

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 2004**

**Grand Orator
George L. Geanoulis**

BRETHREN OF THE GRAND LODGE

Most Worshipful Grand Master Howard D. Kirkpatrick, Past Grand Masters, my fellow Grand Lodge officers, distinguished visitors, members of Grand Lodge and I'm proud to say, my brothers: On behalf of all the elected and appointed officers, I wish to thank you, Grand Master Kirkpatrick, for your leadership, your vision of what California Masonry can become, your unwavering dedication to the quality of our Lodges and our members, but most of all, for your capacity to find the very best, in each of us and maximize our individual contributions to our beloved Fraternity. It is Leaders like you that build the foundation for the renaissance of Masonry.

I believe the greatest experience this year was traveling our State and meeting some of the finest men and women in the world. In conjunction with the studies conducted at Grand Lodge this year, we have been most fortunate to better understand the dynamics of California Masonry, the fluctuations of membership, our demographics and their movement. This coupled with your request of the Craft to provide their vision of what Masonry in California could look like in 10 and 20 years, inspired us to ask that same question and contemplate the answers as we traveled.

The responses were energetic, exciting and very upbeat. We are now seeing Lodges with a positive net gain of membership. Not brothers joining multiple Lodges but new young men who are fascinated with and want to learn the philosophies, principles and mysteries of Masonry. It appears as if there has been a paradigm shift where camaraderie is the by-product of the teachings rather than the reason for membership.

I would like to share, allegorically, some of the things I've heard as we traveled.

My story starts at a 150th Lodge anniversary in a small town in northern California. The Lodge had been there since the gold rush. It was typical of that era, small in stature but filled with antiques and historical documents. As was the case with so many Lodges built in a time of all wood construction, this Lodge had burned to the ground and was rebuilt more than once. The celebration was first-rate and well attended by the members and their families. It included the telling of the rich history of Masonry in the community and how Brethren from back East were helped as they entered the town without knowing anyone, almost destitute from the trip. They were given clothes and food and guided to the most likely places to find Gold. The story continued about how they helped each other build their businesses and homes and reminded all of us that brotherly love is one of our most important tenets and was alive and well back then.

Shortly after dinner I went out to a small patio area for some fresh air. I noticed a solitary old man sitting on a bench, smoking a roll your own and just looking thoughtfully into the woods.

I said "Do you mind if I sit down?"
He said "No, you're more than welcomed".
We sat quietly for a few moments taking in the beauty of the area.
Then he said "You're a visitor up here!"
"I am" I answered.
"What do you do for the Grand Lodge" he asked
"I'm the Orator" I responded.
He chuckled and said "We used to call them the Grand Lips"
I laughed and asked him if he had heard any Grand Orations.
He said "Oh yes, many of them, I'm a Past Master for many years".
"By the way" I said "my name is George, what's yours?"
"My name is Benjamin, but most folks around here call me Ben."
"You know" he said. "I've been watching our Fraternity change and search for answers for many years, and have seen it grow until we were bursting at the seams, building Lodges as fast as we could and then shrink as our members moved away or died. But one thing remained the same."

"What was that?" I asked
"The answers to our many questions can be found in our Ritual and the Obligations we took at the Altar. I don't mean the Rod or Floor work; I mean the real meaning behind the words... If you look at most every problem or situation we have ever had, it was created by not remembering the lessons taught in the Ritual, or not living out our Obligation. That Obligation we so fervently swore to uphold at the Altar. Anything less, you know, is Non-Masonic conduct."

I agreed that our Masonic teachings were the standard of our performance and that we needed to hold ourselves accountable. Otherwise the whisper of good council was needed This led me to another thought; "Ben if we believe the Ritual and Obligation is the mainstay then aren't we losing our focus by lessening the scope of the proficiencies?"

Ben took another puff on his smoke and said "What is most important is what the Ritual says about **not** recommending anyone to Masonry unless we had **good reason** to believe he would bring Honor to our Fraternity. The men that participate in the Craft must pass the test of Honor. Our standards are not being lowered. These men should already be Masons in their hearts and searching for new light in their lives.

We have never been a fraternity based on paling around. Our friendships come as a result of our teamwork and focused resolve. We know that teamwork is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results. We are here to achieve personal growth and contribute to a greater purpose. Besides, if the Lodges are relevant to our members then the new Masons will attend and hear the Masonic lessons at each meeting. The Lodges do teach Masonic Education, don't they?"

I answered, "Some do better than others. It may be they don't know how to present it in an effective way."

Ben replied; "But isn't that what leadership in Masonry is all about?" He leaned forward and asked "George what is more important than understanding the philosophy and principles inculcated in Masonry?" He continued "If the relevance of our fraternity is in the teachings and the good work we do, don't you think someone should follow up and know that it's really happening? If great and thoughtful programs are developed,

shouldn't we follow up to see they have been implemented and are successful or need to be modified? And if a Lodge develops a great program, would it make sense to share it?"

