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FREEMASONRY'S
REBIRTH

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FREEMASONRY'S REBIRTH

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Jim Tresner is an Oklahoma Mason, noted Masonic author, and Book Review Editor for The Scottish Rite Journal. In this STB he sounds a "wake-up call" for today's Masons. His question "How will we receive the new members?" A question posed by the reality of the younger members interest in Freemasonry going beyond what we have experienced in recent years.

—Editor

I sometimes wonder what it would have been like to be a Mason in the late 1500's in Scotland, when the rebirth of Masonry as a Speculative Craft from the Operative Craft was happening.

The Scots, to their credit, are known as very conservative of fundamental values. What must a craggy old warden of a Lodge thought when he saw men joining the Lodge who had never set one stone atop another in their entire lives; men who worked with pen and parchment, not their hands; and spent their time talking about ideas and theory. It must have offended his practical soul.

Yes, it must have been hard on that Operative Masonic Warden. It must have seemed to him that the whole world was turning upside down. How could a man call himself a Mason and not work stone?

How could he claim to be a member of a Lodge and not live in a Lodge?

“I dinna ken what it is,” he might have said, “but it’s nay the Masonry.”

And yet, of course, it was. It was Masonry about to emerge with renewed strength and life; speculative Masonry about to change the emotional and cultural world as surely as operative Masonry had changed and shaped the physical world by building cathedrals, fortifications, and castles. The operative Masons had dreamed dreams of faith and security and safety, and worked with skill and sweat to bring those dreams to reality. The Speculative Masons would dream dreams of humanity, liberty, fairness, and intellectual liberty, and they would labor with skill, and often with sweat and blood and tears to bring those dreams to reality.

The operative Mason had only a little ritual—enough to define the few officers of the Lodge, set basic rules of conduct, and instruct in the practical work-place rules which kept people from getting hurt. The Speculative Masons seized upon ritual as a means of instruction and thought, and expanded it to meet their needs.

In some ways, the two Masonrys were very different—but in all the important ways, they were the same. They were the means by which dream-driven men could accomplish those dreams.

As those dreams have changed over the centuries, Masonry has changed. Freemasonry has always been a living, breathing, dynamic thing. The Light Masonry celebrates is the light that shines in the eyes of

dedicated and thoughtful men, engaged with life; not the chilled glint of light reflected from the dusty glass of a museum display case.

And so Masonry changed again, after the battles and revolutions which reshaped society. It became, essentially, a charity. We found new philanthropic causes, and devoted time and energy to them. We solved problems for the society and the culture. Philosophy became less important, and ritual became more so. Masons, perhaps, became less distinguished by what they thought than by how they thought. It was very comfortable, and very rewarding. And we hardly noticed that the comfort was that of a well-made coffin. That is the Masonry into which I was initiated, passed and raised.

And so I have a certain fellow-feeling with that old Scots operative Warden, because Masonry is changing again. I rejoice in that—because I know the alternative is death, and I love Masonry too much to watch it die, or to know that it will die shortly after I do. And I know that any organization which does not reflect the needs of its living members is not long with us. When was the last convention of the National Association of Buggy Whip Makers?

We have been given a second chance at life, and only the profoundly ungrateful would turn their backs on it. Social and cultural changes have resulted in young men looking for a source of spiritual and ethical values in venues other than religion.

The age of candidates seeking admission into Masonry is growing lower and lower. Only a few years ago, the typical candidate was in his mid-forties. Now he is in his early 30's.

He comes having researched Masonry on the Internet. Often he comes after having read the rituals. He comes knowing much about what he is doing, and he often comes with many questions. And he comes expecting answers.

As some of our Lodges have discovered, statements such as "you don't need to worry about that," "don't ask questions until you have learned the lectures," "the ritual has everything you need to know," don't fall on deaf ears—they are heard—and treated with the contempt they deserve.

It's important to understand that these Masons do not come looking for a fight—that's the last thing they want. They want brotherhood. They want intellectual stimulation. They want to have someone at their back in the battles of life. They want to be with men dedicated to making a difference. They want to be with those who have subdued the ego and focus on that which is real and not on "petty piques and quarrels." They want to be in an association with older men who have promised to mentor and to share wisdom and experience.

In other words, and rather embarrassingly, they come looking for exactly what we have been telling the world we have to offer. In some ways, Brothers, we are in the position of an automobile dealership

which advertised luxury cars for sale because we used to have them, and now have buyers on the sales floor wanting to purchase—and some Lodges are having to say, "wouldn't you rather have a nice golf cart instead." Monty Python fans may be reminded of the cheese shop sketch.

There is no question that Masonry is supposed to be all the things they are looking for. Our ritual says it. Our Masonic heroes have written about it. We have all knelt at the altar and promised to make it real. So we can hardly blame them for expecting to find it.

They are willing to cut us quite a bit of slack. They understand that no one knows everything. I have not yet found one who became angry when I said, "I don't know the answer, but I'll find out." or even better, "I don't know the answer, but let's find out together."

What they don't like is "Go away kid, ya bother me!" And what happens, far too often, is that they do go away. And they tell their friends, "don't take the trouble to look at Masonry, it doesn't have what we want."

Really, they are not asking for much. They are only asking for what we should be able to give in civility, let alone fraternity. "Don't ignore me, share with me, treat my questions and concerns as important, help me learn, let me help with the Lodge." And, perhaps most important, "Understand that I am dream-driven, too. And my dreams are important just as yours are."

And it is true. Just as the old operative Masons were driven by dreams, as the first

speculative Masons were driven by dreams, as the Masons who created the great charities were driven by dreams, as we are driven by dreams, so are the young Masons. And they are dreams, not the nightmares they may seem to those of us who are long in the Masonic tooth. And they are our future.

For years, in speaking to Masonic groups, I told the audience that I was certain Masonry would survive—that something that “right” and that ancient simply could not die.

I can admit to myself, now, that I was whistling past the grave-yard. I wanted it to be true, I thought that if I told myself often and strongly enough, it would come true.

And I know it IS true. Dream-driven organizations can never die...

...unless they kill the dream.

You see, my Brothers, in the life of every organization there comes a point of choice—a point at which circumstances, fate, even the dreams themselves culminate in a moment of decision. When that point is reached each person must make a choice. It isn't possible to avoid it; for not choosing is a choice. One choice leads on to new growth, strength, vigor, power and relevancy, with all of the effort and even pain that growth always entails. The other choice leads to the ease of death and the comfortable warmth of decay.

The fraternity is at that point, and each of us must choose!

You may choose life; or you may choose death; but you must choose!