

"Reach Out and Touch Someone"

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This challenge was made to the Masons of Rhode Island by Past Grand Master Menge. We thank him for permitting its use as a Short Talk Bulletin. It contains a lot of food for thought.

Freemasonry, is it the same as yesteryear? Are our accomplishments as great? Is our work as meaningful? Are Masons as charitable as they once were?

There are many beautiful faces to Masonry: the child who walks through life instead of crawling; the child who goes to sleep minus the pangs of hunger; the child who wakes up to see that Santa did not pass him or her by; the child who at least for a moment escapes the ghetto and sees nature in full bloom; the young people who can further their education because scholarship money is available; the Masonic Widow who is given support to face life after her loss; the fallen Brother who ever so gently is lifted back to his feet; the Masonic Homes for the elderly where care and love abound.

An organization thrives when it is needed and wanted, much as a person thrives when he or she is needed and wanted. Take away the need, take away the want and it or they weaken and become ineffectual.

Is the Masonry of today growing by taking in members based on the same ideals and motivation as yesterday, or is it taking in bodies merely to perpetuate itself? Are we losing our identity and becoming a social club rather than the benevolent Fraternity that we started as?

How often do we hear the phrase that we are living in a time of change? Ask a person who is one hundred years old and he or she will tell you they've been hearing it for as long as they can remember. Yes, we are living in a time of change and will continue to do so for as long as we live; but the basic foundation of life, the concepts of Freemasonry never change, nor, God willing, will they ever.

Much has been said in our recent past about members of our Fraternity, who upon completion of their degrees, step forth from their symbolic lodge room to return no more. Maybe we failed in our degree work to light the flame. There are a number, who for reasons known only to

themselves, do join our Fraternity with no intention of ever being active; do pay their monetary dues, stay on the rolls and in due time receive their twenty-five year medal. So mote it be.

Then there are those Brothers who take their Third Degree, pause momentarily, then move on to end up workers in Scottish Rite, York Rite or Shrinedom. No criticism here for they simply found their own Masonic niche in life and the opportunity to work and live their Masonic teachings, possibly with an opportunity not offered in their Blue Lodge.

There can be little controversy when it is said that Masonry is not as prominent in the community as it was years ago; but what organization is? Times and people change as do many of the human needs and wants. In the not too distant past the social needs of the destitute, the handicapped and the elderly without family were taken care of in any community by people within the various religious bodies, veterans groups and the fraternal organizations, with the local Masonic lodge playing a low key but prominent part. Masonry was known, respected and membership in it was sought after. Times changed and what was once a major reason for our growth and very existence, became a responsibility of the state and federal governments. Agencies and departments were formed on both the state and federal levels, programs initiated to make the lives of our senior citizens more secure. All well and good; a commendable project on the part of farsighted planners in our state and federal legislatures. Unfortunately, however, in many instances, the human, personal touch was gone.

While Masons took on new ways in which to give of themselves, the hospitals, the eye banks, the kidney foundations, scholarships, all to our credit; the mystique, and much of the personal aspects took a back seat. Apologies are not necessary, for we still stand tall. We can continue to be proud that our Craft does not fail in works of charity. No organization is richer in benevolence. However, is it possible that to a great extent we, like the government, have lost the personal touch? Maybe for too long we have thought of charity and money as being synonymous. Money has its place, is needed and provides for untold acts of charity; but it is not all, and does not fulfill our obligation. Indeed maybe we have for so long linked charity with the giving of money that the word has all but lost its meaning. A notable exception is in the great benevolent work of the M.S.A. Hospital Visitation Program, which indeed does "reach out and touches someone."

In his sublime hymn in praise of charity, in the thirteenth chapter of Corinthians, St. Paul does not mention money at all, except to say, "And although I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. "

There is a Russian story in which a poor man asked aid of another who was as poor as himself: "Brother, I have no money to give you, but let me give you my hand" was the reply. "Yes, give me your hand for that also is a gift more needed than all others," said the first.

We do stand tall, but we can stand taller still if we answer but one of the most pressing challenges to confront our nation today,-that of our elderly citizens. Here is a challenge to Masonry that staggers the imagination.

In 1900, four percent of our total population was 65 years or older. Now we are rapidly approaching a figure of fifteen percent, and the percentage figure will continue to rise.

In the early history of this land, generation after generation of a family lived side by side in the same community, worked and played and were in daily contact. Even today, contrary to a common notion, many elderly persons still have daily or at least frequent contact with their children. A recent nationwide survey indicates that most older people live relatively close to at least one of their children and that contacts with the children are frequent. But, what about those elderly who do not fall into this category?

