

Change!

Antiquity cannot privilege an error, nor novelty prejudice a truth.

“Change is the one constant and Freemasons have done little to keep pace with change.” That is the conclusion drawn after a year of study by a special task force commissioned by the 2004 Conference of Grand Masters in North America. It is not a new idea! More than two centuries ago, Bro. Robert Burns, with characteristic insight and wisdom, wrote: *“Nature’s mighty law is change.”*

Too often, change connotes pessimism and regret, expressed in the line of the hymn, *“Change and decay in all around I see.”* It is a common fallacy of modern man to think that our problems are more complex and difficulties more challenging than those of our forebears in “the good old days” when we romantically imagine that life was simple and living was easy. Think of the challenges faced in everyday life by our pioneering forefathers – before modern heating and lighting, before modern transportation and communication, before medicare, social security, and pension plans, when it cost the full week’s wage of a common labourer to join a Masonic lodge, when Brethren walked miles over country roads lit only by the moon to attend a lodge meeting. Yet, Freemasonry flourished. By 1906, after the Grand Lodge of Canada was formed, during the first fifty years, membership had grown from 1179 to 37728, and the 41 lodges that united to form the first Grand Lodge had increased to 395 – a phenomenal growth by any standards!

“The motive of change is some Uneasiness: nothing sets us upon the change of a State or upon any new Action but some Uneasiness. This is the great motive that works on the Mind to put it upon Action.” John Locke (1632-1704) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690

The question has been posed, *“How did our predecessors in Freemasonry change?”* *“How did the early leaders attempt to modify the practice of Freemasonry in their day?”* *“Did their efforts succeed or fail?”* *“What was done – how was it done – was it achieved?”* These are appropriate and legitimate questions to which history can provide illustrative answers and from which we may derive instructive lessons.

The published Proceedings of our Grand Lodge abound with the documentary evidence to enlighten and encourage those who follow. The formation of the independent Grand Lodge of Canada under the leadership of M.W. Bro. William Mercer Wilson, the first Grand Master, is the great example of ‘change way back then’ achieved by the determination and perseverance of a few good men. They had a dream, a vision of how change could achieve a better way of practicing their Craft in Upper Canada, adapting Old World conventions in principle to serve the needs of their Brethren and conditions in the New World. That is what we recently celebrated in the Sesquicentennial year just past. They understood the delicate balance between timeless values and the necessity of adapting them to the present times and conditions. In this sense they proved that Freemasonry is both timeless and timely.

“The successful innovator is one who conceives new ways to carry on the old traditions of an old established organization.” M.W. Bro. R. Johnston – Grand Master New South Wales, 1991

“Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.” William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925) At present, many lodges are enjoying an influx of candidates for Initiation. At last it would seem that we have turned the corner – Initiations are balancing Deaths. It is easy to bring a man into Masonry; it takes only about forty-five minutes. The challenge is to keep these intelligent, curious young men interested and active in the practice of Freemasonry for the rest of their lives. A lodge must be more than a degree mill; more than a social club. A meeting must have more than the reading of minutes, the conduct of routine business, and the perfunctory conferral of yet another degree to supply the “mysteries and privileges” we promise every man that enters the lodge. The lodge must be a place of lively learning – an experience that is rewarding through participation, study, and discussion – education and self-improvement.

“The great thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving.” Oliver Wendall Holmes (1809-1894) In short, *“Decisions determine destiny.”* Frederick Speakman *“We must therefore take account of this changeable nature of things and of human institutions, and prepare for them with enlightened foresight.”* Pope Pius XI, Achille Ratti (1857-1939)

The words chosen for the community entrance signs by the town of Hunstville capture perfectly the essence of that balance we must ever try to achieve in our understanding and practice of Freemasonry: ***Touch the Past – Embrace the Future.***

We cannot live in the past, however great and glorious our history may be. When we boast proudly of the great and famous men that were Masons, and publish lists of eminent political leaders and statesmen, renowned writers, artists and musicians, and well-known captains of industry and business that were members of the Craft, they are invariably long dead. Masonry is the men, and a lodge is the members today. The report of the special task force of the Masonic Information Center, *It’s About Time: Moving Masonry into the 21st Century* (2005) ¹. begins with this wake up call quoting Michael Hammer: *“One thing that tells me a company is in trouble is when they tell me how good they were in the past. Same with countries. You don’t want to forget your identity. I am glad you were great in the 14th century, but that was then and this is now. **When memories exceed dreams, the end is near.**”* The report concluded with this call to arms: *“Cast off negativism. Turn the objection around to a challenge. Encourage and reward open and positive communication throughout each stage of change. Share ideas and ask yourself to take ownership of transforming the identity of Masonry through each and every action, regardless of how small. Make the fraternity that you want – brother by brother, lodge by lodge.”*

1. <http://www.msana.com/downloads/abouttime.pdf>

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