

Freemasonry in Society Today and Tomorrow

Some Personal Musings



by

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Over the last number of years and with increasing concentration in recent times, individual Brethren and Grand Lodges seem to be getting more and more involved in matters which clearly lie without the stated "aims and relationships of the Craft".

There are probably as many reasons for this as there are cases of it happening but, in any case, the fact that it is happening at all probably indicates that it is time for a close and searching examination of what Freemasonry is, what is happening to it and what action, if any, needs to be taken to reverse undesirable trends by channelling energies and enthusiasms down acceptable paths, as we approach the year 2,000 and beyond.

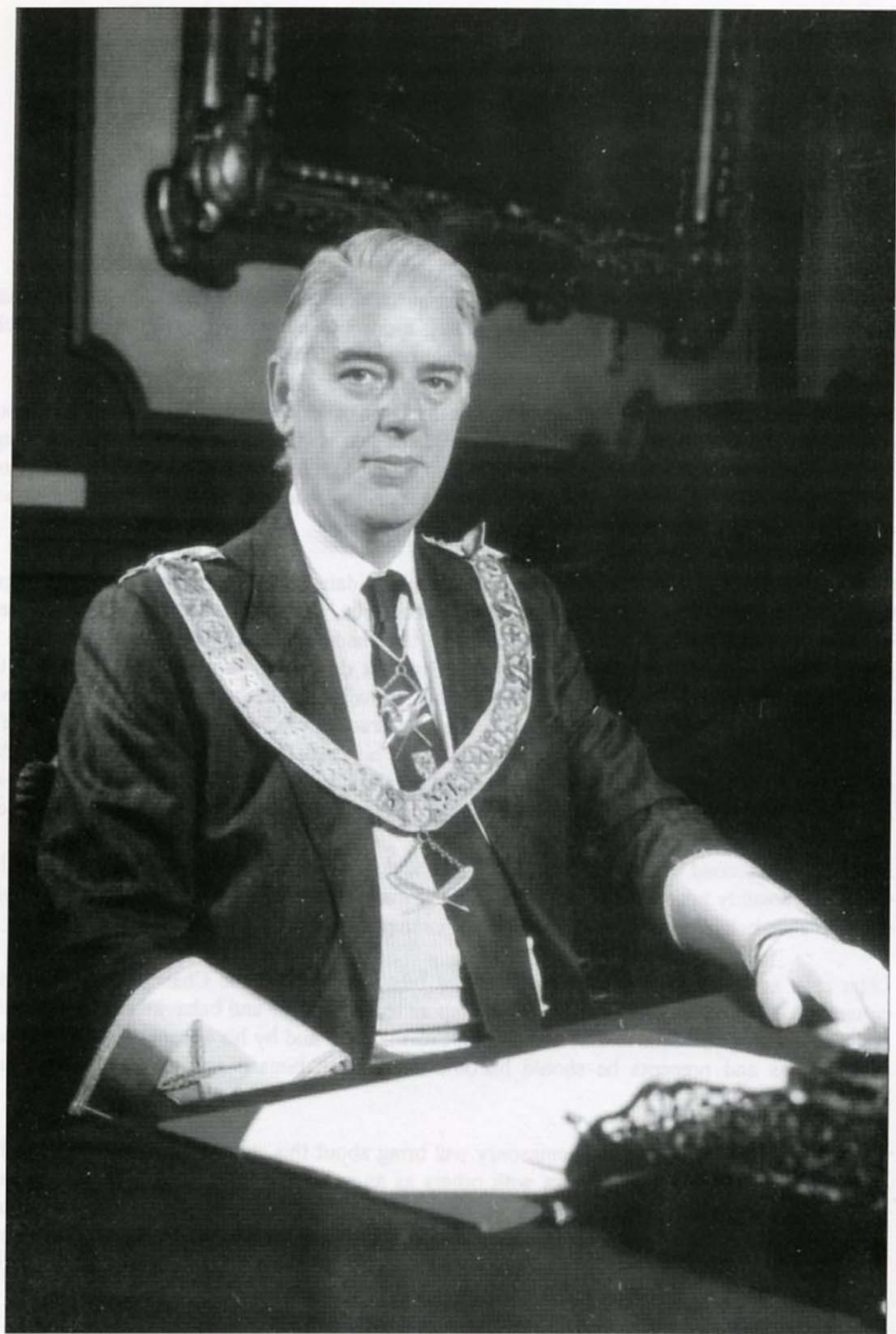
On his initiation, the Brethren are assured that the candidate is "living in good repute amongst his friends and neighbours". He is therefore, or should be, a peaceable and law-abiding citizen who gets on well with others. A little later on, the candidate affirms that he comes "with a preconceived notion of the excellence of the Order, a desire for knowledge and wishing to make himself more extensively useful amongst his fellow men". Later again, on being charged, he is told that the foundation of Freemasonry is "the practice of every social and moral virtue".

