

HOW I WOULD LIKE TO REMAKE FREEMASONRY BY LEÓN ZELDIS

*(Paper read at the Benjamin French Lodge #15, Washington, D.C.) by León Zeldis
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The first thought, when considering such a question, is “Well, where do I start? There are so many things I would like to change!”

However, when getting down to business, making a sort of a shopping list, I discovered it was not so much a matter of making radical changes, or overturning our old traditions, but rather, of improving what we have, of profiting from the experience of other brethren, other Lodges, other Grand Lodges.

The symbols and moral teachings of Freemasonry are our foundation stones, these cannot be removed without having the whole edifice come tumbling down. The structure of Freemasonry, as well, doesn't have to change, that means, the pyramid of lodges, Grand Lodges, and the side degrees, Supreme Councils, Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapters, etc. What needs change, perhaps, and I'm not trying to be dogmatic, is the way Freemasonry operates.

Let me give you an example. In America, most lodges regularly work in the third degree. Of course, Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts are excluded from those meetings. This is not a “landmark”, in fact, the universal practice abroad is to work regularly in the first degree, raising the lodge only to confer a higher degree. Why this is different in America, doesn't concern us. Some blame the scare after the Morgan affair, it makes no difference why it happened. The fact is this is the current practice. What is the result? A man is initiated, we tell him he is now a Mason, he undertakes some obligations as a Mason, yet, the next time the lodge meets, he is left out. Perhaps not once, but several times. How does he feel, this newly initiated brother? Does he feel part of the group? Does he feel welcome? Was he prepared for this kind of welcome? This brother starts his Masonic life on the wrong foot. And correcting this problem is so easy. Some Grand Lodges have already taken steps, allowing its lodges to work in any degree they wish. Should all Grand Lodges take this simple step, that would erase a common cause of disappointment and the loss of promising brethren.

Another example. Many lodges have the rule of approving every expense, no matter how insignificant, in open lodge. Brethren, I'll tell you a secret, there is a new invention called a “budget”. Well, it's not so new, really. What do other lodges do? The open lodge approves

a budget at the beginning of the year, and then, through the year, all expenditure within the framework of the budget has to be approved only by the Master and the Treasurer. Maybe the Secretary as well. Think how much time will be saved in lodge business. And how much more interesting the meetings may become, without discussing why the electricity bill is so high.

Brethren, I travel a lot. I have visited lodges in many countries. Everywhere, I have found that the most successful lodges are those that hold interesting meetings. Coming to the lodge should be fun.

Think for a moment about our competition. There is television, video, and now Internet, and of course, the old staples, bridge and poker. There are shopping malls, sports arenas, plays and movies, concerts and galleries and night classes and... oh yes, there is also a family, don't forget, a wife, and the kids.

So take a man who comes home from work, or perhaps he still is chained to his desk. When that man stops to consider how he will spend the evening, there must be some darn good reasons to make him choose the Lodge. And don't tell me about loyalty, tradition, his father was a Mason. This is the 21st century, or the end of the 20th – if you want to be punctilious. Life is fast, time is our most expensive commodity. And a non-replaceable one. Each one of us tries to make the best use of every waking hour.

So, how do we make our meetings interesting? There are many ways, but the most important factor, the one key factor is this: involvement. Be sure to make as many brethren as possible take active part in the proceedings. If there is a ceremony, assign stand-ins for every officer. Have rehearsals with participation of as many brethren as you can get. Have three Directors of Ceremonies, six Deacons, let them practice the ceremony, then, if one of the regular officers is sick, or engaged, you'll have a replacement ready at hand.

Have lectures, by all means. Not only on the history of Freemasonry or again an explanation of the Tracing Board. Brethren, when you have heard that a few times, it takes a strong will to stay awake. Particularly if it's simply a recitation of what's written in the book.

