

Living Freemasonry

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United Grand Lodge of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory
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Being a Freemason is not – to me – merely about knowing what our Masonic tenets and principles are but lies in taking pleasure in them.

Knowledge by itself can be a dry and dusty thing, to be taken out and aired from time to time when the occasion calls for it. 'Living' is an attribute which describes Freemasonry more aptly and, looking to the Oxford English Dictionary, we can describe 'Living Freemasonry' as having life; being real; being contemporary; and is the action of living one's life in a particular manner.

I learnt one useful lesson about 'living Freemasonry' from my father, who was a Freemason in another jurisdiction. He was an Anglican who fell in love with a devout Catholic woman. To marry her, he had to promise that their children would be brought up and raised as Catholics. And so we were. We went to Catholic schools, were immersed in Catholic doctrine and went unfailingly to Mass every Sunday; and my father was always there to make sure that we got to Mass on time. He also insisted that we attend Sunday School in the afternoon, something my mother was not particularly fussed about.

My father remained staunchly Church of England until his death in 1975 and I occasionally wondered why he was so much more rigorous than my mother in ensuring that we practised our Catholicism. It was not until I joined Freemasonry some twenty years later that I was able to comprehend this conundrum. He applied the principles of his Masonic Obligation to all facets in life; not just in applying them but also in taking pleasure in them.

He did this by cultivating friendships with Catholic clergy. He taught Italian to our local Parish Priest – a Canadian – to prepare him for a posting to the Holy See. This was all the more remarkable because my father, although a linguist, had to teach himself Italian first to do so. He frequently invited senior clerics home for dinner and they would discuss universal points of theology late into the night. These were entertaining evenings and I used to listen on the periphery while pretending to be absorbed in homework.

This is an opportune point to go from the example of an individual; to how we as Freemasons can practice and enjoy 'living Freemasonry'. To quote Christopher Hodapp in 'Freemasons for Dummies': *"Freemasonry is a strange topic. It's not a religion, but it's religious. It's not a political movement, but its members have been some of the greatest political and social reformers in history. It's not a charity or a service club, yet its various organisations operate outstanding charities. Its language comes from the 18th century, yet its lessons apply to the 21st..."*

So what is Freemasonry? To me it is a combination – in varying degrees – of fellowship; of charity; of sociability; of self development; and of brotherhood throughout the world; all robustly underpinned by a strong moral code which expects men to be truthful and for their promises to be believed.

How many of us live our Freemasonry? That is a question I cannot answer with any degree of objectivity as it has not been measured. This is not an important question though. We can safely assume that Freemasonry is representative of the society in which it exists; and that this representation is heavily biased towards the good in society – arising from the values of the Institution and the aspirations of those who join.

The important question is: How can I live my Freemasonry? There are no prescriptive answers but there are practical guides which a man can follow. First and foremost among these is a mindshift from wearing Freemasonry as a comfortable, well worn glove which fits snugly to your hand, which you pull on once a month or thereabouts without a second thought; and which you later remove with either a feeling of satisfaction or perhaps satisfaction tinged with a fleeting and soon forgotten niggles; then putting it away until the next time. It is all too easy to be seduced by routine. The Canadian Mason and author, Stephen Dafoe, likened it to an imaginary restaurant chain which had a slogan, *"We take good food and make it better"* – but did not deliver on that promise, leading eventually to the decline of the chain as its newer patrons woke up to the hollowness of that promise.

Shake off that seduction! We must take responsibility for thinking about our Freemasonry and how we can implement its philosophy in our everyday lives with our families, our neighbours, our friends, our communities, our workplaces and our Lodges. Living Freemasonry starts with us and our Lodges and the decisions we make today will have a bearing on Freemasonry for our children's children.

We are at a moment in time that may never be repeated. The world is going through revolutionary change and our Lodges need to adapt to that change or risk becoming an anachronism. Change is our bedfellow and there is nothing we can do to displace it. Instead of making change unwelcome, we should embrace it and partner it.

As Master Masons, we are the Perfect Ashlars of our Lodges. Essentially it means that we must have the same set of values in our 'outside' lives as those we espouse in our Freemasonry. If not, it means that the Ashlar is flawed, presenting one face to Freemasonry and another to the world at large.