He is exhorted to learn how to discharge his duty to his God, his neighbour and himself; to be an exemplary citizen and that, as an individual, he should practise every domestic as well as public virtue and maintain those truly Masonic characteristics, benevolence and brotherly love.

Following his second degree, he is told that he should "not only assent to the principles of the Craft, but steadily persevere in their practice". Finally, following his third degree, he is told that his "own behaviour should afford the best example for the conduct of others".

Later still, at the peak of his Craft career, on being installed in the Chair of his Lodge, he consents to a comprehensive list of instructions as to his attitude and behaviour. All in all, the entire underlying principle is that by entering Freemasonry and by his acceptance and practice of its tenets and precepts he should become a credit to himself and an example to, and benefactor of, others.

It is expected and hoped that Freemasonry will bring about this state of affairs but that, in his daily life, a Freemason will interact with others as an individual and not in his capacity as a Freemason. Freemasonry is therefore an intellectual and philosophic exercise designed and intended to make an individual's contribution to society, and extension of himself, greater than they might otherwise have been had he not had the opportunity of developing his capacities and capabilities through membership of the Order.



What Does Freemasonry Provide?

Election to membership of a Lodge and initiation into that Lodge are an overt indication and confirmation of one's worth or value; and recognition of such, by the Brethren. In itself, this should increase self-esteem and hopefully generate a conscious or sub-conscious desire to prove worthy of others' confidence and trust. Subsequent promotions through the second and third degrees are symbolic of the Brethren demonstrating their satisfaction that their original choice and decision was correct and that the candidate is worthy, both innately and by virtue of his zeal, interest and proficiency in the symbolic Craft, for such promotions. These additional and consequent marks of esteem should engender in the candidate further personal satisfaction and self-confidence.

The Lodge teaches many skills often untaught, or not experienced, elsewhere. A Brother must speak in public, think on his feet, make decisions, vote on issues and finally chair meetings. These are invaluable assets in all other aspects of his life and for many this may well be the only opportunity of learning, practising and perfecting these skills and techniques.

In fact, I think that nowadays much of this list of benefits - the "Masonic Product" - is left to the candidate to work out for himself, and a good deal of the symbolism is lost unless the candidate's mind is keenly attuned to it. Indeed, Freemasonry fulfils many of the psychological needs of the average man. To a much greater extent than women, I believe, men are gregarious creatures who feel the "pack" or "herd" instinct more strongly. They need to belong to something, like a school or a team; and the Lodge takes on that role even providing, like a Regiment, a distinctive uniform which indicates each individual's place in the "pecking order" or his present achievement level. Further the Lodge provides outlets for the indulgence of personal interests which may be denied both at work and even in the home - administration, responsibility, dramatic talents, ceremonial, fund raising, caring - but above all the Lodge provides peace and tranquillity, a haven where the expected is unfailingly found; and the increasing turmoil of outside life can, with certainty, be avoided and forgotten for a time. Batteries can be re-charged and the Lodge's calming influence will help to fit one for the fray once more.

Those who have gone through, or may be going through, some serious mental trauma such as redundancy, or perhaps depression brought on by the stresses imposed by modern living, will know how true this is and can testify to the soothing and calming effect of this unique and invaluable supportive atmosphere, as found within the Lodge.

Is Freemasonry a Charity?

Freemasonry is not a Charity, but as in any fraternal setting, the need of a Brother or his dependents, will receive the sympathy and support, not always or necessarily financial, of his Brethren. Charity is a natural off-shoot of Brotherly Love and is promoted explicitly in the Masonic ethos, but it is not the "raison d'être" of the Order.

