

**Grand Lodge  
Free & Accepted Masons  
Of California  
Grand Oration 1959**

**Grand Orator  
Theodore Meriam  
"Reappraisal"**

Most Worshipful Sir and my Brethren in Freemasonry

It is indeed a rare and valued privilege to have had the opportunity to serve as a member of the corps of Grand Lodge officers during this past year, and I count it as an especial privilege to have served under our present Grand Master, the Most Worshipful Phil N. Myers, whose sincere and generous devotion to Freemasonry has been, and will continue to be, an inspiration for us all.

It is a rare privilege, too, to have the opportunity to share with you for a little while some thoughts about our Craft and to pose a few questions, the answers to which will not be readily forthcoming. But awareness of questions, and of problems, is an essential part of existence and development. Because of this, questions should be asked and answers sought.

I have chosen to entitle this presentation "REAPPRAISAL," and I hope that, with the employment of a certain amount of subtlety, what I say to you today will prompt your thoughts along the general direction of Masonic Reappraisal.

I am increasingly concerned-and I here use the two words "increasingly" and "concerned" in a very broad, long-term sense-with the relative place and importance of Freemasonry in our constantly changing world. Our dignity is recognized by all. Our antiquity is unquestioned. Our solidness of purpose and principle is universally recognized. Our general reputation is excellent. Or is it? Are we as an organization, or as individual Masons, relatively as important in our respective communities as we have always been, or as we should be? Do we contribute, collectively or individually, to the betterment of life in our communities to the degree that we should?

I do not raise these questions with any thought of criticism of what we have done or what we do-but rather in that purely critical sense of thoughtful self-analysis.

I have always been impressed with the opening paragraph of the comparatively brief message of Grand Master Jonathan D. Stevenson, first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of California, read one hundred and nine years ago at the First Annual Communication of this Grand Lodge. The Grand Master could not be present at this first communication, held just a month after the convention of organization for the Grand

Lodge of California, but his message was received and read. Here is what he said:

"The formation of a Grand Lodge for the State of California should be a subject of sincere congratulation to every Mason here and elsewhere; for probably in no part of the habitable globe has its usefulness been made so manifest as in this country within the past year. Already does California number among its inhabitants persons of every nation and clime known to the civilized world, all seeking, by enterprise and industry, to improve their condition in life; and it not infrequently happens that within the distance of a few hundred yards of a mining district, there will be found many persons laboring together who are strangers in language, heart and in feelings; but if they be members of our ancient Order, each is the master of a language that all can understand, and there at once springs up that deep feeling of fraternal affection which has ever so distinctly marked and distinguished the members of the Masonic Fraternity above all others; for, as a member of this Order, no one can be a stranger among his brethren-no one can be in sickness or affliction without some one ministering to his wants and contributing to his comforts-and no where is this holy fellowship and brotherly love more frequently called into requisition than in this land of gold and promise; for nowhere is man more dependent upon his fellow man for all the necessary comforts of life than in California; and so often has the benign influence of the Masonic Order been witnessed and felt in various parts of this country, as well in health as in the dreary hours of sickness and death, that all who have witnessed these influences have learned

properly to appreciate the benefits of the Institution in a community like ours. The cultivation of brotherly love and affection is therefore earnestly recommended to all, and especially among the lodges of this jurisdiction. No strife should ever exist, either among Masons or Lodges, except that honorable strife or emulation of who can best promote the happiness of his fellow man. and the true interest, honor and dignity of our ancient Craft."

Here in this brief message of over a century ago I think we read an expression of relative value, of the relative importance of Masonry to life itself in a young, raw, exciting kind of existence. Let me particularly call your attention again to these words of Grand Master Stevenson: ". . . so often has the benign influence of the Masonic Order been witnessed and felt-that all who have witnessed those influences have learned properly to appreciate the benefits of the Institution in a community like ours." This was no egoistic statement. This was a simple statement of fact. Many of the most authentic accounts of life in California in the early gold rush days make strong mention of the prominence and importance of Masonry in that life.

There is no doubt of the community stature, of the community service, of the influence for good and for betterment on the part of basic Freemasonry in those early California days. We are still a young California, and in a sense, perhaps, living in a raw, exciting kind of existence. Certainly, at the increasingly rapid pace of change in our state, in much less than a century from now our successors will look back upon our days as days of pioneering excitement also.

But again there is my question-are we relatively as influential as we have been or should be?