I responded by saying "If Leadership and these programs are so critical to the success of Masonry and the Lodges, perhaps we need professional training in developing teamwork and leadership with committed, ongoing, training for the Inspectors and the Masters. We would certainly be giving more Light to our leaders that could be used in their Lodges, their business, as well as at home with their families. We would be making good men better."

"What a coincidence," he said with a smile, "we would be building our human asset, and preading more light among our Brethren. Another thing, this would mean the more capability and responsibility one was willing to accept, the more professional training they would receive. Not a bad incentive program. It's similar to what other successful corporations do for their leaders." Ben went on "It would seem to me that if our future depended on leadership, we would be prepared to fill our vacancies with the best possible people to do all the things we've been talking about."

"Sounds difficult" I said.

Ben responded with "It could even start today by each person identifying their potential successor and their qualifications. That information could then be put in the *Successor Book*. It seems to me it would be more thoughtful and minimize selection by random acts of kindness or default. They would be judged on whom can best work and best agree. Capability would be the criteria. "George", Ben said, "we're running a huge corporation and continuity is a major concern. If we don't address it, our stockholders, the Craft, get whip sawed, which is a great motivational deterrent. That's why we need trained resource facilitators at the Inspector level. They could be the continuity. The missing link might be integrating all the leadership with similar ideals, goals, thinking systems and visions. And that doesn't happen in one or two meetings a year."

I said, "Ben, you continue to give me tuff things to think about."

"Now you're getting it." he said, "You're getting pushed out of your comfort zone and that's where the growth starts". He continued "for Masonry to be successful we need a common thinking process, not everyone thinking exactly alike, because that stifles creativity, but rather a way of thinking that generates collectiveness and better understanding. The Ritual and Obligations are pretty good at that. It just needs extra care in getting the message across."

I was stumped. "How do you do that?" I asked.

"Back to continuity in training and follow up" he said. "You start at the top with the Executives and their staffs and progressively work through the organization to the Inspectors and into the Lodges. The Inspectors would be charged to facilitate the Lodges with assistance from the great programs that are already in place, like the Wardens Retreats, the Management Seminars and information from the Lodge Support Committee. Maybe," he paused, "the Inspectors School of Instructions can become a school to improve leadership capability, thereby becoming the developmental tool for the officers and Lodges."

Do you know that some of our Lodge Masters today have only 3 or 4 years in our Fraternity?" He Said. "That's barely enough time to know what we do. And our mentors,

they can't support the way they used to because of their age or infirmities. It takes us back to the need for Grand Lodge and the Inspectors as a point of continuity and training." "Professional training?"

That kind of training is going to cost money" I said.

Ben laughed, "We Masons talk about Millions or pennies. I've seen us pass a resolution that commits thousands of dollars in a heart beat and argue and grumble over a \$5.00 dues increase. We need to invest in our future not scramble and patch with Bands-aids. Once we start something like that, we must be committed to seeing it through for years not just one term of a Grand Master. You know," he said "the best way to prepare for the future is to create it." "Speaking of dues," he continued, "Do you know that the average annual dues in California in 1900 were equivalent to \$115.00 in today's dollars? Today the average is \$50.00. Our most expensive dues, now being charged in California is equivalent to a cup of coffee a week? Do you know, that it is not unusual for a **Rotarian or Kiwanis** member to budget \$1000 to \$1500 for their annual membership dues and expenses?"

"But Ben, they are designed to develop business contacts which are very relevant to their well being."

Ben said. "George, we do the same thing, coupled with a Moral Code and Value System as well. Most Masons would rather do business with someone who they know is on the level and has knelt at the same Altar and swore to protect his Brother, rather than some stranger out of the phone book. But getting back to dues, there are Lodges out there that expect their dues to cover all the Lodge expenses, reserves, maintenance, fraternal Obligation, leadership training and all their costs."

I said "That's an interesting concept. So what do they do with their investments?"

"Well" Ben said "That's the best part; the interest revenue can be used for all the things that allow Masons to do what they could not do as individuals. It can be used for Scholarships, essay contest, public school support, programs, community outreach like meals for the less fortunate, but most importantly, to invest in our future, our Masonic Youth Groups, the men and women of tomorrow, our baby Brothers and Sisters. I've never quite understood why we would not support our own youth groups before we supported outside community youth groups."

"Interesting point" I said.

He continued, "The dollars generated by investments allows us to live out what we say we are. Our Lodge is the first point of support for our Brethren and their families in need."

I commented, "Our dues would be a lot more then they are now."

"My goodness," he said "so what if it cost a cup of coffee a day for the **philosophies and mysteries of the ages**. Don't forget what the other fraternal organization pay. There is a reason for that. It's needed if you want a quality organization that trains and develops men to see more light. The California Mason will grow in capability and better assist their families and their Lodge. It will come back to us, just like it says in our teachings.

We sat on the patio as the moon crested the mountains and I finally said. "Ben, what are your thoughts about the relationship of Grand Lodge and the Blue Lodges?"