The hackneyed criticism of the Order that "it looks after its own" is totally spurious and without validity, as it is entirely acceptable to provide for a "class" of beneficiaries, viz. The Poor and Indigent Roomkeepers Society, the Presbyterian Orphans Society, etc. This does not mean that Masonic charity is restricted to Masonic beneficiaries; and more and more it is

directed to any deserving case or cause providing these do not infringe the terms of the 1938 Declaration. Also in his everyday life, and in his personal capacity, a Freemason is fully at liberty to support any charity which excites his sympathy.

The Purpose of Freemasonry

The purpose of Masonry is "self-improvement" - not in the material sense, but in the intellectual, moral and philosophic sense of developing the whole persona and psyche so as, in the beautiful and emotive language of the ritual, "to fit ourselves to take our places, as living stones, in that great spiritual building, not made by hands, eternal in the Heavens". Such an hypothetical whole, developed, complete person must, in his journey through life, and in his interaction with others, make a more extensive contribution to society in general, thus realizing and fulfilling his expressed wish on initiation, to become "more extensively useful amongst his fellow-men". Such are the lofty, lawful and laudable aspirations of the Order.

My view of the Masonic Order could be said to mirror W.B. Yeats view of the aristocracy - "protecting its denizens and devotees from the political storms of change, almost as if in a primal maternal shelter; and as an ingenious scheme for fostering a kind of spirituality, one of order of the soul - secular, profane and beautiful".

I would like to think that the same could be said of the Lodge as Yeats once said of Lady Gregory's home at Coole, in County Clare -certainly a "maternal shelter" for craftsmen of a different métier - that "this house has enriched my soul out of measure, because here life moves, without restraint, through gracious forms".

Society Today

As world changes happen faster, and in more complex and unpredictable ways, our natural needs for security, control, certainty and predictability are being undermined. This type of environment is a breeding ground for what is now termed the "Achilles Syndrome" where more and more people who are, in fact, high-achievers, suffer from a serious lack of self-esteem - men apparently more so than women. This is gleaned from an article on the work of Petruska Clarkson, a consultant chartered counsellor and clinical psychologist.

A number of contributors to the press recently have all been individually, yet collectively, worried by this impact on the individual caused by the rate of change in the culture and ethos of society; and by the effects on individuals that this phenomenon brings about. Gerard Casey writes that "in every society reason operates within the context of myth (myths being the fundamental cultural narratives which provide the unquestionable principles and values which constitute that society and without which that society cannot flourish)". Unfortunately those who pass for experts in education today have apparently no awareness of the importance of these things; and perhaps also under the pressures from those who urge an education based solely on technical and career subjects, such as potential employers, and also because many children are today brought up by the television-set instead of by their parents, as a society we are losing, or have already lost, our cultural narratives and like so many others are beginning to wander aimlessly, without the fuel to change direction, like debris in space on some pointless and endless orbit.

Casey suggests that the pressures of modern living have brought about moral chaos and collapse in contemporary Ireland and that indeed this has reached epidemic proportions throughout the western world. He goes on to speculate on the necessity of finding a rational ethical basis for behaviour, which is bound to be a lengthy task with no guarantee of success. Dr. Donal Murray, when Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin, identified "a hunger which is not being satisfied. People need to feel they belong; they need to feel they can be fully committed to something. The prevailing mood, in Ireland and elsewhere, is one of disillusionment and cynicism. We have come to see ourselves as living in a world of institutions and structures - we think of ourselves as belonging not to a country but to an economy; we think of our national life and resources in terms of statistics and of the machinery of Government, rather than of people and culture."

Dr. Murray goes on to say "it is increasingly presumed that the ideal citizen possesses no strong religious or moral beliefs, or at least has the decency not to intrude them into the public arena. Strong moral beliefs are, we are told, divisive; religious belief is, at best, embarrassing. In other words," he continues, "one is not meant to participate in national life with one's wholeness, with one's religious beliefs and moral convictions. These are private matters. We are in danger of trying to build a culture which regards as irrelevant the very realities which make people tick. Divisiveness results only when religion and morality are misunderstood. The individual conscience is worthy of respect because it seeks the truth, as every human being is obliged to do".