When children lose their parents and become orphans, adoption often follows. Might Masons and Masonry consider adopting an elderly person or couple who have lost their children or whose children are miles away? An interesting concept, a charitable and loving concept, and possibly a challenge to Masonry.

There are many ways in which Masons and Masonry can help. When we say Masonry, we include all of the bodies of Scottish Rite and York Rite, Eastern Star, Amaranth, White Shrine, Rainbow, DeMolay, Job's Daughters – not one body is excluded.

Here is a true story that was related to us recently: A woman in her nineties, a widow for many years, living in her own third floor apartment with a mentally retarded son who is in his sixties. Up until now she has managed to take care of her home, doing all of the cooking, cleaning and shopping. Her son helps her to the best of his mental ability. He is now bothered with bursitis in both shoulders and will not go shopping with her and absolutely refuses to carry the grocery bundles up the stairs. She contacted the Department of Elderly Affairs with the request, "Can someone come to help me carry my groceries up the stairs? I live on the third floor, you know, and it takes me ever-so-long to make those stairs. I have to go real slow 'cause my heart is not that good any more."

A whisper for help, a whisper for charity, a whisper for love. Brethren, here is a challenge for Masonry that staggers the mind. Here is an opportunity to put Masonry back in the community as in yesteryear. Very simply put, we in the Masonic family can enable isolated and home-bound older people to live more comfortably and decently within their own homes by providing assistance with some of their daily needs, Just a little love, just a little understanding. Through our lodges, chapters and assemblies, we can enable the isolated and home-bound people to participate in community life through activities, socialization and communication. Their lives will be enriched, the communities will benefit, and last but certainly not the least, our Masonic family will become richer in spirit knowing that we are living the creed that forms the foundation of our Fraternity.

The state agencies along with the federal help provide many of the desperately needed aids for our senior citizens, but there are just not enough people or dollars to do all that is needed.

President Reagan has indicated to the people of this nation that there are many facets of federal help that should and could be taken over by the private sector. We in the Masonic family are now being presented with the opportunity to put into practice those ideals which we profess to hold so dear.

A program could be instituted whereby referrals through the elderly state agencies could be made to a committee chairman in each lodge, when the personal touch, the truly "I do care" was needed.

A simple phone call once a day just to show someone cares that they are alive and well can serve as a life-line.

Those of us in the Masonic family who have special gifts, like the know-how of caning chairs, cake decoration, quilting, flower arrangement, might hold get-togethers with our elderly at housing for the elderly units, elderly meal sites, Nursing Homes, or our lodge buildings, and give of our talents.

Might there not be an "around the house project" for the younger set in our Masonic family, the young men and women of DeMolay and Rainbow and Job's Daughters? Those daily phone calls could include the question, "Can I pick up anything at the store for you today? "

Holidays are usually a time of gladness and family get-togethers. They can also be a time of sadness when there is no family to join. If they are adopted then they would have the family and the happiness that goes with it.

It takes little imagination to see what this could do for Masonry. Better still, think what a program such as this would do for those who participate. They would truly experience the inner warmth that has permeated our Fraternity since the very beginning.

You may recall reading an essay written by Washington Irving in which he stated that, "He who plants an oak looks forward to future ages, and plants for posterity. Nothing can be less selfish than this. He cannot expect to sit in its shade nor enjoy its shelter, but he exults in the idea that the acorn which he has buried in the earth shall grow up into a lofty tree and shall keep on flourishing and increasing and benefitting mankind long after he shall have ceased to tread this earth."

Our Masonic forefathers planted an acorn many centuries ago which has grown into a lofty monument and as the mighty oak, provides a refuge for the weak, a shelter for the oppressed, a defense for the defenseless, as does our Fraternity provide Faith, Hope and Charity for our needy Brothers. Once again, we in Masonry have an opportunity to flourish in our communities giving to our elderly citizens that life blood which has surged through our root system. Faith

that there can be a bright tomorrow; Hope when the burdens of life seem to bear down too hard; and the Charity of Love.

How often have you been asked the question, "What Is Masonry?" How often have you heard or been a part of a discussion involving the need of Masonic exposure? Much has been said and written about "public relations" and the need to publicize the many charitable deeds performed by our Masonic bodies. The picture in the paper of the check being presented, the list of students receiving the Masonic scholarships is fine, but the grass roots approach of "Reach Out and Touch Somebody" Are we what we claim to be? Can we meet the challenge?

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