

**The Most Worshipful Grand Lodge
of
Free and Accepted Masons of Florida**



**GRAND
ORATION**

**By: R□W□ Brian R. Poole
W□ Grand Orator
2016-2017**

The Grand Lodge of Florida – Grand Oration 2017
“Building Today for a Stronger Fraternity Tomorrow”
By: R.:W.: Brian R. Poole, W.: Grand Orator

The Wooden Box

Most Worshipful Grand Master, Elected and Appointed Grand Lodge Officers, Past Grand Masters, Distinguished East, My Brothers, Ladies, Members of our Masonic Youth, and Friends:

First, Grand Master thank you for the opportunity to serve you and The Grand Lodge of Florida as Grand Orator this year. While traveling around the state at many of your Official Visits, having numerous conversations with the Brethren, and remembering previous Grand Orations from Right Worshipfuls Waas, Wiseman, King, and my mini me, Alan Rosenthal, I have learned a few things; stand up straight, speak clearly, not too long or short, keep it interesting and pertinent, and stay behind the podium, like I could do that right, well Most Worshipful Grand Master that’s what’s about to happen.

There was a box that sat on my father’s dresser, it did not look like anything special, it was made of wood about 3 inches by 5 inches and about 2 to 2½ inches high. He received it from his father and now it sits on my desk. However, when opened, it told a story. In it was my grandfather’s veteran’s pin as he served in the Army in World War I, his glasses, and a few other small items. Then my father added his veteran’s pin as he served in the Coast Guard during WWII, his military ID card, and a few other items. I have added a couple of items to the box: a DeMolay Past Master Councilor’s Jewel and a Cross of Honor. While none of this seems important or valuable to anyone else they tell a story, a story of family, my family.

While I’ve had several role models and mentors in my life, some family and others, well family, from my Masonic family and yes, they are FAMILY. The lessons taught me from my Brothers about the Masonic Box and the stories contained therein continue to echo in my mind, and as I impart some of these lessons and explain some of the emblems, tools, decorations, and symbols, I hear that small voice out of the past from one of my DeMolay Advisors or my Lodge Brothers and I just open my mouth and they talk through me to give that explanation or wise council. While we must be willing to teach, we must also be willing to learn. We see Masonry our way and we learn Masonry our own way and we all see it differently. The light just doesn’t go on; the switch must be flipped. Before that can happen we must take off the collars and the jewels, set aside the titles, and remember that from the first time that we knelt at the Altar we are BROTHERS. Only on the level can we assist another Brother in finding the switch and in due time he will be able to turn it on and see the light. But how is this done?

Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” We must train our younger Brothers, not young in age, but young in Masonry, thus solidifying our future. The last generation took the time to teach and train us and we must take the time to teach our future. While teaching the future we must listen to the future and I know we’ve never done that before. These are the six words that will kill any organization unless it’s followed by “but let’s give it a try.” So let’s give it a try and listen to our Brothers because we need to learn about them as much as they need to learn Masonry.

From the Masonic Reformation webpage I found the following article written by Barry Newell:

“While I have great love for my Lodge and the Fraternity, some of the practices and policies that are used I am not a fan of. One such is the ‘cheapening’ of Freemasonry. Indicative of most Lodges

throughout the United States is the low dues. Several years ago at a District Communication, the Senior Grand Warden had a list of all Lodges in the state that listed the dues and initiation fees when the Lodges were established, the current dues and initiation fees, and what they would be if they had followed inflation. The Brethren were then divided into two groups: those younger than 65 years of age and those 65 and older. Each group was asked if they were willing to significantly raise dues or not. The younger group was far more willing while the older group was not. Another way we have cheapened the experience is by making it far too easy for one to attain the Sublime Degree of Master Mason. I believe this is a result of the 'factory era' of the mid-20th century.