Freemasons will hardly fail to notice these references to ethics, morality and truth the very foundation of Masonic teaching and endeavour. But these cultural jewels-without-price are coming under increasingly powerful destructive forces which are eroding the foundation and base on which they rest. Conor Cruise O'Brien- the distinguished Statesman and commentator - says that "for as far back as we can go in history, human discourse concerning ethics has been effected, in varying degrees, with hypocrisy". Another commentator states that the term "business ethics" is fast becoming an oxymoron - that is a contradiction in terms; and the Bishop of Waterford felt it necessary to denounce publicly "the Cult of Excessive Individualism".

This excessive individualism led to a false idea of freedom. Such freedom told the individual that no limits could be placed on the choices which one could make. One was free to do one's own thing, to insist on one's own rights irrespective of the rights of others. Dr. Lee said the cult of excessive individualism has placed the individual man and woman on a pedestal at the centre of things, does not allow for community in the true sense; and militates against the realization of the "full life" to which all are called.

Whether we like it or not, know it or not, or knowing it are prepared to accept it, there are many subtle and not-so-subtle forces daily at work all around us which, as they multiply and accelerate, produce a sort of mental dizziness - not always immediately perceptible, but none-the-less insidious - which makes us unsure if our feet are on the straight and level path; and if they are, is it really the right path? These are the forces which are filling psychiatrists' waiting-rooms, and their pockets, as more and more people become aware that something is wrong, which is somehow affecting their whole being and their quality of life, but they are not able to identify the cause - only feel and sense its debilitating effects until help is sought.

What is needed, in all this, is some form of mental sheet-anchor - a sort of fixed navigational point like the pole-star which, when the clouds pass, can be seen and provides the traveller with the means to identify his exact position and thereby the knowledge to return to the true path.

Freemasonry - a part of, or apart from, Society

Every individual, on occasion, is forced to be a little introspective and ask himself "who am I and where am I?" Even an organization such as the Masonic Order must also occasionally ask itself "what are we and where are we?" What we are has, to some extent been already dealt with. We are a fraternal organization, the aims of which are brotherly love, the relief of our distressed Brethren and their dependents and the search after "Truth" which we may express as, and expand into, public and private morality, the knowledge and fear of God and, following on from that, respect for, and love of, our neighbour. This respect includes toleration of his personal viewpoint, his religious beliefs and his political opinions. If we pursue the aims of the Order, our search should widen, yet focus our vision, while ever making us more deeply aware of, and closer to, the Great Architect of the Universe, heightening our spirituality and deepening our insight into that which we may never hope fully to understand - something like the search after the mystic Grail as sought for, and fought for, by our possible, even probable operative forebears, the Knights Templars who followed on, in their own way, from the mythical Knights of the Grail Romances and Arthurian Legend. There is so much more to Freemasonry than the shallow depth of to-day's assessment and its scant inspection by to-day's society, obsessed as society is with material success for the individual rather than his contribution to society. Society's role-model to-day is the "successful man". Success is measured almost solely in money and material terms and the position or belongings that such wealth has made it possible to achieve and acquire. Whether this wealth, position and possessions were legally or morally acquired is beside the point - what matters is that these are the trappings of "success" irrespective of whether others were hurt, ruined or otherwise damaged in their garnering.

The Masonic Order is not just another organization like Rotary, Round table, Chamber of Commerce or any other; all designed to meet differing particular needs and carry out distinct functions. If Freemasonry were any or all of these then they would not have come into being.

We are what we are; and any attempt to assume the mantle of others detracts from both. Probably there are many who joined Freemasonry thinking it was something else or, who having joined it, would seek to fashion it into what they want, as being easier than trying to identify the institution they need and seek, which they thought they were joining when they became Freemasons. This is not a cure for anyone's ills.

It is true to say, however, that within the Masonic Order world-wide to-day, numbers are falling. Reasons for this are not hard to find and are based largely on the superficiality of to-day's society, the many pressures on individuals and the multiplicity of opportunities, in the social scene, for disposing of leisure time.