Recently a friend of mine, a brother of my Lodge, loaned me a book which had been sent to him by one of his relatives, a Mason in a Small community in Texas. The book, clothbound and over three hundred pages in length, is titled "A Century of Light." It is the detailed history of Brahan Lodge No. 226 of La Vernia, Texas. In 1858, the Grand Lodge of Texas granted dispensations to thirteen lodges to work. One of them was Brahan Lodge. I recently read this entire book, even though I have never sat in Brahan Lodge, have never been in La Vernia, Texas, and know absolutely nobody who is a member of that Lodge. I found the book fascinating, because here was the story of a small community and of a small Lodge (Brahan Lodge had 107 members at the time the book was published this year ) . Here was a Lodge that seemed to me to be an indispensable part of the community which it served. In 1871, after a number of years of money-raising effort, this Lodge completed its first Lodge hall. And let me quote from their history here- "Brahan Lodge has always given attention to the educational needs of the community. Knowledge that the lower floor of the Lodge hall would be used for a school was responsible for some of the contributions and for much of the free work on it. When the building was erected it was meant for the lower floor to be used as a school and a place of public worship. It has been used for some purpose of the school almost every year since it was completed." Here is real community service and influence for good and betterment. Throughout this book one is impressed with how Brahan Lodge has been inextricably bound up in the affairs of La Vernia in Wilson County, Texas, actually beginning before the organization of the county. The author, in compiling this documentary account of the growth and development of a moral and progressive force in La Vernia, has shown conclusively how Freemasonry has contributed in one community to that community's society.

Brahan Lodge is but an example of hundreds and hundreds of essentially similar Lodges in our country. Their history is fascinating too, and their position of influence and importance in their respective communities has had profound effect also.

We can always take pride in the accomplishments of our predecessors, but this is of no real value unless we are able to apply the lesson of their experience to the problems of today and the future. The true worth of all history is in the fact of its explanation of how we got to where we are-and the wise practitioner is the one who can use these explanations to aid in plotting the course for the future. Generally, history demonstrates that goals are attained by struggle and that when one goal has been attained there is still a further goal that must be reached. Satisfaction is never present.

A story is told of a famous artist who painted a great picture. It was the finest work he had ever done, but one day he was found weeping beside his masterpiece.

"What is the trouble?" he was asked, "aren't you satisfied with your picture?"  
"Yes," he replied, "that's just what the trouble is; I am satisfied."

He knew that being satisfied, he would never do better work; his ambition would wane; he would begin to slip, and the future would no longer be a period of increasing greatness as an artist. It meant that the stimulus for improvement had gone and the joy of doing work would be no more. The climb up the hill, the effort to do, the struggle to accomplish, is what brings to us our greatest and most enduring satisfaction, without which life is worth little.

So it is with Freemasonry. The greatest and most worthwhile satisfaction is for those who concern themselves with how best to strive for the goal. It would be most presumptuous on my part if I were to say, "here is an answer; here is a way." Rather it is the collective thought and the collective work of all of us, and especially of you who are the leaders in your respective lodges, which, when applied with the basic tools of Masonry, can bring us steadily along the road, no matter how rough and rugged it may be.

I can suggest, though, an area for our thoughtful consideration. Integrity is the very core of Freemasonry. An example of integrity, worthy of all imitation, provides one of the most essential lessons in Masonry. Integrity is moral soundness, honesty, and uprightness. In a broad sense, too, it is steadfastness to the right course no matter what influence there may be to vary the course. Our quality, our value, our reputation, are all the result of our integrity in this broad sense. This is an area which today, and other days too, might stand some reappraisal. Are our Masonic teachings, based on integrity and moral truths, applied as rigidly and as fully as they have always been? Or is there an occasional tendency to rationalize just a little bit here and there? Have we slacked off? Have we rationalized by saying, "we should be broadminded about that?" Is there an occasional tendency to permit other, softer sets of values to have "just a little" share in influencing our decisions and actions? It is not my intention by raising these questions to imply any softening or slacking off. But these are pertinent questions, and I hope they are provocative also. They are intended as such and if, because of such questions and because of similar ones which will undoubtedly occur to you, there is some reappraisal of our integrity then it is good that the questions have been raised. We must never be satisfied with the way we are.

Just two years ago this Grand Lodge confirmed the edict of Grand Master L. Harold Anderson which effectively banned certain activities engaged in by affiliated organizations which were clearly commercial in their purpose and thus tended to depreciate the integrity of Masonry in California. This was an historic and courageous decision. I am confident it was the result of self-analysis, of reappraisal, of determination that what had been happening was wrong and not in keeping with our purposes, our dignity, or our integrity. Softer sets of values were cast aside. This was altogether proper and I use it here as an example of what I have been talking about—reappraisal of integrity. The wise man is the one who can apply with clear-headed directness the facts of moral truth to the situations presented in an ever-changing world.

