

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1963**

**Grand Orator
Charles Becker
“We Are Builders, Yet”**

Most Worshipful Grand Master, Distinguished Guests, My Brethren

"We belong to the great fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons. The implements of our Craft, however, are no longer for operative toil we do not now, as part of our covenant, set fast the Doric pillar nor release from marble the ornament of the Corinthian capital. We no longer sketch the complications of Gothic piles, and cement buttresses of haughty towers, and carry up, course by course, the aspiring stones of pinnacles. The tools of the Craft are representative now of speculative truth and speak to the inward eye of laws and duties that make life noble and character symmetrical and strong. Yet, though we build no structures such as our ancient brethren reared, though the temples in which we meet are not the monuments of our own proficiency in the art whose instruments we cherish, we are builders and preservers in a richer sense, for our Order itself grows stronger and more precious with years, and its uses are more varied and beautiful with the lapse of time.

"The Masonic organization is far more remarkable and wonderful than the noblest edifice it ever added to the landscape of history.

"Let us pause, brethren, on the word 'organization'. Man can arrange, manufacture, weave, forge, adjust, refine, but he cannot organize as nature does. He can make machines through which the forces of nature will play for cunning ends, but he cannot conjure the principle of life into any mould of his making. He can start shuttles that will weave a carpet for the reception room of a palace in one loom.... He can tell how sugar is secreted in the veins of a clover blossom but he cannot make a clover seed and you might well ask the wisest scientific man to fashion a world, as to create one of the green needles which a pine tree produces by the million, or one of the innumerable blades of grass.

"But the great glory of organization is when it is revealed in human life.

"In savage life men are slightly organized. A savage tribe is like a heap of sand, the atoms are distinct, they are aggregated, not combined; no beautiful product springs from them: and the first wind of disaster blows them away. A half civilized nation is but slightly organized, so far as noble purposes and high sentiments are concerned. Progress is marked by wider, higher, finer developments, issuing from the combination and co-partnership of souls. There can be no such thing as justice until men, in large masses, are rightly related to each other. There can be no prosperity in a community until the majority of its people are so organized that their minds receive training, and their energies are unfettered. There can be no happiness, except as the result of proper relations permanently established between the different classes or strata of the social world.

"No man liveth to himself. Whether one member suffer, all members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. . . . When a compacted unity of living beings is seen one of the most precious objects for which the world was built is attained. A large and well-ordered family is such a jewel. A neighborhood at peace and free from scandal is, -or rather I should say, would be- a still more precious jewel of the same quality. A state, a nation, so constructed that the forces of all ranks of its inhabitants should be brought into play, and rights of all ranks should be saved from pressure, would be a more marvelous and a more inspiring structure than the material order and harmony of our solid globe.

"It is in the light of this principle that the value and nobleness of Masonry appear.

"This is the most remarkable social organization in the world. None on the globe, with half so many elements in its composition, is so old. . . . We delight to feel, brethren, that the past, measured by as many ages, is under us; but it is not beneath us in broken symmetry, and a dead grandeur as (the ruins) under Jerusalem. It is rather beneath us as the roots are beneath the tree,

and as the central rings are hidden in the trunk. They give power . . . to the structure still. They are parts of its present majesty, sources of its living vigor, prophecies of its future strength.

"We should take satisfaction, brethren, nay, a noble pride, in the consciousness of the age and vastness of our organization. Shall we not feel that there is dignity, that there is privilege, in being living fibers of an organization which has passed from one era of the world to another . . . which has on its roll names that sparkle in history like sovereign stars, and which exists, not for purposes of private aggrandizement, or the selfish joy of its members, but to give deeper root to good principles in the world, and to diffuse the spirit of peace and order? If a Mason is not grateful and glad over his fellowship, it is because he does not appreciate the value in the world of the organization of good....