Ask brethren to speak about their work, their profession, their hobbies. Have panel discussions. That way you'll involve several brethren at once. Subjects? Anything. The AIDS epidemic, the problem of drugs in schools, mercy killings, police brutality, don't be afraid of discussing controversial subjects. Just make sure the debate sticks to the rules of order. Everybody addresses the Master, no interruptions are allowed, every speaker as one five-minute period, and perhaps a three-minute reply if warranted. Don't let comments turn into another lecture.

Have frequent dinners with the ladies. Initiations are good opportunities to have the wife of the new brother meet the other ladies. Make the new member – and his wife – feel honored, the star of the evening. In my lodge we give the new brother, at the end of the Initiation ceremony, two pairs of white gloves, one for himself, and one for his wife or his mother, in fact, we tell him, to the woman he most respects. We also give him three red roses, for the wife. To show that the Lodge is not going to split the family, but rather to enlarge it. The new Mason becomes part of this big, huge family of millions of Masons throughout the world.

If at the beginning Brethren are reluctant to speak up, to take part in the debates, ask the brother who will deliver his paper at the next meeting to prepare it in advance, make copies, hand them out to two or three of the “inactive” brethren to read the paper and prepare a written comment on it. Praise, no matter how well intended, is not a comment. A comment should increase our knowledge of the subject. By the way, papers read in Lodge should always be written. No improvisations, no ramblings based on a few headings.

Once or twice a year, have some outing, a barbecue, or a week-end in a resort out of town. A visit to some geographical or historical site. Depends, of course, on where you live. In Israel we have plenty of archeological sites. But you have good places to visit everywhere. You know quite well all the interesting places you can visit on a Sunday. Instead of going alone, go with a group of your brothers.

I have spoken about the lodge, because that’s the foundation. The Grand Lodge exists by virtue of the individual lodges, not the other way around. The Grand Lodge should act like the conductor of an orchestra. He doesn’t play all the instruments. He directs, he does not impose on a soloist his opinion of how he should play. Grand Lodge should give the greatest latitude to the lodges, to develop in their own way. A lodge wants to meet every week? Let it. Wants to work only once every two months? That’s also OK. As long as the lodge really works, as long as the brethren are active. As long as the lodge grows and develops.

Tradition. That’s a real stumbling block in many lodges, and also in Grand Lodges. “We have always done it this way. Change? It won’t work.”

Brethren, tradition should act as the helm, not the anchor. Take an example. Tradition is that you cannot ask a man to become a Mason. No sir, that’s a no-no. The ritual says so: “on your own free-will and accord”, or something like that. Why? Why shouldn’t you ask a friend, whom you know would be a good element in the lodge, to come and join it? Of course, if you are the boss, and you “invite” your subordinates to join the lodge, that’s another matter. That’s twisting arms. But telling about the lodge, describing its good points, the fun you have, the things you learn, the help you give, why not?

Better still, invite him to an open activity, such as a lecture around the table, or a social gathering of the Lodge.

I have spoken a lot about the fun we should have in Lodge. But Masonry is in fact a very serious subject. Ours is not a club, not a Rotary or Lions with aprons, not a charitable foundation.

We have a very serious mission: to improve ourselves, and thereby improve society. Wow, big words!

What do I mean by “improving yourself”? Let me explain. All of us have some preconceived ideas on many subjects. These are the product of education, the family, life experience. Some of these ideas are justified, others are not. Some of our judgments are right, some are wrong. The exchange of views in open lodge, in a friendly, non-censorious environment, leads to reconsider some opinions. We learn to tolerate views that run against ours. We learn to appreciate the variety of human experience, of human characters. All this is part of what we call “smoothing the rough stone”. This, my brethren, is Masonic work.

This brings me to another important point. I would like to see small lodges, where brethren know each other, each other's families, professions, illnesses and happy events. A Mason who doesn't come to Lodge regularly is in fact an isolated Mason, and that's unacceptable. He cannot perform his Masonic work by himself, he needs the give-and-take with his brothers. In many rituals, the first words of the Master when opening the lodges are: "Brethren assist me in opening the Lodge". Why does he need the assistance of the brethren? Doesn't he know how to open the lodge by himself? The point is, all the brethren in the Lodge, all together, will be contributing to the Masonic work. And a lodge with over a hundred members is too big to allow its members to do Masonic work properly.