Freemasonry grew dramatically starting in the 40's and kept growing until the height of membership in American Masonry being in 1959 with 4,103,161 members. Lodges during this time turned from, in my opinion, centers of enlightenment to factories, more concerned with running through initiates, reading minutes, and paying bills. Lodges were overburdened with petitioners (seems weird that I would complain about such a thing), and the Brethren seemed more concerned with one becoming a Master Mason so he could join appendant/concordant bodies rather than gaining a strong understanding from the very beginning. This lack of education and ease of progression allowed Masons to often just walk away as it was something easily given to them and they didn't have to work hard for it. When one has to work hard and put an effort into progressing through the Degrees they will keep coming back and stay active within the Lodge because it was a special achievement, not an instant gratification. Just in my area alone, not taking into accounts I hear from all over the United States, I have seen far too many young men walk away because Freemasonry did not live up to their expectations or meet the developmental needs. When other young Masons ask about my experiences and the issues they see, I tell them to 'be the change you want to see. Don't just walk away.'

Since 2001, the M.R.F. (Masonic Restoration Foundation) has been conducting research on the problems affecting American Masonry, identifying successful practices, and offering realistic solutions aimed at reversing negative trends.

The M.R.F. seeks to put out, through publications and symposiums, research to assist Lodges in cultivating 'time-tested cultural and fraternal Masonic practices' that are seen as successful and practical. These successful policies have been collected and Lodges that practice them are often referred to as 'Traditional Observance Lodges.' The M.R.F. does not Charter or establish these Lodges; Lodges that style themselves 'Traditional Observance Lodges' are still under the auspices of their respective Grand Lodge and must operate in accordance to the Rules and Regulations of that jurisdiction.

Many Masons are ignorant as to what Traditional Observance Lodges are. According to the M.R.F. and the Brothers of Traditional Observance Lodges, these Lodges seek to 'incorporate higher dues, festive boards, a strict dress code, and higher standards of Ritual.' They are characterized by their solemn and dignified approach to the performance of the Masonic Rituals and demanding the best out of their members in the pursuit of that Masonic talking point 'making good men better.' Some differences one would see is the use of a Chamber of Reflection prior to the Entered Apprentice Degree forming a 'Chain of Union' at the end of each meeting requiring more time between Degree progression requiring candidates to present some kind of research paper to the Lodge require the strictest silence during the Rituals so as not to distract from the solemnity of the Ritual and holding a festive board (or Agape) following the closing of a Lodge. The Chamber of Reflection is a room filled with symbols and implements to allow the aspirant to reflect and meditate on his mortality and the changes he seeks by going through the initiate experience of Freemasonry, and in some jurisdictions, he answers certain questions. What is included in a chamber may differ between jurisdictions and with the various Rites. The Chain of Union is formed at the closing of a Lodge where the Brethren go on the Level taking

hands, often after crossing the right arm over the left. This act reminds me of the principle Tenet of Relief where we are taught that Masons are linked together by an indissoluble chain of sincere affection. The word 'Agape' means 'love' in ancient Greek. In the Masonic context, Agape refers to one of our Tenets, Brotherly Love, and the Brethren coming together for this meal is a reminder of that Tenet.

With the onset of the Millennial Era, Freemasonry is coming to a crossroads; we can either reform and restore the prestigious nature of Freemasonry or we can continue to live in decline and inactivity. Many Masons seem okay with complacency and stagnation, and taking Freemasonry on course towards destruction; often the slogan 'that's how things have 'always' been done' is touted by those unwilling to change course. Sadly, in attempt to slow the shrinking membership, Grand Lodges have lowered the standards and made mediocrity the new standard which has done very little to increase help or turn the tide. In learning about the M.R.F. and the Traditional Observance Lodge, I have found that many Masons find it and its practices controversial, and that the changes are only 'superficial.' Some have even charged that the practices are in violation of not just the Rules and Regulations of the numerous Grand Lodges, but the Rituals themselves. Some have sadly let their passions and prejudices get the better of them which led them to fabricate information against them or trying to pass off the faiths and/or religious beliefs of individual Brothers as the characteristic and practices of the Traditional Observance Lodge system. From my observation, some of the pieces of propaganda passed around appear to be un-Masonic and not very Brotherly. From my experience these practices exclusive from the Tenets and Landmarks of Freemasonry, but take us back to a time before the factory setting to a place when education, development, and improvement were the concerns of the Lodge rather than filling the records book with faceless names and absent dues payers.