It has been identified by American research work into this problem, that there is a very strong inverse relationship between the amount of disposable leisure time that any particular pursuit requires and its popularity with individuals. People nowadays have a very limited amount of free time due, often, to very heavy demands by their profession or occupation; and this leisure-

time must be rationed out sparingly to avoid competition with family and other priority interests. Any pastime which makes substantial demands on time available, or which is not perceived to give a fair return - however that may be measured subjectively - will not be favoured and, in masonic terms, this will be evidenced by reduced attendance, no matter how pleased, proud or honoured a Brother may feel in being a member of the Order. We all know the annual attenders at the Installation Dinner -Brethren who come, bring guests and enjoy themselves hugely - who are then not seen for another twelve months. They are acknowledging their "belonging" to the organization without its providing, or seeming able to provide, the stimulation necessary to encourage regular attendance.

My grandfathers, apart from their Club and their Lodge probably had few enough outlets for leisure time and the monthly meetings were looked forward to, perhaps, as opportunities. Nowadays there are a host of activities open to all strata of society which not so many years ago would not have been open to them either socially or financially; and the monthly meeting or meetings, in many cases, instead of being opportunities are competitors with other activities whose "return" may be perceived more favourably.

In marketing terms we must view Freemasonry as a product. This is what we are "selling", or otherwise providing, for uptake by members and potential members. We must either improve the product or make the packaging more attractive.

Freemasonry is a fairly stable product in itself - very little can be done to alter the product without changing it entirely in both essence and appearance. Its principles and precepts have stood the test of time and are as valid today as ever. We cannot change the product and remain in the same business; and we must be true to ourselves in this. If we want to get into a new line of business it must be accepted and recognized that this is exactly what we are doing; and will it perhaps not be long before somebody decides that the new product is not quite right and needs further adjustment to meet the current demands of society. This, I suggest is not an option which is open to us. What we have and what we stand for will always be right, even if its acceptance rises or falls on the scales of time.

What we can do is upgrade the packaging, and make it look more attractive to potential customers, while also actually making it more palatable to current consumers. In the former case we can -and indeed already so do - actively adopt a higher profile; and gently but firmly "let our light shine before men". The candle in the window is the invitation symbol understood by all; and some will accept and knock on the door. I am entirely against the "go out into the highways and by-ways and compel them to come in" attitude. This is the means that those who would appoint a Public Relations Consultant seek to adopt. Hard-sell is not for Freemasonry however you may try to dress it up. Freemasonry is there to be adopted and savoured by those with minds attuned to, or even seeking, its attainment and what it provides. Freemasonry is not for everyone; but within all populations and at all times there will be those to whom it will appeal. By its packaging and presentation these customers may be identified and maximised but they cannot be created. "I am that I am" and no amount of manipulation or massaging will turn into silk a purse made from a sow's ear.

Appropriate opportunities must be taken to dispel the old myths and turn the spotlight onto the benefits of Freemasonry. In this we can all play our part for we are all - as a North

American Grand Master put it "someone else's perception of Freemasonry". Let us identify "the positives" about the Order, then talk openly about them and try to promote them. This will necessitate across-the-board activities, starting in the home and family, expanding through one's circle of friends and acquaintances, into the work-place and leisure resorts - leaving it up to Grand Lodge, of course, to deal with the media so that a constant and coherent message comes across. Otherwise there will be as many viewpoints as there are members of the Order, and we should not be surprised if the media and the public continue to be confused as to what we are and what we aspire to be.

In order to try to rejuvenate interest in Lodge attendance and to encourage those who so often fail to become active members again, a definite programme of action must be undertaken. Basically this has only one aim - to make Lodge meetings attractive, as something to be enjoyed; and not something to be endured.

One may look at this from many angles but it must be realised that, in the long run, it is something which every individual Lodge has to solve for itself. In time-immemorial days, before Grand Lodge systems were developed, every Lodge was an independent autonomous Body. As speculative masonry took over from operative masonry; and membership came mainly from persons not actually involved in the construction business; a code of ethics and conduct had to be instituted. Grand Lodge is an administrative and regulatory Body with an hierarchical structure down through Provincial Grand Lodges to the basic Craft Lodges. Within the framework, however, of Grand Lodge Laws and Constitutions, extended perhaps to meet Provincial needs, and culminating in the individual By-Laws of every subordinate Lodge, each Lodge is still an independent, autonomous Body responsible for its own activities, functions and ultimately its very survival. Nowadays, brought up on the ubiquitous Welfare System, everyone everywhere expects somebody else to spoon-feed him and shoulder all the responsibility.

