

**Grand Lodge  
Free & Accepted Masons  
Of California  
Grand Oration 1989**

**Grand Orator  
Lee A. Strong  
“Nobody Said It Would Be Easy”**

To the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge, F.& A.M. of California:

Before I begin there are two things I would like to do.

First I want to express my thanks to the Grand Master for giving me the opportunity to serve this year as Grand Orator. It has been a rich and rewarding experience to be a part of this Grand Family and to be able to travel throughout the State and see first hand, Masonry in action in the local Lodges. We may have problems but it is refreshing to see the optimism and enthusiasm which are abundant among the members of this Grand Jurisdiction. The other members of this Grand Family have also asked me to express the admiration, respect and affection we have for our Grand Master. Most Worshipful, you have truly been an inspiration.

The second thing I feel I must do, is to make the following disclaimer.

"The views expressed in this Grand Oration are my own and do not necessarily represent those of the Grand Master, the Grand Lodge Officers, the members of this Grand Lodge or the members of the various Constituent Lodges."

Why do I feel it necessary to say this?

The California Masonic Code states, in part, "It shall be the duty of the Grand Orator, at each Annual Communication, to deliver an address to the Grand Lodge upon matters appertaining to the Craft...". I believe there is implicit in this charge, the responsibility to discuss those things which are of concern and of importance to the Craft. This discussion should identify these problems, review some of the causes and effects and point out and evaluate possible solutions. Since my remarks are necessarily subjective and contain personal biases I offer the preceding disclaimer.

I also expect that there will be disagreement with some of the things I am going to say. If there were not, this would be a pretty bland talk. Disagreement is good if it generates dialogue and discussion. Dialogue and discussion are beneficial if they generate positive action. My hope is that this Grand Oration will stimulate further discussion between you and your Lodge members. I especially hope that these discussions will motivate you and your members to consider positive and forceful steps to deal with the issues or problems which are of concern to your Lodge.

Let me tell you a story about motivation. I first heard this in this Grand Lodge in 1969 when it was told by the Grand Chaplain, Dr. Kenneth A. Carlson. It is about a young man who was walking through a cemetery late one night when he accidentally tripped and fell into an open grave. He struggled for a while and tried to get out but he just couldn't quite make it. He finally decided to settle down and spend the night. About fifteen minutes later another young fellow came along in the same cemetery. He tripped and fell into the same grave. He struggled for about ten minutes, but he could not get out. Finally he decided he'd better settle down and hoped someone would find him in the morning. He was just on the verge of getting comfortable when a hand reached out in the dark, tapped him on the shoulder and a voice said, "You can't get out of here." But he did!!

Fear is, perhaps the greatest motivator of all. There are however, other more practical and effective forms of motivation.

In this story the two young men were faced with the same problem. How to get out of a grave into which they had inadvertently fallen. One of them was successful because he was more strongly motivated than the other.

Our Lodges are faced with what might be considered a struggle to climb out of an abyss of declining membership. As a matter of fact, virtually every issue considered at this and recent Annual Communications has attempted to deal with this problem. I hope we can find the motivation to work our way out of this hole in which we seem to have fallen.

Let me discuss with you some concerns I have about what I have been hearing relative to suggested causes and proposed solutions for declining membership. Then I will talk about some steps we might take in our Lodges and at Grand Lodge to deal with this problem.

I am concerned when I hear that Grand Lodge must bear much of the responsibility for our loss of members and that Grand Lodge must find ways to turn things around. There is no question that Masonic Law and Custom can have an inhibiting effect on our efforts to get more members. There is no doubt that things might be easier if some of the rules could be changed. But even if this happens, and maybe it has, it does not mean that you can go home and wait for applicants to come to your door. Grand Lodge programs can promote Freemasonry statewide but new members are the result of the efforts of the individual members of individual Lodges.

I am concerned when I hear that people don't know who we are, what we do or what we stand for. I am concerned because I think this is true. And it is true because we don't talk about Freemasonry.

