Back to the Basics –  
A Plan for Masonic Restoration and Beautification  
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A Walk in the Park

This past weekend I watched a show on television about one of the city parks in Cincinnati, how it came into being and its history over the past 100-plus years. In brief, it talked about the lack of beautification in a highly industrialized and growing city. It spoke of the great city leaders that had a dream and a vision; the foresight and wherewithal to both develop a plan and see it through to its completion.

The show went on to talk of the many events, the great crowds, the beautiful gardens, trails, fountains, lakes and architecture during the initial few decades of this beautiful park.

The park then went into a period of serious decline, disrepair and disuse to the point that the main structures were cordoned off for safety reasons and they were almost slated for demolition as the cost of restoration was considered too high and the damage created too great. The park became the home of a motorcycle gang for years and citizens never ventured into the park. The then current city park board members were political appointees of a “boss system” government with no real interest or concern.

The citizens themselves, both business and private, dissatisfied with the inaction of the city, took it upon themselves to form an action committee, chased away the motorcycle gang, raised the money, did the work and brought this park back to its original splendor and magnificence. There is a volunteer program whereby individual citizens have a feeling of ownership in a piece of the park through maintaining it, planting, pruning, and trimming and other similar types of programs of community involvement.

There are many interesting specifics to this story that I have left out, being of little interest to anyone other than locals, but the bottom line moral of the show is that the park can only thrive and flourish as long as the citizens themselves maintain their interest in it, use it, have a personal stake in it and a feeling of ownership and pride in both its current condition as well as its continued future. Government alone will not perpetuate the park; it requires the active participation of the citizenry.

How It Relates To Freemasonry

Many of the more astute among you I’m sure already know where I am headed with this story. As I sat and watched this show, I could not help but to relate each aspect of it to our Masonic Fraternity and to my theme and goals this year.

First, our founders and predecessors. These were great men with a dream and a vision; the foresight and wherewithal to both develop a plan and see it through to its completion. Several of the great leaders of Freemasonry were the same leaders of our cities and communities, recognizable and familiar names. We look back with fondness, marvel at their accomplishments and call them great men and great Masons.
For several decades, Masonry then flourished. The great crowds, the magnificent Masonic Temples, the dinners, consecrations, cornerstone layings, anniversaries, candidates flooding through the doors and very busy meetings. It was a time to sit back, relax, live large and enjoy what had been built. Life was good. No need to build for the future any more, everything’s great!

That era peaked. A decline began. Few noticed. Everything was still great. Our founders and predecessor’s did a wonderful job. Just relax, things will get better.

Things didn’t get better.

I don’t need to go on as you know how the rest of this story goes, to our current condition. The point here my brethren, is that we have gone through a several-decade period of stagnation and decline whereby all building for the future has ceased. There have been no seeds planted, no pruning, no trimming and no tuckpointing of the walls of both our physical and symbolical Masonic structures.

**We Must Accept a Cold, Hard Fact**

I don’t wish to be disparaging to any brother, but I feel we must accept a cold, hard fact if we are to understand and change the paradigm in which we presently find ourselves. That is, that generally speaking, Masons over the last several decades more often than not have consumed the fruits of Freemasonry from the seeds planted by our predecessors, without having planted any seeds themselves for their successors. We have taken without having given back. We have allowed ourselves over a period of several decades to deteriorate into what we are today.

Now let’s be clear, I’m not saying that anyone maintaining this status quo for the past many years is a bad Mason. Many of them are great Masons. They are simply following the paradigm established when things were good, during a time when we really didn’t have to worry about it. But really, is there such a time to just sit back and do nothing? How easily we forget the lessons of our Great Light! The paradigm assumed that work could be stopped and things would simply take care of themselves. However, our work is never ended, not until this mortal shall have put on immortality. Isn’t that one of the lessons we learn in Masonry?

How about the government? Well, the Masonic government seems to be doing just fine, thank you. At least based on the number of banquets, long hours and thousands of miles of logged to receive honors and recognition. Again, no one is a bad Mason, but rather, just following the pattern that was set long ago.

**But I Did My Part!**

Now, one might say things such as, “I was secretary for 35 years, I did my part.” Or, “I did the major part in that degree for 25 years. I did my part.” Or, “I was the Presiding Officer five times and attended every meeting for the past 40 years. I’m tired. I did my part. It’s someone else’s turn.”

As for our top leaders, they might say, “I traveled 100,000 miles around this state last year representing Masonry! I did my part!”
The Missing Ingredient

My brethren, congratulations. Yes, you have done a lot. Your service is to be commended. However, you have left out the one vital ingredient to the formula that guarantees future success. That is, you did not plant a seed and grow your successor. Did you ensure membership by replacing yourself and adding at least one for growth? Did you develop a qualified replacement for the important job you held for many years? How about this: did you in fact hold on to that job too long, bypassing qualified candidates that got discouraged and eventually faded away? I cannot begin to count the times I’ve heard it said that a certain part “belongs” to someone. Is that proper planting, pruning, nurturing and developing? Is that planning for the future? I’m sure everyone reading this can think of several ritualistic parts in the Masonic bodies that used to “belong” to someone that are now vacant positions with no one able to do them. Why? Because a seed was never planted, despite that brother’s “hard and dedicated work” for all those years. There was no thought given to the future, but rather, only the here and now.