George, I don't think most Masons know what the Grand Lodge does for them in particular, and Masonry in general. There is always a suspicion when someone is asking

for money or proposing a change. However, I think the Grand Lodge is seeing the Lodges more and more as their customers, to provide and serve that which would be impractical for one Lodge to provide for themselves. The Grand Lodge has a roll to play as do the Lodges. One is no more important than the other; they both have a job to do. An example of what the Grand Lodge does is; providing continuity of the ritual, low insurance rates due to the economy of size, the managing the Endowment so that it continues to grow for the next generation, renting and care of our Grand Lodge building, Leadership training, programs, Masonic Education, New Technology, Communications, the Masonic Homes, intercourse with other jurisdictions, data and historical storage, the Inspector Corps, Lodge counseling and the list goes on and on. Most Masons don't realize that the Grand Lodge has cut over a Million equivalent dollars out of their budget in the last five years without lowering its standards. Some real difficult calls were made, but they did it. So you see George, it's much more than what's in the CMC, it's running a major corporation."

I paused and said "Ben, you mentioned relevance a few times, can you give me an example?"

Sure George" he said, "We need to look at what Masonry was about when it was at its strongest; when Lodges served an important function in everyone's life. One example is our flagship, the Masonic Homes. In the early 1900's there was no Social Security, no government benefits to speak of. If I died my widow was on her own in an environment that was not friendly to women working. Her alternatives were bleak at best as were the children's. If there was not extended family, it was not that unusual for the children to go to a state institution of questionable capability and performance. Masonry became

that extended family and we Masons built the Masonic Homes. Masonry was very relevant, because men whom I trusted, swore to make sure my family would be ok. That was many years ago. Now the government has tried to do what we Masons did years before. Masonry was once again on the forefront of social evolution as we have been for centuries. He continued "I've tried to think of what we Masons could get behind and provide now, that would again be on the leading edge while filling a critical void; Something that would be relevant to our members and would be as unique as the Masonic Homes were in the 1900's. And I think I have come up with an idea."

By this time I was getting excited, what could be so impacting that it would provide such relevance to the Fraternity today?

Ben continued. "I believe that with the new technology and our combined capability for raising money, we could establish an online **California Masonic University** where Masons and children of Masons could be assured of a college education for what it costs to go to our Shrine Children Hospitals or our Scottish Rite Language Disorder Clinics. Free Absolutely Free."

I didn't believe what I heard; college for Free? "How could we do that?" I stammered;

"Just like we did with the Homes," he said, "one bite of the elephant at a time. If we start an endowment fund now, it will grow. The advantage to belonging to an Organization that is here in perpetuity is you have time to build things that seem impossible, just like the Cathedrals our operative brothers built in Europe."

“Do you think the brothers would contribute to a College Endowment?” I asked.

“Absolutely” He said “Their children and grandchildren benefit by their contribution forever. It’s our job to spread light, and who better to spread it to than our own members and their children.” He continued. “It might have to start small, maybe offering only a few accredited classes and Masonic Education on line, but it would be the seedling and could grow into a four year accredited online University similar to Phoenix or National University and maybe the Lodges could be the campuses.”

“It would be a lot of work and a lot of details need to be resolved,” I said.

Ben nodded and continued. “We have a lot of skilled people in the Craft, from all walks of life, that could make it happen. When a collection of brilliant minds, hearts and spirits come together with talent.... expect a masterpiece. And the **California Masonic University** would be a Masterpiece. No problem can withstand the sustained power of great attitudes and ideas; they’re like ripples in water... they spread, and Masons have great attitudes and ideas towards the future. What could be more comforting than to know that your children would be assured an opportunity to go to college no matter what your finances were? Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed men can change the

world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

I told Ben that was a big chunk to think about. He laughed and commented again about me being out of my comfort zone. I thanked Ben and told him I needed to contemplate all he had said.

“No Problem,” he said. “I’ve got more thoughts and we’ll talk again. But don’t forget that **excellence** is the result of caring **more** than others think wise, **risking more** than others think safe, **dreaming more** than others think practical and **expecting more** than others think possible. That is what positive change is all about.”

He did it again, I had to stop a moment and think about what he had just said. I turned and walked into the dining room where the celebration was winding down. The same old good guys and their wives were starting to put things in order. I smiled as I admired their teamwork. They were the good guys pulling together! The sitting Master, Tom, came up to me and asked where I’d been. I told him I was out back talking to one of his Past Masters.

“Oh, Which one?” he asked.

“Benjamin” I responded.

“Benjamin? You must be mistaken. The only Master we have ever had with that name was our charter Master in 1854.

I was still for a moment and then went back outside to look for Ben. Of course he was gone but he left me with a lot to think about. And I hope, that is what I have left for you today. A lot to think about!

Thank you Most Worshipful for allowing me to meet my personal responsibility as a Mason for our beloved Fraternity.