Charity. This has become a shibboleth, our single presentation card to the outside world. Look how much money we give to charity! See all these children's hospitals! The funds allocated to fight this disease or that. I'm not saying this is bad, but it is not the purpose of Freemasonry. Not only there are many other voluntary organizations doing this kind of work, but the government – Big Brother – gives big money for these tasks. Our 3 million bucks a day we give to charity, are nothing compared to the cost of public health, or public education nation-wide.

So, should we stop doing our charitable work? By all means no, but don't make it our most important, or our only reason to exist. You want to help society, to make ours a better place to live? Why not giving more to education? Poverty is the cause of many social ills, and it is principally the result of a lack of education, or faulty education, which is even worse.

I fear I'll be running out of time, so let me touch on two subjects that concern Freemasonry as a whole, two issues that will become more crucial as the time passes. These issues are: first, the relations between Masonic bodies – recognition, jurisdiction, regularity. Second, the place of women in Freemasonry.

Do I see some eyebrows touching the hairline?

The whole issue of regularity was from the beginning fraught with illogic. At present, confusion reigns. Grand Lodge A recognizes Grand Lodge B, which is not recognized by Grand Lodge C. What happens to the relations between Grand Lodges A and C? Elections take place in a Grand Lodge. There are two candidates. The loser doesn't accept the verdict of the ballot box, he claims hanky-panky. He and some of his supporters go out and form a new Grand Lodge, claiming to be the true and genuine successors of the Old Grand Lodge. They grab the keys to the Grand Lodge building, and have police evict the other group.

All this is not theory, it has happened, more than once. Who is right? How can we determine the truth of the accusations and counter accusations? There is no higher tribunal to turn to in the Masonic world. So we now have a number of countries with two – or more – Grand Lodges, every one of them claiming to be regular in all respects.

Recognition between Grand Lodges, the right to visit lodges in other jurisdictions, the right to affiliate, has become a mess. The so-called principle of exclusive jurisdiction is in shambles. Some Grand Lodges openly practice religious discrimination.

Some efforts are being made to have at least regular meetings of Grand Masters. You have this in the United States, there are also similar meetings in Latin-America, and World Meetings of Grand Masters have been proposed, and have even started in a modest way,

still not encompassing the entire world of Freemasonry. Hopefully, this trend will continue and develop further.

The issue of the place of women in Freemasonry I left to the end, so I can run for cover if the need arises.

To start with, we have to recognize that there is feminine Freemasonry. In other countries, there are Grand Lodges exclusively for women. There is also co-Masonry, also known as Le Droit Humain, where men and women sit together. For some Masons, these bodies are anathema. Other Masons are of the opinion that each man or woman should be free to choose the kind of Freemasonry he likes, and as long as the basic purpose of Freemasonry – personal improvement leading to a better society, is adhered to, we should find some accommodation with them in order to work together towards our common goals.

One proposal submitted on the Internet is that Co-Masonic lodges could be used as a neutral ground, where both brethren from all-men lodges and sisters from all-women lodges could visit. Male members of a co-Masonic lodge could visit mainstream lodges, while female members could visit Feminine lodges. Thus, there could be contact between the three streams of Freemasonry without making any mason – male or female – uncomfortable by sitting with a person of the opposite sex.

This is one suggestion. Probably it will never happen, but let us take heed of the overwhelming movement towards equality between the sexes. The time may come when we are forced to change our present regulations. Would it not be wise to take preventive measures now?

Brethren, I would not want to leave you with the impression that all in present Freemasonry is negative. Ours is an exciting, unique organization, with long traditions, profound philosophical teachings, a haven for right-thinking men in our present world, so torn by the ills of poverty, war, terrorism, hunger and crime.

We must strive forth with enthusiasm, our spirit strengthened by the knowledge that we still have much to teach society, and that we have the tools to assist us in bringing to fruit our human potential

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