Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1924

Grand Orator
Ben R. Walker

M. W. Grand Master and Members of the Grand Lodge of California

I appreciate the important place that is accorded to the Grand Orator of the Grand Lodge in directing him to deliver, at each annual communication of the Grand Lodge, an address on matters appertaining to the craft. But I cannot believe that the Grand Master of California, whose most conspicuous quality, among his many strong characteristics, is his kindliness, would have laid upon me this burden if he had realized at the time it would have come so soon after the Grand Lodge had, in the celebration of its diamond Jubilee, been favored with such fitting, complete and eloquent reviews of the extent of Masonic character and Masonic influence in California during the past seventy-five years.

But the humility I feel in the presence of such earnest authorities on Masonry as Past Grand Masters Keesling and Hunter and Bledsoe and Hervey, fades away in your presence. I feel that I am one with you, in membership of the Grand Lodge, and that on this level of Masonic interest and Masonic experience I may, with you, discuss for these few minutes, questions appertaining to the activity and the purposes which we, in our conduct here and at home may exemplify. I do feel, as no doubt each of you do, a deep respect to the Grand Lodge as such, for it is the sole fount of authority for us as Masons raised in and responsible alone to the Masonic authority of the Lodges subordinate to the Grand Lodge of this jurisdiction. Owing fealty as we do, as well as respect to the Landmarks of Free Masonry and owing brotherly kindliness to Masons in good standing whitersoever dispersed around the globe, it is this Grand Lodge alone which can define for us the terms of Masonry, and can direct for us our future Masonic growth. There is no supreme Grand Lodge to ordain for us, no other Masonic jurisdiction that can take precedence over this body. So I am humble in offering to make suggestions about what the Masonry of California should do.

But it is vitally necessary that we, as members of this Grand Lodge, in our annual communications, do take stock of ourselves, with an eye upon this grave responsibility. There are now something over a hundred thousand of us, in something like five hundred lodges. Each of these hundred thousand of us was at one time outside the door of Freemasonry. We had gathered from our friends and fellow citizens a respect, perhaps an awe, for the reputation of this venerable Institution. We had felt that its ancient character gave assurance of its capacity to serve men and that it might, with our humble assistance, serve ourselves as well as others. We knocked and were admitted. Each of us at the altar took the obligations of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. Each of us came to share personally in the noble record of what had been done by our ancient brethren. Each of us entered with fervency into the enthusiastic service of the order. And then each of us, in the course of a few months settled down into the commonplace routine of life. A few of us, called by the wishes of our brethren and perhaps our own talents and energy to hold office, stepped into the path of Lodge service and of honorable preferment. But for the great mass of Masons, there has come the satisfaction of "being" without in any notable degree, the call for "doing." It bas been noted already in the reports in this Grand Lodge that there is a percentage of failures to keep up dues, in the Lodges—not a great percentage—but a notable one. You and I may each of us know that a part of these failures to maintain standing in the Lodges is not due either to poverty or to lack of appreciation of membership in the Lodge. It is due definitely to a lack of interest in the running facts of Lodge membership. There is a failure to find "purpose" in Lodge membership. Men who should be ardently occupied, year in and year out in maintaining their "standing" fail to do so because for some lack they find in the Lodge work as it operates—a "purpose" that they perhaps unconsciously demand, and which has not been, by the Lodge processes, supplied to them.

It is, to be sure, no new discovery of mine that every institution, no matter how venerable, how highly placed in the respect of its own members or of men without its limits must have "purpose." An institution, like a man, must have a soul, and no soul is possible without a goal.

There must be a reaching out for the future, there must be a flame to guide, a gleam of hope to pursue. Even if never grasped, it arms the spirit for the deeper discharge of daily tasks; it wipes away the commonplaceness, the drudgery of daily tasks. It makes life worth living. Of course, Masons have wanted a purpose. But they have not agreed on this purpose.