I ask the top leaders of the Fraternity this (and again, these are good men and good Masons, well intentioned, simply following the paradigm established since “time immemorial”): What exactly did those 100,000 miles of travel last year, in and of itself, do to improve Masonry? How about those 500 banquets of being seen? Were many of Masonry’s issues solved there? Were any seeds planted?

I ask our current and potential future Masonic leaders to consider this: If a leader’s time is completely absorbed in travel and simply being seen, how can he possibly devote any time to real goals and real accomplishments? For the past several decades our leaders have been forced into a paradigm of “travel for success.” That is a seedless fruit that cannot propagate.

We are evaluating leaders for the wrong qualifications and prerequisites and are not properly utilizing the talents and abilities of the leaders that we are selecting. Worse yet, we are bypassing qualified future leaders because they do not possess the “skillset” required for the current, seedless paradigm.

And here we are.

You are NOT Finished Yet!

I have heard it said from more than one, to paraphrase, “I did my time; it’s someone else’s turn.” I have even heard it said after that remark that, “I don’t care what happens, even if they have to give up their charter.” I liken this attitude to a scorched earth policy. That is, “I got mine. Now you have to fight and fend for yourself to get yours, that is, if anything is left.”

Thank God the great men and Masons that founded and built this Fraternity did not have that attitude!

As I said at the outset, we look back with fondness, marvel at our predecessor’s accomplishments and call them great men and great Masons. I therefore ask you this question – will your successors say the same thing of you? Wouldn’t you want them to? Wouldn’t you prefer that future generations thought, spoke and wrote of you kindly and fondly, telling of your
accomplishments and how you continued to build upon the foundation established by our founders?

We have basked in the sunshine created by our predecessors long enough. It is time that we think about the future and our successors and what we are leaving for them and what they will think and say about us. It is a difficult, uphill journey, but we must make it to the top. We didn’t get into this overnight and we certainly aren’t going to get out of it overnight, but we must start somewhere.

**Back to Basics**

Masonry has morphed into something, in my opinion, that has gone far beyond what our early predecessors had intended. This happens frequently in society, not just in Masonry. Some churches for example, have sometimes developed into something that has necessitated a breakup or breaking away, a splitting and dividing, in order to return to the true principles as originally intended. Now, I am certainly not recommending or saying that Masonry requires anything this drastic at this stage. What I am saying however, is that Masonry needs to return to the basics, to the core values as established by our founders and predecessors of what makes us Masons and what we are supposed to be doing as Masons.

We use 1717 as the starting point of modern, speculative Masonry, which was founded in English taverns and probably started out mostly as a festive organization that enjoyed eating, drinking, singing and generally being merry. Some today would use that model to say that Masonry is strictly a social organization. However, Masonry did not develop at the snap of a finger, at a certain point in time. Rather, it developed over the course of several decades into an organization of degrees, Orders and ritualistic ceremonies rich in spiritual and philosophical symbolism. As society grew, matured and developed over time, so did Masonry. Learned men built upon the works of their predecessors and eventually, the flower of Speculative Freemasonry was in full bloom.

We today need to return to the basics and the core values of what Masonry is supposed to be: an educational system of morality veiled in allegory, to make good men better. We do this through maintaining excellence in ritualistic performance, developing a quality education program and focus on a robust, three-pronged membership development program of restoration, retention and renewal. And these aspects are exactly what my theme and goals are about. I have developed a Ritual School of Instruction, a York Rite University education program and an ambitious membership development program including an amnesty program, which, if successful, will show a net gain in membership. The plan is to have five reinstatements of former members (via an amnesty program), no suspensions for non-payment of dues and ten new members.

**The Membership Must Take Ownership**

The leaders of Freemasonry cannot do it alone. They can come up with the ideas and develop the action plan, but it takes the individual Masonic bodies and their members to make it happen. Traditional leadership may be a top down pyramid, but success occurs from the bottom up. The
individual member must be given the responsibility and take ownership. You must plant, nurture, prune and trim, to use the park analogy.

If you consider yourself a leader of Masonry in your constituent bodies, in your district or at the state level, then you cannot just sit back and say it can’t be done. Rather, you have a mandate to do what is necessary to make it happen!

With just a small amount of effort by everyone, we can accomplish great things. Many across this state have taken me up on this challenge and are proving it can be done. Therefore, the question no longer is can it happen, but rather, are you willing to do what is necessary to make it happen? Many are. I challenge you to do the same.

Consider this: All the work you have done in Masonry will have been for naught, if you do not plant the seed of your successor, for him to continue to build upon your work and to guarantee the future success of Freemasonry. What you have done, what you have accomplished, what titles, honors and rewards you have received, the many years you have served the fraternity, are all meaningless if you did not pass your skill and knowledge on to someone else and train them to take your place. If you have not done this, then your work is not yet done! It is NOT time for you to step aside. Rather, it is time for you to STEP UP and GIVE BACK. You have taken for yourself long enough! It is time to give back to others.

Yes, my goals are ambitious, but they are not unattainable. It has been proven it can be done by those that understand the concept of planting a seed. I ask you, are you also willing to do it?

Let us restore and beautify Freemasonry to its former magnificence. Let us remember what we should be truly focused on in our core values and prune away the distractions. May the membership be empowered with a personal stake and sense of pride in taking ownership of the restoration, revitalization, planting, new growth and development of a bustling, thriving Fraternity that is alive with energy and excitement, a place where everyone enjoys spending time with one another.

Ritual – Education – Membership
Restoration – Retention – Renewal