

Boring Our Members To Death

By Christopher Hodapp

author of Freemasons for Dummies

The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to One. He advanced towards it trembling. The Phantom was exactly as it had been, but he dreaded that he saw new meaning in its solemn shape. "Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point," said Scrooge, "answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?"

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me."

The Spirit was immovable as ever.

-Charles Dickens - A Christmas Carol

Sit down and chat for about ten minutes with an insurance agent, and let him quote you chapter and verse about the death rate among the World War II generation. Okay, I'll grant you, there's a certain ghoulish aspect to it. I'm bringing it up because, like Scrooge's portentous Spectre, Freemasons have spent the last fifteen years pointing an empty sleeve at the grave, and blaming our declining membership numbers on the four-million Masons who were members during our boom years, who have had the very bad timing to pass on to the Celestial Lodge Above in record waves over the last dozen or so years.

Once you're sufficiently bored by your insurance guy, give your Grand Secretary a call and ask him how the numbers compare between the death rate of members every year, versus the losses from demits and non-payment of dues. Prepare yourself for a shock. In most jurisdictions in the U.S. and Canada, the losses of members from deaths has been statistically tapering off, while the losses due to Freemasons walking away from the fraternity have been rising at an alarming rate. Oh, we're initiating a very healthy dose of new Masons every year all right. But men whom we have initiated, passed and raised are deciding in increasing numbers to say no thanks to what their local lodge offers. Masonic membership rolls are still dropping, but not from natural causes. The truth is, we are boring our members to death.

It has long been understood that the Baby Boom generation didn't join the Masons. As a result, there is a five-decade difference between the generation of men who kept Freemasonry alive for us and the men who are now moving into leadership positions throughout the fraternity. At any other time in the history of Freemasonry, each succeeding generation came along approximately in twenty-five year intervals, making changes in their lodges, and in Freemasonry as a whole, to reflect their needs and desires. Masonry has always adapted to serve the societies in which it resided. Until recently. Now, instead of a twenty-five year adjustment in direction, Freemasonry is suffering from fifty years of habit and hardening of the arteries.

Not long ago, I visited a lodge that had fallen on hard times - very hard times indeed. At one time, their rolls held the names of more than 1800 members. Today, they are down to 200. That's not an unusual state of affairs for a fraternity that artificially swelled in size after World War II, but for men who see success and failure only in the narrow terms of numerical statistics, it is an emergency of epic proportions. There were members in that lodge who remember those heady days like they were yesterday. They remember the degree nights with 150 Masons on the sidelines. They remember the dances, and the Christmas parties, and the big group trips. They remember the dinners when the dining hall was packed to the rafters, with their kids running up and down the room, while some successful member from the civic or business world tried to give a speech. They look on those days fondly, and are bewildered by the fact that no more than eight members show up for the average meeting today. They'd had no candidates in four years, and they literally begged their members to come and participate. No one did.

The men who kept that lodge barely alive tried to do things the way they have been done when most of them joined a half century ago. The same eight men met for a meager meal before their monthly meeting. They opened lodge with perfect ritual. They read the minutes and the bills. There was rarely any business, new or old. They closed and fled the building, and were home by 7:30, before prime-time network programming got started for the night. Over the last five years, the same eight

members have been trading officers' positions, and they just got tired. They were fed up. So, they decided to merge with another lodge and be done with it.

As with any turning point of this magnitude, all 200-plus members had to be notified of the meeting. Only twelve cared enough to show up to vote to euthanize their lodge. They had no fight in them to save their lodge. They wanted to simply slip into the ranks of another, give up their charter and their 140-year history, and vanish from memory. They had killed their own lodge with their own failure to embrace any change, and in fact, many of them were enraged that some brethren from outside of their lodge had come in to try to resurrect them at the eleventh hour and interfere with their plans for a quiet suicide.

They didn't do anything to appeal to new members. But neither were they serving their existing ones. They weren't broke. These were children of the Depression. They had almost \$200,000 in the bank. So why did they do nothing to interest their aging members? Bus trips to Branson. \$100 cruises to the Caribbean. Casino boat trips. Tours to Masonic sites in Britain. Trips to the Holy Land. Catered dinners. Sponsored movie nights. Loads of public awards. Medicare drug program presentations. Estate planning seminars. Computers at lodge to send emails to the grand kids. Power-chair races in the halls. In short, give their existing members a reason to keep coming to lodge, to keep enjoying it, to love it.

Neither did they do anything to attract new members. They rent the lodge room in the big downtown Temple building, so like most tenant/landlord relationships, they figured they didn't have to put a dime into the place if they didn't own it. That's somebody else's job. Really? If only they had tried investing in their lodge. Put in new lighting so members could see three feet in front of them. Upholster the sad looking chairs and benches that have the original leather from World War I on them. Tear up the worn and moldy carpet and replace it - maybe with one of the only black and white checked carpets in the U.S. that we talk about in our ritual but almost nobody seems to have. In short, make it look like something worth coming to. Make it look like something worth joining.

Then start kicking the members into participating in lodge - not worrying about who was going to be what officer or memorize which part of the ritual. Actually talk about Freemasonry, its history, its symbolism, its philosophy. Actively visit other lodges and help with their degrees. Get members interested in other activities in the building, or volunteering to help some of the community groups that have been meeting there with greater frequency. We talk a big line about charity and helping the community, so let's start giving time, and not just checkbook generosity. And if they still didn't have a full lineup of guys willing to be officers, just sideliners, it wouldn't matter.

Because, once the place looked like living inhabitants occasionally might be in the place, and that it was actually a vibrant, active lodge, maybe, just maybe, some of their grandkids might get interested in Freemasonry, because they were seeing Freemasonry in action, instead of Freemasonry inaction. The business author James O'Toole says, "People who do not think well of themselves do not act to change their condition." Even a lodge that only has eight regular attendees has within its active ranks the resources to wake itself up, to do things that make them truly happy to be there, and sometimes to even surprise themselves.

Leadership has no age, and there are no limits on imagination. But a lodge has to mean something to its members. It has to remain part of their lives, every day, every week, every month. Because once it's more fun, or less hassle, to stay squeezed comfortably in the LaZBoy, curled up with a remote control, than it is to go to lodge, we have lost them. No one would ever voluntarily join a memorization club, and no one wants to join the oldest, greatest, most legendary fraternal organization in the world, only to be sentenced to a lifetime of cold cut sandwiches made with suspicious meat, generic cola, and monthly meetings of nothing but minute-reading, bill-paying and petulant sniveling over why no one comes to meetings anymore. Be honest with yourself. What rational human being seriously wants to go to the trouble of leaving home to go and listen to someone spend twenty minutes reporting that nothing happened at last month's meeting either?

It will be the lodges that provide programming for their active members - whatever their age may be - that will survive and prosper into the future. But those that stubbornly cling to the notion that lodge is no event, that lodge is just one more meeting to be borne, that lodge is that most terrible of things, Ordinary - those are the lodges that will literally bore themselves to death. Those are the lodges that will slip silently away in the night. And the shadows of things that Might Be will have faded into the concrete Reality of a deserted lodge room.

"Ghost of the Future!" Scrooge exclaimed, "I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear your company, and do it with a thankful heart."