to the past, is free. In our own land, the true theory of government, based on the organic sovereignty of man, limited only by the decrees of the Almighty and by the concessions necessary for the maintenance of law and order, has been adopted and applied. In other countries, in varying degrees, the tendencies towards that final result are everywhere distinctly marked. Science is penetrating the secrets of nature, and art is applying the discoveries of science. Knowledge accumulates and pervades the masses with startling rapidity. Comforts and luxuries multiply day by day. Invention turns the wheels of progress, until the very air is full of sparks and flashes. Literature diffuses itself through all the strata of mankind. Labor is disciplined and aggressive. Capital is aggregated, and sometimes useful and sometimes dangerous. Wealth has enormously increased. And, through all the elements that are blended into modern society, thought penetrates and ferments.

But, in the third place, what are the dangers and what the necessities of modern society? Its dangers in form are manifold; in substance they may be expressed in THE WASTE OF ENERGY. All history is full of illustrations of the truth of this proposition as applicable to past ages, and it was never so true or so important as now. The pathway of the race is literally strewn with ruins. Forms of civilization, systems of government, theories of religion and morals, hypotheses of science, codes of legislation, diversities of manners, of fashions, of habits, have existed and passed away, because they were founded in the eccentricities, in the unregulated passions, ambitions, and selfishness of men. And in our own day, and in some respects pre-eminently in our own country, we are reproducing these evils with greater intensity than during any former

epoch. The very excellencies of modern progress, its accelerated speed, its multiplicity of forms, its enlargement of scope and purpose, have quickened the pulse, stimulated the nerves and intellect, and fired the ambition of men, until they have sought to break down the barriers of discipline and to overleap the limits of their powers as defined in their own nature by the God who made them, and are deluging the world with those vanities which our first recorded Grand Master investigated and abandoned.

You will not fail to observe that, in the line of this discussion, it is no part of my plan to contrast and balance the good and evil in modern society; and that the views I present, applied and limited as they are, do not imply any doubt of the steady advancement of our race. Optimism and not pessimism, in my opinion, is the true abstract creed of every close student of history, past and contemporary; certainly of every such student who is possessed of a Masonic heart. But we are considering facts, which cannot be disguised or concealed, and which must be met and controlled; and we are considering them, too, on one side only, and with reference to a definite result. It is a profound truth that, in our generation, the waste of energy, which, to adopt a commercial simile, implies the extinction of capital, is fully commensurate with the increase of activity. The illustrations of this truth, which we encounter daily, are direct and abundant. I cannot enumerate them, but will allude to some of the most conspicuous. Agnosticism, which is a species of nihilism, is expending much of the intellect of the world in a ceaseless effort to dethrone the Almighty, and to plunge humanity into a sea of perplexity and skepticism, in which the rudiments of morality, as well as the essentials of religion, would be submerged and destroyed. And the speculations which the modern Agnostics are reviving, I through the new facts and discoveries of science, end precisely where the speculations of the Greek infidels began. New social plans, inconsistent with the individual nature and history of man, with his family relations, and with order, subordination, and prosperity, are insidiously appealing, first, to the imagination, second, to selfishness and covetousness, and, third, to the destructive instincts and passions. The province of law is invaded, and its principles and its precedents, which have marked step by step the regular growth of permanent civilization, are superseded by new doctrines of limitless flexibility and absurdity. Legislation is swelled in volume until even the free citizen, who is almost capable of being a law unto himself, is in a worse predicament than the Roman subject who sought in vain to decipher the decrees of CALIGULA. Books, periodicals, newspapers, are produced by a rule of progression which threatens to defeat the object of literature by rendering education impossible, through the fixed limits to human capacity and to human endurance. Systems of instruction fluctuate and change with the seasons, and often discard the essentials of good citizenship. The departments of industry—muscular, mechanical, and professional—are divided and subdivided, until they are as countless as they are incomprehensible. And in the midst of all this pressure upon the human heart and the human brain, a morbid desire for novelty and excitement usurps the place of duty; liberty drifts into license: calm reflection ceases; character becomes weak, impressible, and yielding; and dissipation is the only alternate to labor. Sometimes at night, in the streets of a great city, walking beneath the still majesty of the stars, and watching the phantasmal multitudes as they jostled each other in the wild rush for relief from the fever of modern life, I have asked myself where all this would end; whether a time would not come when the world itself—that is, the world of human beings—would grow mad, and reason fly to brutish beasts, and the very power of repose and serenity sink back into the breast of Nature.

Of course there is a reverse side to this picture. But, at present, we are concerned only with the dangers of modern society, and with its necessities growing out of those dangers. I proceed to inquire then—What is the remedy for these evils? The answer is plain and spontaneous—the remedy is REST. But what is rest? Surely not sloth, surely not torpor, surely not that placid contentment which indicates the satisfaction of an animal or of a savage whose daily wants are gratified to repletion. No! REST IS FOUND ONLY IN BALANCED ACTIVITY, from which all that is superfluous is excluded. It means the arrest of wasted energy. It means stalwart humanity, standing upon the rock, with its eyes towards heaven, and all its faculties calmly and resolutely bent upon the fulfillment of duty, upon the true, the useful, the lasting elements of a life which commenced in God and is to be projected into immortality. It means wisdom, clearly understood and inexorably applied. It means the rejection of all materials that do not fit into the human temple, designed by the Supreme Architect for the temporary habitation of a pure intelligence, of a holy spirit, pervaded by truth and aspiring to angelic companionship. It means that conscious

humility which sees the beginnings of human life, and by faith forecasts its future. It means the definite recognition of the bounds that are without the widest range of human reason. It means the concentration of limited powers upon practicable objects. It means the apprehension of complicated facts through the light of unalterable principle. It means the obliteration of selfishness in the warm love of humanity. It means the development of individuality through the rational use of opportunities, through simplicity, through directness, through self-denial, and through self-abnegation. It means regulated industry—modest independence—sturdy integrity—softened by wide and exquisite sympathy. It means, in short, all these elements, issuing in that calm and sweet repose through which man, erect, self-poised, and moving forward and ever forward in the groove in which Providence has placed him, imitates the productive silence of all the creative forces on the earth in which he lives, and in the spheres of light which point the way to his eternal home.