"Society is struggling to reach the order which nature thus indicates. Civilization is yet in its infancy. There is no town, no village, yet where the bounty of nature to all the needy is fulfilled. Let us be grateful, brethren, that within our fellowship charity is organized, as well as law and peace.

"How good and how precious it is for brethren to dwell in such unity!"

Would that those words were mine, but verily they are not. They are the words of Thomas Starr King spoken one hundred years ago, on May 16th, 1863, as part of his address as Grand Orator of the Grand Lodge of California. And though he spoke those words to his brethren assembled one hundred years ago, he thought of us. We know this because he concluded his message with these words:

"May it (our fellowship) continue, brothers, and widen through our fidelity and service and beneficence! God preserve our organization, guard our Order, inspire our beneficence, and grant that, a century hence, our successors may meet here to enjoy in a larger fellowship the result of our faithfulness, and within a nation not sundered...."

Thus we meet here today-a century hence. My brethren, what a thrilling year this has been for me and for the opportunity and privilege to serve I shall be forever grateful.

Would that I were able to adequately describe to you, my brethren, the startling sensation which was mine upon becoming aware of what I consider the truly remarkable coincident. I am a member of Starr King Lodge, No. 344, named in honor of that small but mighty man, that Unitarian minister who did more than any other single individual to preserve the State of California as the part of the Union of States of this great nation of ours during the time of the Civil War and who, though he lived in California for but four years, was named one of the two representatives of the State of California to the Hall of Fame and Honor in the National Capitol. Being a member of Starr King Lodge, I was aware, of course that at one time he had been Grand Orator of this Grand Lodge; and believing an opportunity would present itself at some time during the year that I might properly allude to it, I endeavored shortly before the installation of officers at the last Communication of Grand Lodge to locate the Grand Oration of Thomas Starr King. Assisted by our Assistant Grand Secretary, we began searching through the archives and ancient volumes of our early proceedings. I knew that he had succumbed to pneumonia in 1864. so we began with the proceedings of 1864 and quickly found in the index a reference to Thomas Starr King. However, when we turned to the referred page, we found not the oration but instead a memorial dedicated by the Grand Lodge to the honor and memory of the Grand Orator who had died in that year, 1864. It occurred to me then, that perhaps no oration had ever been recorded, but I was puzzled because I was aware that an oration had been given. So, we proceeded to search through the next earlier volume but without success. We went to the next earlier volume-still no success, and the next earlier volume-still no success. By this time, we were in the proceedings of 1859 and I knew we would find nothing there because he did not arrive in California until 1860. We began going forward again through 1860, '61, '62 and now we were back to the volume of 1864. We again looked in the index and again found a reference to Thomas Starr King, but that reference was again to the memorial page. As we were about to replace the volume on the shelf, in a parting thought, we thumbed through the other pages in the volume and there on a head note we found the words "Grand Oration." We quickly turned the pages to the beginning of the oration and there we found with chilling surprise the Grand Oration of Thomas Starr King delivered May 16th, 1863. We quickly realized that this volume contained the proceedings for the years 1863 and 1864, and it was then obvious that Thomas Starr King, though a Mason for but two years prior thereto, had been appointed Grand Orator for two

successive terms. As I stood there among the book shelves rejoicing in my find, I was suddenly overcome with the realization, as I read the opening words of his address, that there I stood about to be installed as Grand Orator for this year, which was exactly one hundred years after Thomas Starr King—a centennial to Thomas Starr King. The sensation was thrilling and the impact was greater than if this coincidence had been prearranged. Thus, you can understand what a truly inspirational year this has been for me.

In speaking of Starr King, Grand Master Belcher, who conducted the funeral service had this to say:

"God had made a true mason of him, long before, by our mystic forms and ceremonies, his name was added to our roll of members. For all the precepts and principles of masonry had long been exemplified in his daily life. Not to learn from us, but because Heaven directed, was he passed into our inner chamber, to guide us by his bright example."