Our past history as an Institution gives striking illustration of this search for a purpose. Arising in the somewhat limited needs of operative Masonry, with the reaching out into the wide possibilities of speculative Masonry, the division in objective came early, and acutely. New degrees were added, in great number. And some of these were squeezed out, some were forgotten, some were made rather permanent additions to the body of Masonry. Some became the brilliant if complicated bases of the various "Rites." Most of them have been shunted off, in one direction or another, until today the Grand Lodge of California, as the official ruler of Masonry in this State, is very nearly, in its official utterances, purely "Speculative," in the earliest sense, a reflection of the primitive virtues of the operative Masons of our ancestry, worshipping God each according to his own conscience, binding himself simply but with a whole heart, in workmanlike fellowship to all men of good will, particularly our brethren in Freemasonry.

Then there have been other efforts toward making a formal "purpose" in Freemasonry. There has been the purpose to make the Lodge a mutual benefit association. There have been attempts, mostly unsuccessful, to commit it to the formality of insurance relationship to the practical affairs of life. There has been the attempt to assure, between Masons, the mutual obligations of trade and patronage. There has been the demand that Masons support each other in political or other public aspirations. There have been proposals that Masons commit themselves to definite political aims and associate themselves in the campaigns that might accomplish political results either for personal aggrandizement or for the imposition on the government of certain policies in alignment with actual or supposed Masonic objectives.

Each of these efforts has been, for the great body of Masonry, a failure. Each of these efforts, while it may have at certain times and places shown success, has not impinged upon the body of Masonic theory or of practice. Masons have rejected the call upon them to make their Masonic membership a preliminary to force them into a Masonic communism, either of industry or trade; of public policies; or of intellect; or of religion.

There has arisen, however, in the last few years, a new sort of "purpose" which must be regarded with deep respect, and yet whose weaknesses must be recognized. This is illustrated among us here in California by the Grand Lodge policies of promoting "Constitution Week" and "Public School Week." These are made the practical objectives of activity by Grand and Subordinate Lodges. They appeal to our instinct as Masons because they are in line with our attitude of mind toward public questions generally. We are earnest and intelligent supporters of our government, and therefore encourage study of the Constitution. We believe in the liberty of thought and action that comes from wide knowledge and of a trained understanding and so we are for the public schools.

And yet in this, we face a danger of falling into the rut of our past, rather than in developing a living, doing purpose. The work of our recent Grand Masters and our subordinate Lodges in promoting these public interests has been wonderful. But just as our Lodge activity tends to become woodenly "ritualistic," so is there a danger that our observance of these "weeks" shall become formalistic, repeated year after year with the shell of respect and without the purpose of making these anniversaries productive of new service to ourselves and our fellowmen.

The failure at one time or another of the proposed "purposes” of those who with eager intent but with an enthusiasm and a judgment which did not accord with the feelings of their fellow Masons, in the course of time has produced a definite "conservative" body within our Masonic members. It is a body suspicious of any proposals whatever to vitalize the outward aspect of Masonry. It finds its sufficient apology for being Masonic within the ritual of the Order. These conservative Masons perhaps protest that they are not purely ritualistic. But they do find the entire scope of Masonry as they would have it within the ritual. They ask if there is any authority for some proposed action in the ritual. And any attempt to change the ritual is viewed not merely with regard to its practical effect but also as a possible blow upon the "authorized version" of what Masonry is, a blow at the "apostolic succession" within the fraternity.

Worthy as has been the sentiment of the intelligent supporters of this view of Masonry, it has produced, among the rank and file of Masons a suggestion of despair. It has been a basis for reactionism, a gospel of negation in Masonic thinking. It has produced an impression both within and without the fraternity that members of our Order are brought together purely to revere

symbols, to go through ceremonies honored in the past but not understood in the present. It has been a smart saying outside of the Craft that Masons never do anything except attend funerals. Observing the remarkable growth of Masonic membership, some Masons and many non-Masons have realized that it is impossible for a personal relationship of brotherly affection to exist between Masons as such. With fraternity formalistic, with the history of the Order an obscure science, with the thinkers of the brotherhood amusing themselves with Isis and Osiris, and excited about the digging up of the treasures of Tutankhamen, what wonder that at the period of its greatest extent, men should wonder whether there was a dry rot setting in at the roots of this great Order.