The Oregon state capitol building is one of the newer such structures in America and certainly one of the most beautiful. Flanking the main entrance are two inscribed panels. On one of them is this meaningful statement:

"The mind of man knows no employment more worthy of its powers than the quest for righteousness in human affairs; no goal of its labors that is superior to the discovery of the good in the guidance of life."

Now let us interpolate this slightly with the change of about three words and read it thusly:

"The mind of Freemasonry knows no employment more worthy of its powers than the furtherance of righteousness in human affairs; no goal of its labors this is superior to the application of good in the guidance of life."

No thinking Mason will quarrel with the rightness of that statement, but will a thinking Mason today conclude that we are employing our powers to the fullest for the attainment of this righteous but never completely reachable goal? I think not. Rather the thinking Mason will quickly say, "we can always strive to do better; we should strive to do better; we must strive to do better."

Approximately ten years ago Tehama Lodge No. 3 in Sacramento celebrated its centennial. The feature of that observance was a graphic and dramatic portrayal of the influence of that lodge spread over a century in the community which it serves. Some of you have been

privileged to see this portrayal, for it has been produced several times since the first presentation. It is worth telling about again.

On a simply set stage were two standing panels, each about four feet wide and eight feet tall. On one was mounted a large electric clock, in motion. On the other panel hung a one-gallon glass jug, inverted, and filled with blue ink. A special stopper permitted this blue ink to drop from the bottle at the rate of a small drop each second. Directly below the jug there was a large glass vessel which held perhaps fifteen gallons of clear water. Between the two panels stood a brother of Tehama Lodge who, as narrator, described the beginning years of the Lodge and told of the deeds of some of the more prominent of its members. As he spoke, the sweep hand of the clock moved steadily around, and from the inverted jug there dropped each second a drop of blue ink. As the narrator continued to recount the deeds of the members of Tehama Lodge, the vessel of clear water began to turn blue; first scarcely noticeably, but gradually and steadily becoming bluer and bluer.

The illustration was simple, but altogether complete and clear. With the passage of time, and the steady occurrence of deeds of influence for good, the quality of living in Sacramento became better and better, ever better. So it has been, and is, in every community where Freemasonry influences the deeds of its members.

But what if we reversed this illustration? What if we considered the darkening of the color of the vessel of clear water to have been caused by deeds of which we were not proud; deeds which took place because we did not hold as closely to the integrity of Masonry as we could have -could we then say that the waters became darker and darker until no light would shine through? Yes, the illustration could be reversed, but it will never be reversed as long as we are willing to be self-critical, to reappraise ourselves, to sincerely and wholeheartedly apply Masonic teaching to our daily lives, to ever strive for betterment.

We have in Masonry incalculably valuable tools with which to build for continual betterment. They are the great moral truths which are inculcated within our Lodge. They are ageless and changeless. They are fundamental truths not subject to experimental challenge. Applied diligently in all our activities they can be a most powerful force in the guidance of life for the betterment of all.

Today in this world are two powerful forces opposing each other- our way of life and the totalitarian system. Ours is based on the dignity of man. The other is not. Masonry is compatible with only one-our way of life, because Masonry too, is based on the dignity of man. Perhaps at no period in our country's history has there been a greater need for our system of government, and of society, to work well. We must demonstrate to the world that American democracy is the best system. But to do this we must be certain that in every community in our land, from the tiniest crossroads hamlets to our giant, sprawling metropolitan cities, the same basic rights, privileges and responsibilities apply. Democracy must work first right at home.

We as Masons have a tremendous concern here. It is our duty to be responsible participating citizens. With sincere use of the Masonry we know to be right we cannot fail to contribute to the welfare of all-but our degree of success will surely be in proportion to our own zeal and determination as we apply ourselves to the task at hand.

We must be relatively as effective, or more so, in the application of Masonic principles as were our forefathers in the time of Grand Master Stevenson. We must use Masonry all of the time. We must apply Masonry all of the time. We must maintain our integrity. We must promptly reject any tendency to lessen our standards. We must constantly strive to do better. We must be certain that the little drops of influence for good and for betterment continue to drop in an ever-increasing tempo.

It is a time for reappraisal. It is always a time for reappraisal, because we are constantly on the threshold of the future. There can be no slacking off. There can be no modification of basic values. There must be integrity. We must grow "in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and man." With honest, sincere reappraisal-and the time is always present for this-we can always face the challenges of the future with confidence and with enthusiasm, and with the realization that we as Masons possess the finest tools in the world with which to build an enduring future.