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The Life Cycle of Lodges

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As most of you I've been studying Freemasonry and its history and practices, including giving talks and lectures for many years, and have come to notice a series of what might be called "trends" that indicate organisational life cycles, especially in the individual lodges themselves.

As most of us will know, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the creation of new Masonic lodges continued at a rapid pace, and so did the closure of older ones. This fact seems to go somewhat unnoticed when statistics are being produced to discuss the apparent shrinkage of our beloved Craft today. This constant state of evolutionary change seems to have come to an abrupt halt sometime around 1920. After 1920 Freemasonry entered into what I would describe as the era of, what had described as "mega lodges". Any lodge that has a membership exceeding 500 I consider to be a mega lodge.

During the period following 1920 there were a multitude of lodges that had over 500 members. Across the globe, and in particular in the United States of America, some Lodges had a membership rolls exceeding 3,000. The obvious question to me is, how is it possible that 500 men, not to mention 3,000, could actively participate in the same lodge meeting? Did these men actually know one another, or were they merely going through a fraternal exercise in order to wear a Masonic ring, get a handshake, or did they think there was some other benefit?

European Freemasonry did not follow the trend into mega lodges. The European form of Freemasonry remained far more intimate, with most lodges having no more than fifty members. These small lodges appear very similar in make-up to the

eighteenth and nineteenth century American lodges in that they follow a certain life cycle.

Some lodges in both Europe and America are very old, with some dating back 275 years or so. Did these lodges buck the life cycle trend, or experience a different kind of life cycle? Looking at the oldest lodges, they seem to have followed an internal life cycle of rise and fall over thirty-five-year periods. In other words, they thrived for a while and then almost collapsed before beginning to grow again.

At first it appeared that these trends may have followed the cycles of public interest in Freemasonry, but this turned out not to be the case. Even at times when Masonic membership declined, some of these lodges were growing. Why?

I think the answer lies in human nature and how we relate to those around us. Freemasonry is a fraternity that brings people together in one place (a lodge) for a meeting. What will be discussed at that meeting, the type of food consumed, and the level of personal comfort between the members will be determined by the nature of their relationships with one another. If the members of the lodge share little in common, other than Freemasonry, then the lodge will be socially dysfunctional because the members never truly relate to one another. There are many possible sources of this that include, age, income, and philosophical prejudices.

Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* has been used countless times by the Grand Lodges to illustrate that the present decline in Freemasonry is unavoidable because it is a relational consequence of changes in society. I am of the opinion that Putnam is a victim of his own preconceptions. Society is not becoming increasingly fragmented and separated. It is evolving

and unifying in new ways that were previously unknown. Putnam wrongly assumes that the decline of the social institutions of the past are primary examples of fragmentation and separation, when in fact they are merely obsolete social mechanisms that have been replaced by changes in culture, and the advance of technology.

The present social model utilized by American Freemasonry was developed in the 1950's and is a monolithic cultural relic that cannot adapt itself to the rapid pace of change. This is a result of the failure of the institution to understand the dynamic life cycles of lodges, and the impact of the organizational changes that were implemented in the 1920's to lodge model. The mega lodge relied on the industrial manufacturing concept of streamlining processes. The quality of production came in a far distant second to overall quality. The object was to "manufacture" as many Masons as possible in order to increase cash flow and, thereby increase the services provided to members. Lodge membership from 1920 through the present is based on the idea that the Mason doesn't want to attend meetings, but to take advantage of the relationships created through membership (i.e. insurance salesmen) and the services afforded (Masonic insurance, old age homes, etc.). While this model may indeed have been very attractive to members before the formation of Allstate, State Farm, and senior living centres, it has little to no value in the 21st century.

Many young Masons today point the finger towards the Grand Lodges and mismanagement as the source of all the present problems. In a way they're right. The Grand Lodges are not adapting to changes in society and culture like they once did. The Grand Lodges, however, only appear to be the source of the problem when it is, in fact, yet another symptom of the disease plaguing the fraternity. It must be remembered that the Grand

Lodges reflect the voting members of the lodges. The true source of the problem is at the base of the institution, not the top. Unfortunately, the decisions made back in the 1920's and 1950's have created a self-reinforcing loop in the system. The lodges can no longer go through their natural life cycles because of the monolithic nature of the mega lodge infrastructure of the past. There is no easy way for an aging dysfunctional lodge to split apart and form new healthy social environments. This forces men of all ages and philosophical views into the same organizational unit resulting in bickering, bitterness, and the eventual resulting loss of attendance and membership.

Now it should be becoming clear that the Grand Lodges cannot adapt or change because the lodges themselves cannot experience any life cycle changes. It is the same lodges and members forever reinforcing the same ideas over and over again.

If the lodges were experiencing normal healthy life cycles, new lodges would form dynamically out of the old, and represent the ideas of the present generation of Masons. In order for this to happen under the present system it would require a complete collapse of the organization that would be followed by a reorganization by the survivors. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the organization could survive such an institutional collapse. It would certainly mean the loss of virtually all the temples, financial assets, and collective institutional memory.

The above scenario is becoming increasingly likely. In part because we have failed to recognize the true source of the problems we face as a fraternity. There is, however, hope that things can be changed before it's too late. By understanding our problems and being able to formulate the right questions we

might be able to turn things around. This would require an openness to change and a focused effort on the behalf of the leadership and decision makers.

I believe that this process must begin with a thorough understanding of the historical life cycles of lodges, and the abandonment of the mega lodge model of the 1920's. Ultimately, the future of Freemasonry lies in the hands of its members. Only they can decide whether or not they are willing to make the changes necessary for the survival of the institution.