Lodges should not be discouraged by such banter, but rather should look at practices such as the Traditional Observance Lodge and find what works in their Lodge. Brothers need to seek change and reform the practices that have brought Masonry to a declining membership in applicants and attendance. Masonry needs to reform and go back to time that made Freemasonry famous and immortalized. Freemasonry is not a mere social or dinner club, but an ancient institution dedicated to transforming ourselves from the Rough to the Perfect Ashlar. Brother Andrew Hammer said it best with Freemasonry being 'an institution that calls men to their highest level of social being, in a state of dignity and decorum, which could serve as a place for serious, mindful discourse on the lessons and meaning of life, and search for the better development of oneself.'

What I would suggest to my Brethren is some simple concepts. 1) Worry more about quality than quantity. (I'd rather have a Lodge of 20 Masons who were all active than a Lodge of hundreds where no one attended Lodge) and know who you are bringing in. It takes more than a quick Investigative Committee and a month to get to know someone. 2) Don't be afraid to raise your dues and fees. I found it funny that my dues for Kappa Sigma (my college Fraternity) were five times higher than my Lodge dues are now. 3) Learn, not just memorize, your ritualistic work. The applicant has paid his fees and the Lodge has seen him fit to go through the Degrees of Masonry and the Lodge owes it to him to give him the best experience possible. This also includes learning how to properly present the Ritual so as to leave them in a state of awe and wonder. 4) Don't be satisfied with the status quo. Just because the Grand Lodge establishes the basic premise of progression and proficiency doesn't mean the Lodge cannot go beyond to ensure that the candidates gain the most knowledge that can be gained in a given Degree. 5) Have some kind of educational presentation at Lodge meetings and promote an environment that cultivates learning. It is important to know and understand the history, rituals, symbols, famous figures, and ceremonies of our Order. Without the availability to this knowledge we would fail to have a proper education and so much would fall into the fog of history and obscurity. 6) Dress in the proper attire for Lodge. Nothing bugs me more than when members, and even officers, show up looking like it's just

another day sitting around the house. The attire of the Brethren should never detract from the dignity and decorum of the institution. 7) Be social by having a festive board or Table Lodge where Brothers can assemble and further build the bonds of friendship and brotherhood. 8) Realize that habits of the Lodge you are familiar with are not necessarily traditions. I hate hearing ‘that’s how we’ve always done it.’ I heard that so many times that I decided to read the old minutes of my Lodge and I quickly learned that no, that’s not how we’ve always done it. 9) Don’t be in such a hurry. By this, Lodges should allow candidates to take their time progressing from one Degree to the next. We need to ensure that a newly initiated Brother sets a proper base to his education and knowledge of the mysteries of Freemasonry.

The generational gap created by the counterculture revolution of the 1960’s combined with the ‘Factory mode’ Lodges were set into in the mid-20th century has created poor Lodge practices and policies which has resulted into declining membership and, as Brother M.D. Jardine wrote in 1996, the emergence of ‘Robot Masonry’ which sees Ritual as the end rather than the means. Lodges can either stay the course and crash into the rocks or they can change course safely reforming Freemasonry to an institution that isn’t just another social club like the Lions or Kiwanis. We ‘Millennials’ have a great opportunity to take change and lead the change. We have already seen this with the establishment of the M.R.F. and the perpetuation of the Traditional Observance system, but not every Lodge is the same nor should it be. Every Lodge is different and there is no ‘cookie cutter’ answer or solution to what will cause a Lodge to prosper. Traditional Observance may work for some Lodges, but it won’t work for all. Nor should Lodges attempt to be Lodges of the past or some ‘golden age’ long forgotten because it is folly and every age of Masonry has had its challenges.”

In closing, Brother Mark Phillips in this month’s Scottish Rite Journal wrote “Our commitment to the Craft requires us to be active participants, not passive observers. By explaining the basis for our commitment, we thereby impart our enthusiasm and convictions to others who might be less confident, as well as help us to maintain the Masonic goals which we still expect to achieve. Those explanations, as we define them, constitute our landmarks. Our explanations may change, but the reasons should remain the same. Pragmatically speaking, that is what makes them landmarks.”