I mentioned that he was one of the two Californians chosen for a place in National Statuary Hall. Let me read to you the concurrent resolution adopted by the Legislature of the State of California on April 26th, 1927:

"WHEREAS, the Congress of the United States of America, has by statute enacted and declared as follows, to wit: 'The President is hereby authorized to invite each and all the states to provide and furnish statues, in marble or bronze, not exceeding two in number for each state, of deceased persons, who have been citizens thereof and illustrious for their historic renown, or for distinguished civic or military service, such as each state shall deem worthy of this national commemoration, and when so furnished the same, shall be placed in the old hall of the House of Representatives in the Capitol of the United States, which is hereby set apart or so much thereof as may be necessary as National Statuary Hall for the purpose herein indicated:' and,

"WHEREAS, the State of California has never designated the deceased persons whose statues shall be so provided and furnished by the State of California; now

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, by the Senate and Assembly jointly, that the Legislature of the State of California hereby selects and designates JUNIPERO SERRA and THOMAS STARR KING as the two deceased persons who have been citizens of the State of California and illustrious for their historic renown, or for their distinguished civil or military service, whose statues in marble or bronze shall be hereafter provided and furnished by the State of California to be placed in the National Statuary Hall as so provided by act of Congress."

At the unveiling ceremonies in Washington, Senator Samuel Shortridge said of this man:

"I would have you know him as we knew him. He was frail of body, but transcendently great in mind. Gentle, affectionate, unassuming, happy when serving, and endowed with a marvelous gift of speech, he quickly won the love and admiration of our people....

"It can be said in very truth that Thomas Starr King fell in love with California and that California fell in love with him. No pen, no tongue, has more vividly or more eloquently described the physical glories of that State than did pen and tongue of this reverend man.

"But you ask me why we loved him: why we exalt him; why we place him in bronze here in the Capitol of the Republic. Soon after his coming to California the battle of the brothers, the Civil War, broke out. Thomas Starr King hated no man, no State, but oh how he revered the Constitution and loved the Republic. He flung himself in a spirit of loyalty to the defense of the flag of Washington and Jefferson and Jackson and Lincoln. By day and night, across valleys and through mountain passes, in sunshine and storm, he traveled and appealed in behalf of the Union. Nobler or more eloquent appeals were never made in behalf of the Republic. Wearied, he never faltered; and though warned by his friends, he never rested during those dark and doubtful days.

"And then, like Moses in sight of the promised land—in sight of the Republic's triumphant flag—in sight of the Union he saved—in sight of a reunited Republic—in sight of peace—he died. He died on March 4th, 1864. Thus from the cradle to the grave he traveled but forty years. He passed into the nobler life with a smile on his lips, repeating in a clear, well-modulated voice, the Twenty-third Psalm.... California wept, the Nation wept.

"Though dead, he speaks to us and enjoins upon us to be faithful to the Republic in the service of which he died. For even as the soldier falls on the battlefield, so Thomas Starr King laid down his life for the Union.

"God grant that we of California and of the Nation may be worthy inheritors of his labors. God grant that this Republic may be true to the principles for which he stood."
Such was the tribute to a man who was a Mason!

And now, my brothers, as we meet here one hundred years later, let us examine our craft; let us examine our organization to see if we are builders and preservers yet; whether our Order itself has grown stronger and more precious with years and whether its uses have become more varied and beautiful with the lapse of time. Let us look at the business in which we are engaged.

It is obvious at the outset that our methods, policies, procedures and practices are the same; that our ideals, principles and tenets are the same; that our avowed purposes are the same; that Free Masonry is today the same as it has always been and always shall be. Certainly our business has expanded in volume but do our records, at the same time, show that we have increased or expanded in either achievement or activity? Do our records show that we are builders yet, not of material buildings, which decay and waste away by the lapse of time itself; but rather builders of edifices with materials of integrity, ethics, morals, and virtues, which last forever? Or have we stopped building?