A part of the reason for the tendency toward extreme conservatism in Masonic thinking has been due to this same intimate knowledge of the past. It has been a knowledge that has failed to recognize that all that was great in the past was creative, and in that sense was new. Christ, who rebuked the Sadducees for their undue respect for the formalities of the past, was a creative force in the world, even when He declared that He came to fulfill, not to destroy the law. Our Masonic forefathers, I make bold to declare, gained the glory that is theirs in our eyes, always, because they manifested in their own conduct the vitality needed at those times. When we read of Masonic exploits in renascent Europe, when we tell of the Masonic influences that were so potent in the Revolutionary period in the United States, when we learn of the men who owed allegiance to our Order who broke their way into the Western frontier of our country and on to the Pacific slope—we find that each of these generations of Masons builded anew for themselves and their families and fellow citizens. They were not satisfied with worshipping in faded shrines of old memories, kneeling in deathless dust to pay reverence to a Great Architect of the Universe whose work was done. They found the opportunity of the time, they searched out stones to cut and timbers to hew. And if it be said that these men worked in these matters not as workmen but as citizens, I say to you that it is as citizens, then that we honor them, even though we recall with pride the fact that they were Masons.

Do not imagine for a moment that in this I am urging that the Grand Lodge of California gird itself up for some outbreak of propaganda. I do not ask even that we be "progressive," whether that word be now under suspicion or have the courageous value that it once had. All that I ask is that we as Masons refuse to permit ourselves to be used for the forces of social reaction, that we properly classify our own respect for the past so that it will not be used by weaklings or scoundrels as a cloak for new villainies under old privileges. I believe with that flaming voice of the American Revolution that we "have no lamp by which our feet are guided, except the lamp of experience." But I also notice that the feet of our Revolutionary forefathers moved forward, with the aid of that lamp. They did not mark time.

What is the purpose that we can find in our Masonic outlook, which will be consonant with our Order's history, which can vitalize our membership, which will aid the normally wholesome impulses of ourselves and our fellows as citizens of this as well as of other lands?

I find that purpose in Masonry itself.

I do not believe that it is necessary to go outside of the scope laid down in our Masonic tenets, to give a living vitality to our Masonic experience, to enable us to give to the Entered Apprentice a satisfaction in Masonic membership that will keep him going not for months, but for years, as a Master Mason.

It would be vain to take up your time in a detail of these mainsprings of this Masonic purpose that we find in our Masonic teaching, but I do want to emphasize a few striking points.

First: Our Masonry must appeal, ever anew, to youth. We fall too easily into the habit of thinking ourselves as having eternal youth, when in fact each of us is aging, much too fast. We fail to make our Order, as a human institution, appeal, with new force year by year to the young men entering our ranks. The most of you doubtless still think of yourselves as “young men," as I do. We must remember that to the man of 30, the man of 40 is old, to the man of 25, the man of 30 has a character that is matured, to the lad just qualified to enter our doors, at 21, the man of 25 is experienced. We slide into middle and old age with an ease that is terrifying to us. It is still more terrifying to the young man, who we demand shall be respectful of our whims and fantasies, as well as our wisdom and experience.

We must keep our Order young in its sympathies and its outlook no matter how many years we stay in it, or the young men will take our obligations, walk out of our halls and never darken them again, no matter how long they may continue to pay dues.