Think back to the time you applied for membership in your Lodge. Remember when members of the Investigating Committee came to your home and talked to you and your wife and family. Remember how interested your friends and associates were in what you were doing. Then remember the night you got your First Degree. The experience was almost overwhelming. The solemnity of the occasion, the ancient uses and customs, the sheer volume of information. Most of all, you remember you were told that part of the work was secret and must never be revealed. Since you had no idea what was secret and what was not, it was easier and safer to say nothing. Family, friends and associates who were interested were rebuffed and soon lost interest. In addition, the fact that we don't solicit members, made you even more cautious. And that is the way you have been ever since. That is the way we all are.

I think there are other reasons we are not very good at talking about Freemasonry. I think we are afraid someone will ask us a question we can't answer. Questions about Ritual and Masonic secrets. Other questions like: How did Masonry start? What do you get out of Masonry? What will I get out of Masonry? What is the difference between you and the Elks or the Odd Fellows? Why do you wear those funny aprons? And the toughest one of all. What do Masons do?

I also think we are reluctant to talk about Freemasonry because it is sometimes hard to tell another person why we really love this Fraternity. It is difficult to put into words the relationship that exists among our members. We struggle to describe the harmony we feel in a Masonic Lodge. We can discuss it with each other but not with outsiders. In today's society, brotherly love is easily misunderstood.

I am concerned because we seem to have a tendency to look for easy answers for a difficult problem. We hear that there is too much emphasis on Ritual. Our Lectures are too long. We need to shorten the closing ceremonies. Our Candidates have too much to learn. A Cipher Ritual is the answer. We need to make it easier to get men to become officers. Grand Lodge will have to get in touch with the times.

One fallacy with this approach is the presumption that these practices and policies somehow negatively influence a person's decision to become a member of a Masonic Lodge. We might argue that these procedures have an adverse effect on Lodge attendance or on the willingness of members to serve as officers or coaches. However, the prospective applicant can be little influenced by those things of which he has only scant, if any, knowledge.

I am concerned when I hear that we don't have enough time. We don't have enough time to teach all of the Ritual. We don't have enough time to give the complete Lecture or to close Lodge properly. Our Candidates are too busy to learn the Lectures in their entirety.

Let me tell you about Masonry in Whittier twenty-five or thirty years ago. Now I know, there is nothing more boring than hearing how it was in the good old days, particularly from some senior citizen who has probably lost touch with reality. But please humor me.

Back in the late Fifties and early Sixties we had no shortage of Candidates. In 1957, when I applied for membership in Greenleaf Lodge, it took more than a year to get all the Degrees. As a matter of fact, in that year the Lodge Raised 88 Master Masons in addition to conferring all the other Degrees. This same situation was found in most of our Lodges. Things finally started to slow down but for many years we still complained that we did not have enough time to do things properly. Oh, we found time to confer all the Degrees in their entirety and the

Candidates gave their Proficiencies in full form. But what we didn't have time for, was to talk about Freemasonry. We did not have time for family activities. We were unable to plan interesting and informative meetings. We often said that when the Degree work slowed down, we would correct these deficiencies. Now the work has slowed and still we are told, "we don't have time".

Finally, I am concerned that in our efforts to get more members we might wind up with less Masonry. If we make it easier to get Candidates and if we shorten the Degrees and if we reduce requirements for advancement, then when do we teach Masonry? And who will be the teachers? Yes, we do need members, but in the process let's not forget what originally got us here.

Last year the Grand Orator, the Worshipful Charles H. Alexander, delivered an inspired Oration in which he suggested that we "stop worrying about getting men into Masonry and concentrate on getting Masonry into Men". He also declared, "our job is to keep the principles of Masonry alive, not to compromise them away in a futile attempt to make this institution more popular". He had much more to say and it was enthusiastically received by the members of Grand Lodge. I mention his talk because I share his views and I want to expand upon his theme.

I think we can get more Masonry into men and I think we can get more men into Masonry. But it is going to take more time, not less. It will require planning and dedication at the Lodge level. It necessitates turning sideliners into participants. I know you have heard this before. I know you are skeptical. But think about how much fun it would be. And think about the rewards.

The greatest potential salesman for Freemasonry, is our newest member. He has taken the big step. He is ready and willing to learn. He will be an enthusiastic voice if we give him the information and don't scare him into silence.

When a Candidate first crosses the threshold of a Masonic Lodge, he should be received as someone very social. He represents the future of Masonry, he is the reason we are here. His Degrees should be conferred with dignity, restraint and veneration. He only gets them once. And we certainly have the time to do them well.