The physical structures in many instances which housed the meeting places of our brethren one hundred years ago no longer stand or exist because they were made of perishable physical, material things. But the institutions which Free Masons build and establish wherever needed, any place in the world, can never be affected by the lapse of time but continue forever, so long as man exists. These structures are made not with stones and bricks. They are built with truth, honesty, respect and justice for all men-indestructible materials. Such construction may be, from time to time, interrupted by forces foreign to these truths; whose very existence is dependent upon suppressing truth, suppressing knowledge, subjugating the wills of men, and where freedom, liberty and justice is unknown. But as we have seen in each instance where such building was interrupted, it was only for a temporary period of time, because even though the builders of such forces, systems or governments deny the existence of, or necessity for our divine laws of human nature, freedom, honesty and justice, their mere denial does not abolish these human laws, which though spiritual in form are as much a part of nature as the physical laws themselves.

In evaluating the business in which we are engaged further, it appears to some perhaps that the Free Mason today is more speculating than speculative; that he has reached a point in his evolution, that he has so progressed in his profession from the operative Mason to the speculative one, it is reasonable for him, in view of the great number of men similarly occupied, to merely make his investment in the organization and then leave it to the others to do all the necessary work, and hope that all things will turn out well.

It appears, my brethren, that today we are perhaps more speculating than speculative. While we have thousands upon thousands of men employed in our craft, there are no signs, no obvious signs, of construction of worthwhile human structures. The greatest number of our craftsmen stand ready and willing at all times to expend their greatest effort in doing whatever may be necessary of them to insure that the structures, the foundations of which their ancient brothers built, remain strong and sound at all times. Some craftsmen, of course, may be more technically skilled than others but each is capable of doing his part and his share of the necessary work. We must agree that the edifices our ancient brethren reared, while they stand as beautiful and sturdy as when first erected, they are today in need of some repair. Such a structure, no matter where built, is built to serve the world and the building cannot be restored to its entire beauty and glory if there is need of repair any place in the world.

We say that Masonry is universal and that in every age and every clime are Masons to be found. Masons, yes, but masonry, no. We have seen in our own time the disbanding of masonry by governmental decree, but we need only to look at the form of the government to understand the true basis for this infamous action. They would have their people believe that such action is necessary because Free Masonry is a secret organization and as such is a threat to their government. How smug we would be to believe this. How powerful we would believe we were, to be able to keep hidden any secrets whatever they may be, when these same forces are able to acquire some of the most closely guarded security information of a nation. If then there is work to

be done, and at the same time there is no apparent activity, if this be true, then in evaluating the business in which we are engaged we must endeavor to learn the reasons.

We know that when our brethren in this country had work to do at the time of the Revolutionary War, they did it. We know that when there was work to be done respecting human rights, as well as freedom, that there should be no taxation without representation, our brethren did it. And, we know that when a republic was to be formed by the people, there were Masons there and they did it, and we gave support to the public school at a time when it was most needed.

Can it be, my brethren, that our craftsmen, to some extent, are not working today because they have no knowledge of what is expected of them beyond attaining their certificate, or that they are unaware as to where their efforts and energies might be usefully employed? Have we so impressed our craftsmen at the outset of their membership that they believe all things Masonic are secret and confidential; or if this be not so, then they do not even know what is to be, and should be revealed and that which should not be revealed.

What a shame it is for any Mason when asked by a non-Mason, "What is this masonry to which you belong? What does it do? What does it stand for?" and that Mason replies, "I cannot tell you because it is a secret." What a pity it is for any Mason who has just been initiated, when on returning home, his family is patiently waiting for him and asks, "What kind of organization did you join? What are you supposed to do? and what is masonry all about?" and he replies, "Don't ask me because I cannot tell you." What a tragedy it is that we do not draw clear, plain and understandable designs upon the trestle board so that our craftsmen may know what is expected of them and where and when and how it is to be performed.