Secondly: We must make our Order work. Surely there could be nothing more fitting than that

our fraternity, founded on the mutual interest of builders in their means of livelihood, and symbolized with the tools of their handicraft, should honor the value of labor in deed as well as in word. We have grown too used to regarding our responsibilities as members of an institution as "symbolical" rather than actual. There is no other Order in the world which gets along so well with as big a proportion of inactive members as the Masonic Order. If St. Paul in declaring that "faith without works is dead" expressed a truth of primitive Christianity, we may well declare of our own humanity, that it cannot be true to any principles if it does not with hand and heart as well as with tongue and brain, conform daily.

It will not be easy, this proposal, either for ourselves as an Institution, or for the men that we expect to make better Masons as well as better men. There cannot any great good come without a rigor of soul, and of body.

"Who never ate with tears his bread
"And through the long-drawn, midnight hours
"Sat weeping on his lonely bed,
"He knows you not, ye heavenly powers."

Thirdly: We must make our Order love. Much maudlin talk has been spent upon the quality of friendship, upon the scope of brotherly love. We have been doing too little practically to make our Institution a means for promoting true friendship among men We may give with some freedom to Masonic charity. We may in an ill guided moment make a loan or sign a note. What we don't do is to so know the Masons within our reach that we may love them, and what is important, that we may have the affection for them that is fitting to them and to us as neighbors and fellow citizens with the same decent public purposes and communal relations. One of the most forceful things that has been said in this Grand Lodge session was that no man could love a "name in a roster," Our Lodges are so large that our friendship is a thin film of sloppy sentimentality, expressed on very rare occasions and having little relation to our working lives.

I confess that while I have pride in the fact that there are a hundred thousand fellow Masons of mine in California, I have no interest in it, and I would be very shallow if I were to declare that I love them. I don't, and there is no need for me to love them. Those that I should love are the Masons of my own lodge, of my own acquaintance, in my own community, the men whose intercourse with me puts a debt of fellow sympathy upon me. And do I love them as I should? Does my Lodge help me to know them and to love them, each the other as we ought? The answer, given by too many intelligent Masons, to this question, is that we give a wonderful foundation at our Masonic altar for this friendship. We do not provide in our Lodge's working relations for a building and a strengthening of it.

This friendship must be real. It must have substance. It must be understanding and constructive. It must be personal.

"Sometimes, when shadows cross my path, as shadows sometimes do
"I reach a hand across the mists, and touch the hand of you.
"I know the sun is overhead, I know true love is true;
"But what a comfort in the dark, to touch the hand of you."

And finally, my brethren, our. Order must produce leadership. It must do this, fully conscious of the limitation that is upon us, that our Order is not conduct controlling, but character forming.

We cannot tell our members what they shall do. We cannot dictate how they shall think, nor talk, nor act. If we have selected them carefully and have initiated, passed and raised them as a living exemplification of our ritual impels, their conduct will be decent, beyond any need for our reprimand. But our members will not be the men that we expect them to be, they will not have justified our training, if they be but decent citizens. They must afford something more to us and to their community than this bare return for the nourishment of body and soul that they get.

And this greater return will come from them to us and to our state and nation in the leadership they afford to our communities.

It is an opportunity, the fulfillment of which is sadly needed. I think I am not pessimistic in declaring that, no matter what may have been the fact in previous generations, the great lack at present is for men who can supply leadership to their cities, their states and their country. Everywhere men and women are calling for leadership, for constructive visions of public needs,

for management of public affairs that will satisfy natural conditions and human inclinations alike. Everywhere there is this demand. Too feeble is the response. We find plenty who offer, but few that can make good. They fail in intellect, in breadth of human understanding and sympathy, in energy, in adaptability.

Ours is the great democratic Order. It is composed of men who are indifferent to race, to sect, to creed. It is based upon common human qualities. It knows all men. But it should have no limit on the capacities of its leaders. And it should, through its good offices, through its training in liberty of thought, in respect for human rights give to this country of ours, in which Masonry has had its greatest growth and its greatest opportunity, a service in leadership.