Grand Lodge is not an Entertainments Committee and though it may make suggestions or give rulings, in the end the buck stops on every Master's pedestal. He must ensure that the ritual is well done; the business is conducted efficiently and effectively; that the business content is of interest and not mere routine; but above all that Brethren - usually the same Brethren - do not talk too much. Parkinson's Law is never seen in such intense clarity as at a Lodge meeting and, in particular, at the Festive Board on Installation Night. Poor speeches, over-extended, are a sure recipe for "I'm not going there again" - such a pity when the effect could and should be "Do we have to wait a whole year for the next one?"

As indicated earlier, I believe that the product cannot be changed, so we must improve the packaging. The packaging elements have been identified in our discussion document "Programme for Change - the Way Forward" as - our public image; membership; charity; policy; administrative development; and communication. It is up to us all, from bottom to top, preferably in that order and direction, to decide on the right "mix" to achieve our purpose of creating a masonic revival for our own and future generations' benefit; and hoping that our public perception may become, in the words of a newspaper advertisement seeking a firm of solicitors for a Baha'i group, that of a Body of "healthy pure-hearted souls, manifesting qualities of highest integrity, honesty and truthfulness; with an established way of life demonstrating detachment from material goods, and love of God through service to humanity". The Solicitors that was, not the Baha'i group!

We must try to demonstrate to the world at large, thereby hopefully making our Order more attractive to all would-be members, that the words of the Pro Grand Master of England, M.W. Bro. the Rt. Hon. Lord Farnham - himself an Irish Mason and a Past Senior Grand Warden of Ireland, as recorded in their proceedings, are true: "Freemasonry aims to develop the individual as a good citizen and as a man with a good moral foundation. Other benefits to society may follow, but they come from individuals acting in their personal capacities and not as Freemasons".

"It is not easy in the modern world to convince people that while Freemasonry as a Body is not for anything - and it is certainly not a pressure group - its influence on the personal standards of its individual members must be good for society in general and should be welcomed".

Into the next Millenium

I have endeavoured to identify who we are, what we are and where we are - now it is time to speculate on where we go from here. We are an unfashionable group whose numbers are falling - not perhaps in the developing countries, but in the developed world we are viewed as an anachronism with an ethos which may represent an embarrassment to many of today's moral lepers. "Whence comest thou Gehazi?" You will remember Elisha's devastating question to his servant who had run after Naaman, seeking to profit from his Master's - that is, someone else's - performance and use of his talents. As those who joined Freemasonry in great numbers after the Second World War, because they found it the closest alternative or substitute for the fellowship and support they found within the Forces, now pass on to their reward, there is no surge of candidates to replace them. So recruitment becomes a necessity, though the means and emphasis must be very carefully gauged. Some Grand Lodges have set up programmes of very positive recruiting to the extent that Brethren who induct a certain number of recruits are rewarded. Such a campaign is fraught with dangers and cannot, I believe, be beneficial. We must, in my view, adopt the process of "taking the horse to the water". We can show it to him and indicate its availability but unless the horse is thirsty we cannot do more than encourage him to drink.

The Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge Alpina of Switzerland in his address to the meeting of the Grand Secretaries of Europe in 1994 stated "It is essential to avoid any kind of proselytism - the main goal is not to seek new members but to improve others' perception of our Order" - hopefully, from that, candidates will flow.

We must try to correct the false perception of us by, in particular, the media and the Churches for they are the agencies who can and do formulate and direct public opinion; and both are highly suspicious and/or antagonistic.