It is not that we are unable to draw these proper designs but perhaps it is that we have become so busy in bringing the workmen through their apprenticeship to their positions as master craftsmen, we have little time left to then set the master craftsmen to work. What the craftsmen have been taught they have been taught well, and all that a Mason should know is contained within his training while becoming a master mason; but though he has been taught well, and though he has passed his necessary examinations and has been found proficient, it appears in many instances that he has not learned that which he has been taught.

This situation, however, is not of recent origin. It has existed for many years. The only observation which is worthy, however, is that we have been derelict over the years in making the necessary and proper adjustments, and have been content to let business go on as usual. My brethren, let me read to you from the Masonic Mirror, "Devoted to the interest of Masonry on the Pacific Coast." This is Volume 1, Bulletin No. 2, and I quote:

"Every well informed Mason will agree with us in the assertion, that there is a strange lack of Masonic knowledge in Lodges, and among Masons generally. This ignorance even extends to the officers of the Lodges, who ought, at least, to be posted in the ordinary government of a Lodge, if not in Masonic jurisprudence. We make Masons of good men and true, but when thus made, the work has just commenced."

That was said in October, 1869.

It has been said with some degree of sincerity, that we raise a brother and then bury him, and very little if anything occurs in between.

We are concerned, my brethren, and rightfully so, in learning about our so-called public image. What does the community think of us; what does anyone know of us; how are we regarded individually and collectively? My brethren, we can have no public image, nor can we merit the respect of the uninformed community so long as so many of our brethren are unable to give any account or even an excuse, for the existence of the organization itself or of the purposes for which they have banded themselves together by an indissoluble chain. We are concerned when others fear us, we are disturbed when others are suspicious of us, and we are confused when others distrust us, but it is really not their fault. We have no right to the respect of anyone when all they can learn about us, even those who are interested, is nothing except that all we stand for and all we hope to do is not for them to know. It is perfectly natural to fear the darkness, but what we actually fear is not the absence of light, but the insecurity in not knowing what might be lurking there. How ridiculous we must appear when we expect worthy men to join with us without any knowledge of what their application might be leading them into. We have been

instructed and properly so, that the ritualistic work of our ceremonies is confidential, known only to Masons, and is the means by which we may identify one another. Therefore, the Mason who says that Masonry is a secret organization, is in fact saying that there is nothing more to Masonry than ritual. Perhaps he is right.

We say that Masonry is a progressive moral science, but our progress instead of being forward as progress should be, appears to be circular, going round and round from one degree to another and then back to the beginning again. What a shock it must have been to some, to see a four, page spread in a nationally distributed magazine on "Free and Accepted Masons," including pictures and symbols. There were many I know who resented this article because they felt it was too revealing, however, the article concluded with this paragraph:

"While the ritual of Free Masonry remains secret from the world, the fraternity has for hundreds of years taught its members that Masons must share in the construction of the temple of brotherhood for all races, religions, tongues and nationalities."

There for ten cents, my brethren, more good was done in explaining Masonry for all to know than it appears we have been able to do regardless of the amount of our investment.

You may be wondering why I am belaboring this point. It is only because such conditions do actually exist and any evaluation which did not recognize them would be incomplete. What utter nonsense it is to say that Masonry is secret when there is more information published about this organization than any other, and you need only to go to any encyclopedia to find page after page of the history, background, principles and obligations of a Mason. I have said many times that Masonry by its very nature is not and cannot be secret, because if there is any thought, any deed, any act contemplated or done by a Mason or a group of Masons which cannot stand the gaze of public inspection then for sure any such thought, deed or act is not Masonic.