Candidates Coaches should be accessible and other Lodge members should be available to answer questions and further the new member's knowledge of Freemasonry. Over the last six or seven hundred years, Master Masons have been teaching Entered Apprentices many of the same things we teach today. Doesn't that excite you just a little bit? I think it will stimulate your pupil. Yes, I know you've heard this before. And maybe you are skeptical, but again, think about the rewards. And we do have the time.

We need to do a better job of talking about Freemasonry. We need to talk about what people want to hear. We need to be positive and upbeat. You can't sell negatives. People are not interested in our problems. They have plenty of their own. So what are some of the positive things we can say?

Well, we are the oldest and largest, and yes, the most respected Fraternal organization in the world. We are also the most unique. We do not trace our history to a particular place or a specific person nor to an exact time. We don't really know too much about our origins, but we do know that we are descendants of builders. Builders with superior skill who, among other things, designed and erected many magnificent Cathedrals, some of which still remain standing in Europe and England today. These operative Masons assembled in Lodges or Guilds and taught their building skills and secrets to others who would carry on their great work. In this process they taught, not only how to build buildings of outstanding beauty, but how to build men of character and integrity.

From these humble beginnings, these Lodges or Guilds evolved into today's Speculative Lodges where men continue to build character and integrity and where we practice brotherly love, relief and truth. Our Masonic Lodges represent an oasis where men gather to refresh their spirits, away from the grinding activities of our everyday existence. Our Lodges are places where brotherly love really exists, where men truly care about one another and where family is preeminent.

We are proud of our long list of distinguished leaders. Patriots, Presidents, writers, and philosophers have taken our vows and graced our Lodges. To recite the history of our older Lodges is to recount the history of the communities in which they are located. Many of today's local, state and national leaders are members of Masonic Lodges and we should publicly acknowledge them.

Our members helped write the Constitution of the United States and we have supported public education since the day our Nation was born. How many other Fraternal organizations can say that?

We need to become more visible in the local community. We can do this by participating in local parades, festivals, and holiday celebrations. One of the Resolutions which was carried over to this session would, if approved, permit Lodges to sell food and non-alcoholic beverages at local community events to raise funds for general Lodge use. As I write this, I don't know if this was approved, but even if it wasn't, we can still participate. We can disseminate information about Freemasonry. We can assist the Youth Groups in their participation. We can help the community groups organize and carry out the various events.

We should also encourage our members to serve on local boards and commissions and become otherwise involved in the government of our cities and in the management of our schools. Our communities are always looking for good men to volunteer their time, energy and talents. Our Lodges cannot become involved in political activities, but our members can. When they do, we should not hesitate to recognize them for their service. Masons have never lost interest in good government and certainly we continue to seek excellence in public education.

My Brethren, I know that some of you are thinking, what he says might be true, but it is not enough. We have to do something and we have to do it now. What he is saying may help in the long run but our Lodge may not be here in the long run. We have to face reality. I know you are saying this because I have heard it before.

I have heard it during the past six years when I gave Laymen's Night programs in many of your Lodges. I have heard it during the two years I served in the Grand Lodge line. I know we have problems and I know your concerns. I have thought about it a great deal and I have to confess, I don't have any quick or easy answer. The only answers I have are dedication, commitment, conviction. We have to go to work. We have to believe.

Over the centuries, Masonry has survived oppression, dissension and scorn. We have been opposed by religious groups, political groups and unknowing groups. In this country, Masonry prevailed during revolution, civil war and depression. Freemasonry in California came into being during the lawlessness of the gold rush days and not only survived but grew, because good men were attracted by the principles, philosophy and lessons of our Craft. Whenever Masonry has been threatened, it has prevailed because we were firm in our commitment to our teachings.

So, for the past fifteen years or so we have been faced with another challenge. It is worrisome. It is threatening and it has cost us some of our Lodges, but if in our determination to solve this problem, we forget that which enabled us, not only to survive, but to grow through the centuries, then what is the worth of our solution.

No, there is no quick answer. There is no easy solution. There is no formula for rejuvenation, but I am convinced, that if we are properly motivated, if we are willing to work and if we don't forget what we set out to do, we can meet this challenge. Our spirits will be renewed. Our Lodges will be strong and Masonry once again will be a way of life for men of wisdom and virtue.

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