The Churches find it impossible to accept that we are not a competitor but that, in fact, we are supportive of religion and encourage each Brother to increase his interest in his own beliefs through development of his intellect and spirituality. We have no theology, do not have sacraments, do not engage in worship as Freemasons in our Lodges, and cannot offer or provide the means of salvation through good works or in any other way. We know all this but how do we get it across to someone who does not want to know, because it suits his book to think or believe otherwise? We must remember that the Churches are undergoing an equal or

even greater fall-off in membership than we are in percentage terms. This is partly their own fault and partly due to the fact that today, like us, formalised and structured religion is simply unfashionable. In their own way they are trying to respond as, for instance, by introducing Mass in the vernacular in the Roman Catholic Church; and reducing to common-place prose the beautiful and uplifting language of the Book of Common Prayer and the St. James Bible of the Anglican Communion. Neither of these changes has worked because they have not addressed the problems but simply changed the trappings like someone putting on cheap casual clothes to go to Church, instead of wearing a suit.

In panic the Churches finally went over the top with charismatic evangelicalism in the High Church and fundamentalism in the Low Church denominations. A superb letter to the Irish Times of 22nd June, 1995, by Ms. Gwen Jermyn, a Methodist lady living in Co. Cork in southern Ireland, refers to the advent of extreme fundamentalist teaching and preaching which has hi-jacked the word "evangelical". She goes on to say "This fundamentalist emphasis is doctrinaire in the extreme, denies genuine spiritual exploration, and substitutes a narrow and negative insistence on its own fundamentalist interpretation. It is limited, divisive, offensive and arrogant, taking advantage of emotions and fears in a manner far removed from the gospel's clear teaching".

The archetype of this over-reaction was "The Nine O'Clock Service" in Sheffield which was lauded to the sky by many from the Archbishop of Canterbury down to trendy local vicars. The inevitable result became the greatest embarrassment the Church has experienced in recent times; when, after the usual mass-hysteria and mass-hypnosis induced by the usual mass-manipulation techniques on the super-incredulous, the White Knight of the New Age - the Rev. Christopher Brain - was first suspended from working as a priest and later resigned from the ministry after an orgy of debauchery, amidst a cacophony of vilification from those who had formerly been his keenest disciples; and the ritual washing of hands by the Church Authorities.

Let us not be complacent in this however, but let us learn from it, for the Masonic Order has had its own taste of a "Rave Service". In March 1995 a so-called World Congress was held in Mexico, sponsored by one of the small State Grand Lodges of Mexico which is still considered irregular by many - the Gran Logia Valle de Mexico. At this, if one can believe reports, all sorts of irregular Bodies took part and amazingly unmasonic things were said and done, ending up with the production of a Charter, called the Carta de Anahuac, signed by Representatives of all claimed 37 participating Grand Lodges. The follow-up was to take place in Portugal in 1996; and in Italy in 1997, sponsored by, as far as we are concerned, the irregular Grand Orient of Italy. Their Grand Master put in print his agenda for 1997 as follows:- "We believe that our study must be along the following lines: remedies for the overpopulation of the world, the programming of food and energy resources, the fight against planet and space pollution, cooperation between rich and poor Countries to eliminate conflicts as well as economic and technological differences, control over scientific discoveries addressed towards the good and progress of Humanity in the respect for the dignity and freedom of the individual and peoples, and to safeguard the rights and duties of Man".

This is not Freemasonry, these are not subjects that should ever be discussed in a masonic environment and those that do so are irregular Freemasons. This was firmly drawn to their attention.

Here is a clear case of Freemasonry going over the top and casting about frantically for a bandwagon to jump onto. Choosing the wrong bandwagon is worse than choosing none and is the sure way of bringing the Order into disrepute. If you have nothing constructive to do, then do nothing - as our former Grand Registrar - a highly respected lawyer - says of such situations - "if you are in a hole, stop digging".

The Media too cannot tolerate our privacy which they construe as secrecy with some hidden agenda of subversion or any other imagined malfeasance which is their particular flavour of the month. But we are not the only organization which has fallen foul of the Press for our privacy. Opus Dei, a right-wing group within the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland has fallen foul of the Media, and others, in terms with which we are very familiar, viz:- "We have heard some of our highest public officials intimate that members of Opus Dei ought to be excluded from high Office. No reasons were given, extraordinary when you consider that the matter concerned the imposition of a disability on citizens on the grounds of their religious profession, but we can imagine it involved the supposition that Opus Dei has some kind of corporate agenda. Why for example was it stated as fact that Opus Dei is secretive? What does the writer know that rebuts Opus Dei's repeated denial? People do not introduce themselves as members of one diocese or another. People readily understand that this is because it is private, not secret, no more than members of Opus Dei do not go about introducing themselves as such. Being a member of Opus Dei, or any other organization, is not a public credential. Furthermore, each member's freedom to think and act as they like, in public matters, would be badly compromised by other members acting as if they represented the whole Body".