Brethren of the Mystic Tie, have I not anticipated the fourth division of my subject, yielded up our deepest secret, delineated the Masonic character? If this be true, then the function of Freemasonry in modern society is already in some measure ascertained and defined. Without scheme or plan, without aggressiveness or organized interference, by its own internal constitution and by its action upon its own members, it exerts an influence which places it at the head of the conservative and yet progressive forces of civilization. Ancient, severe, changeless, it is the very type of immutable law. Beginning and ending in God, it antagonizes agnosticism, and it is freed from all doubt and fluctuation on the fundamentals of true religion. It is of all institutions the most unsectarian, because it exacts only that measure of faith which is essential to sound morality. It insists upon order and subordination, because without them the world would be a pandemonium. It demands definiteness and simplicity, because without them there would be little else than confusion and strife. It attacks no form of government, but supports all existing political institutions, while it fits its votaries for freedom and refuses its privileges to slaves. It deals solely with the individual, with his character and conduct in the parenthesis of mortality, and there in those particulars only concerning which there can be no honest and rational disagreement. It requires physical completeness at the outset of a Masonic career, as a presumptive guarantee for the equal performance of Masonic obligations, which also embrace those practical duties that are common to all men. It explores the heart, to determine its aptitude or inaptitude for the practice of virtue. It turns away the atheist and the libertine, the idiot and the lunatic, at its outer portal, because its mission is to build out of sound material, and not to reform or to restore. Having exerted its right of selection, it proceeds with a symbolic education, in which induction succeeds induction until the Masonic equipment is perfected. -As God out of chaos organized the universe, as He brought light from darkness, as out of the principle of life He developed form, organism, symmetry, personality, the family, communities, nations, the entire composite order of mankind, so Freemasonry leads its children from darkness to light, from chaos to order, to wisdom, and to the full comprehension of the social bond. In all its stages, when once the outer door is passed and the preliminary lessons taught and received, the advancing neophyte is forced to realize the value of light, which reveals truth, as truth reveals the Infinite and the Infinite immortality. He finds, too, that the connection between operative and speculative Masonry, through a perfect system, furnishes him with a few simple principles, and with intelligible rules for their application to his daily walk and conduct. He discovers, or rather he is made to feel, that all desires, appetites, and passions are to be used and not abused, and to be firmly held within the limits of moderation. He is also instructed in that kind of equality between men which forbids jealousy and protects every substantial right, while it does not attempt the impracticable (ask of controlling the accidents and circumstances of life by compelling all men to stand upon a dead level in the world of business and of conventionalism. He perceives, too, that uprightness and integrity are the basis of ordinary success as well as of memorable achievements, and that men were created to work and not to prey upon their kind. And last, though greatest of all, he is introduced to that perfect charity which is identical with love, and which is manifested in sympathy equally with beneficence.

But why, brethren, should I pursue this detailed exposition of the relations of Freemasonry to modern society? You are impregnated with its philosophy, and its teachings are as familiar to you as household words. Some of you have grown aged and venerable in its service, and all of you presumptively shed its influence abroad upon the multitudes without its doors. You know,

dear brethren, what the profane can conjecture only: that I am justified in claiming that Freemasonry does exercise, cannot fail to exercise, a predominantly conservative function in modern society; that it guards the faculties and represses the vices of men; that its methods are founded upon that highest logic which leads only to truth and rejects the false and the superfluous, and upon that soundest morality which declines even to discuss a question of principle; that it abhors extremes, while it is definite and uncompromising in protecting individual, domestic and social life ; that it regulates without extirpating human energy, human passions and human aspirations ; that it represses the weaknesses and develops the strength of men checks their self-sufficiency and egotism, and promotes manly self-respect and independence ; that, while it scrupulously renders to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's, it is the friend of liberty and the foe of tyranny; that it rests on no barren theory, is disfigured by no grotesque or hideous mummeries, but is held together by wisdom and by virtue, inculcated by wholesome traditions and enforced by sublime secrets; that it does not feed diseased imaginations or perverted intellects, but that it is clean, pure, definite, exact and harmonious, uniting by a perfect arch the two sections of eternity that enclose our mortal life, and delivering, in symmetry and beauty, at the portals of the tabernacle" not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," the offspring of the womb who become the faithful recipients of its privileges.

With this realization of the office of our beloved institution, I trust I may compress the corollary to my argument into the expression of the hope that we may deeply feel the responsibility which our Masonic association devolves upon ourselves; that we may fully comprehend and realize the strength and the beauty of those fleshly links that unite us with the past through the history and traditions of our Order; and that we may press on in fraternal accord through all the circles of the future, leaving behind us a trail of light which shall illuminate the minds and guide the footsteps of untold generations.