How then does our business appear to you as we look at our situation today, one hundred years later? There are many who say that our principles today are just as pure and righteous as they always have been, therefore, we should do nothing which might in the slightest affect the purity of these principles. Certainly if we believe that Masonry is a state of mind, a philosophy, a set of moral virtues which requires no doing, but just believing, then we have made of Masonry an impotent source for good and need expect nothing to result from it. On the other hand, there are those who because of lack of knowledge, lack of understanding and lack of true Masonic interest believe that our way of doing business is archaic and old fashioned; therefore, we should change our methods and become more competitive with other modern organizations. There then is the conflict, not an insurmountable one, but a conflict between those who believe that any activity, regardless of how well intended, on the part of Masons, might possibly be disapproved or misinterpreted by others, thus causing a controversy, and rather than risk such a situation, it is perhaps best not to do anything, or say anything or become involved in anything at all, and those who say we should "do like the other folks do."

The business of Masonry cannot progress nor can Masonry continue to be the progressive moral science we say it is under either theory of this conflict. Masonry, though pure, and virtuous and righteous was never intended to be so noble that it was not practical and unattainable; nor was Masonry intended merely because it espoused the cause of the common man, and requires that Masons respect and have a wholesome concern for the welfare of all men that it should be reduced in its operations to the catering only to the whims and pleasures of man.

The real business of Masonry is serious and active and the action of the Mason in his work is human and exemplary. It may be likened to some extent to that of a non-profit corporation in that it was organized to render public service for the good of all without any profit inuring to any of the stockholders. This, therefore, means that for Masonry to be progressive, it must be active and vital, current and living. The greatest of literary manuscripts has no significance whatever, if it is not read. The most sensitive of musical compositions gives no pleasure unless it is played, and the most beautiful objects of art reflect no beauty unless they are seen; so it is true with Free Masonry. The noblest of our tenets, the most virtuous of our principles are meaningless and as of naught unless and not until they are actively practiced by the craftsmen. Knowledge that is not experienced is valueless and unfulfilled intentions are worthless.

We repeat with great and justifiable pride at every opportunity the history of our early American brethren and the important feats which they accomplished. We are proud of these accomplishments and we are proud of these Masons because they portray Masons in action. As

we review our organization one hundred years later, I believe it is fair for each of us to ask ourselves, "What have I done-what am I doing?" How many times since becoming a Mason have we reminded ourselves and proved to others by our actions that in us as Masons, hypocrisy and deceit are unknown, that we, as Masons, are distinguished by our sincerity and plain dealing, and that with heart and tongue, as Masons, we join in promoting the welfare and happiness of others?

We require that a Mason's actions be efficient and proficient, that they be uniform and conform, that they be traditional and customary but, my brethren, what about brotherly love, relief and truth; temperance, fortitude, prudence and justice; charity, fraternity and good will toward all men. We measure the success of our action not by any power, position or possessions, but rather by the closeness of performance of our ideals. As Masons we have not only the duty to conscientiously believe in the principles and tenets of Free Masonry but we also have the duty and obligation to act at every opportunity and on every occasion in their performance. We have the duty and responsibility to resist actively that which is wrong, unjust and untrue-it is not enough just to say that we are against it. We must all realize that the more we have the more we owe to others, and, my brothers, it takes a big man to champion a small cause.

We must realize, and teach the others, that the Lodge Room is only where Masons meet to be enlightened, but the real work of the Mason is done outside the Lodge, wherever the need may be.

Our duty is then clear. If we are to prosper during the next century, we must convince the world by our actions that on becoming Masons we have become better men; and that we are engaged in the industry of spreading useful knowledge, practicing unceasing and unostentatious charity and inculcating fraternity and good will among all men.

By your actions outside the Lodge shall ye be judged, by your actions outside the Lodge shall Masonry be judged: thus shall the image of Free Masonry be born. On that day every Mason shall stand in the pathway or at his doorway and all who pass him shall know, that he is one to whom the burdened heart may pour its sorrows, one to whom distress may prefer its suit, one whose hand is guided by justice and whose heart is expanded by benevolence. We are builders, yet. On that day, all Masons will say to all who are in need, to all who are in fear, to all who are enslaved and to all who are not free, I am a Mason, try me.