What I am trying to emphasise is that as we move into the next millenium we must be steadfast in our adherence to the Aims and Principles and not attempt to obtain public acceptance through promoting or pursuing non-masonic activities which can only, in the long term, prove our undoing. We must be patient and bide our time for we will come again. I have heard it said that the pace of life and its stresses will get even more frenetic than at present and that while we may be able to cope with this intellectually, it is questionable if many can cope with it emotionally. In these circumstances with Internet bombarding us with a quatermass-like availability of ethical and unethical information in the privacy of our own homes, I believe that Brother Michael Yaxley, President of the Board of General Purposes of the Grand Lodge of Tasmania is quite correct when he writes "Society does have a need for a body such as Freemasonry. I believe that this need will increase rather than decrease. In the next century the work place will not offer fellowship and camaraderie sufficient to satisfy the social instincts that people have. Many people will work at home, linked to the office by computer and telephone. Others will work in an office with complex but nevertheless inanimate equipment. The irony of the Age of Communication is that people spend, and will spend, more time by themselves".

We must be careful to hasten slowly - "festina lente" - when we are assailed on all sides by exhortations to bring the Craft into the 21st Century - or to move out of our time-warp, as a Brother Robert H. Abel of New Zealand puts it. He refers to another Brother being fearful for the dignity of the Craft - and says that so he should be, for we merely cheapen our Institution by touting it in public. He wants to see the Craft respected for the efforts of its Brethren in the society in which they happen to live - we are all someone else's perception of Freemasonry.

He believes that man's spirituality tends to wax and wane in long term cycles; we would do well to ensure that our Craft endures unchanged for future - and perhaps less frivolous - generations to appreciate and enjoy.

Perhaps it may be said that Freemasonry is currently enjoying an Indian Summer before the harsh realities of Winter arrive. As the poet Humbert Wolfe wrote:

Listen, the wind is rising
And the air is wild with leaves;
We have had our Summer evenings;
Now for October eves!

This ends on a slightly threatening or admonitory tone which we may do well to note and prepare for - a sort of symbolic battening down of the hatches in order to ride out the approaching storm. But perhaps it may be more of a belt-tightening exercise as we ready the ship for the tide of men's spirituality to turn and carry our Craft calmly and sedately once more into deep and safe sailing waters. As the American writer, Henry Adams saw it; "The Indian Summer of life should be a little sunny and a little sad, and infinite in wealth and depth of tone - just like the season."

I think that pretty closely describes Freemasonry today - a little sunny and infinite in wealth and depth of tone - we all can empathise with that. A little sad too with memories of past greatness; and quieter more settled times when bogeymen were not found everywhere and Freemasonry was a recognised, accepted and fashionable part of society. Will our time come again? I think it will - not perhaps an exact replica of the past, for we cannot turn back the clock, but a slimmer, trimmer version with new vigour and enthusiasm ready to meet the new millenium.

But remember, Brethren, as we enter and endure "the Winter of our discontent" we must maintain our standards and our dignity. There can be no compromise with quality in any facet of our Institution. One of Ireland's greatest actors and one of its best-known characters Michael Mac Liammoir was once accused by a critic of being "square". "Yes" said Mac Liammoir, "perhaps you are right, but so much better to be square than shapeless". How appropriate for Freemasonry at this time - let us hold firm to the symbolism of the square and the compasses and let them be the means of restoring "Ordo ab Chao" - order out of mental and moral chaos - as we strive to readjust emotionally to the crushing pressures and stress of modern life.

Now Brethren, let me close on one final exhortation taken from the beautiful language of our ritual - "See that you conduct yourselves, out of Lodge as in Lodge, good men and Masons"; and remember those immortal words of Polonius giving advice to his son Laertes as he departs from Denmark, on his return to France, in Shakespeare's greatest play, "Hamlet" - "This above all, to thine own self be true; and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man". Almost the whole masonic ethos can be found in those few words - so easy to remember, so difficult to put into practice.