The starting point must be our ritual because it is the very cornerstone of our moral philosophy, but – and this is a very salient point – it is not an end, it is only one means to an end. The ritual is there to provide lessons to the initiate as he progresses through Freemasonry. It is not there to be trotted out as an exemplification because we do not have a candidate. It gets back to what we and our Lodges are there for. Are we there just to make Masons or are we there to develop, promote and encourage lifelong learning and discovery, based on the principles of our fraternity?

If we are there just to make Masons, then we have lost sight of the reason for our Lodge's existence. One can see the symptoms of this with Lodges scheduling exemplifications; or opening and closing in the three degrees; or just having a business meeting only. While these may satisfy long tenured members, it does nothing to develop them or to attract and keep our newer members. This is not 'Living Freemasonry'; it is 'Fossilised Freemasonry'.

My message is simple – if the Lodge does not have a candidate, then do something different. "Not another lecture...", I hear the groans. I agree – lectures can be boring but they can also be most interesting. In the opening to this essay I wrote that 'Knowledge by itself can be a dry and dusty thing, to be taken out and aired from time to time when the occasion calls for it'. I am referring to stored knowledge – what we have already learnt. What can make a lecture interesting is new knowledge – adding to the store. What is more, it does not mean that we need new lectures or new lecturers. The ingredients are all there, we just need to learn how to cook with them.

The late Max Schubert of Penfolds Wines once said that you cannot make a good wine from bad grapes but that you can certainly make a bad wine from good grapes. We have good grapes in Masonry and these are the lectures and other resources available to us. Having a person stand in a corner of the Lodge Room and drone on and on is not what I espouse. As an example, take the accredited talk on the First Degree Working Tools. This was written in 1924 and we need to remember that it was written at a time when society was vastly different, although the underlying message is still of value. There are a number of ways to present that talk, other than the drone approach.

One approach would be for the presenter to take a point from the talk, go up to one of the brethren, state the point and ask him if he agrees or disagrees with it. If the answer is monosyllabic, ask him 'why?' If he says something out of left field, bounce that off the others around him. Do the same with other points. In this way, the dusty talk becomes interactive, people engage in it because it becomes fun and we learn from each other.

It's not hard. These talks abound with potential questions. For instance, here is one example: "The talk on the First Degree states that the 24-inch gauge is a static instrument, rigid and inflexible; while the other two are dynamic. The gauge also represents the wisdom of the Worshipful Master. This seems to imply that the Master's wisdom should be rigid and inflexible. Do you agree with this?" And so on.

Another approach is to take a Masonic topic – controversial or otherwise – well before a meeting and organise a debate between two teams drawn from your Lodge; or you can challenge another Lodge in your district. Run it as a traditional debate with your DGIW or an independent Master as adjudicator. When the debate is over and before the result is announced (save the adjudicator's summation and verdict for the South), open the topic up for discussion by all. Have someone there to facilitate this. Take a point made by one of the teams and ask an audience member to say whether or not he agrees with it. Bounce it off others. Take another point and do the same. At the end of it all, arrange for a rematch to be hosted by the visiting Lodge and it will snowball.

What else can we do? We can invite interesting people from our local community organisations and professions to come to Lodge and speak to us. It's a diverse community out there, full of people with engaging interests. It would not take much persuasion to engage them, especially if the Lodge can assist their endeavours in a material way. Show our communities that we are interested in what they do, that our Lodges are a part of it and that we want to explore how we can actively contribute to community life.

We must also involve our wives and partners. If Freemasonry is a way of life, then it cannot be to the exclusion of wives and partners. How can they contribute to it? Ask them how; not tell them how. Ask them to discuss it in your Lodge so that you can learn from them. Our wives and partners are a powerful, untapped source for doing good in the community.

We need to focus on transforming our Lodges into quality organisations that are like old trees – firmly rooted in the ground of history and tradition but forever putting out new leaves, new branches and new shoots. We need to shift our thinking about our Masonry by actually thinking about our Masonry and taking it out into our communities as an observable and attractive way of life.

Let us not focus on declining membership and how we can stem that but on how we can stimulate the members that we have to become more active in learning; in heightening our awareness and our contributions to our communities; and taking responsibility for making ourselves better. Freemasonry is not about taking good men and making them better. It is about taking good men and then we make ourselves better.

All it takes is for one man to join such a fraternity and to enjoy his Masonry; and he will bring others in. If there is one thing that is clear to me, it is that age is NOT a prerequisite for enthusiasm, exuberance and energy in our Freemasonry.

Live your Freemasonry and your Freemasonry will live!