

Photo Cover: The Dragon-Serpents of Viking Mythology gnawing on the root of the world-tree at the base of the Apprentice Pillar of Rosslyn Chapel. © Bro. Klövekorn



The Future of Freemasonry: a return to the traditional observances.

Brother. Henning A. Klövekorn

Some quarters within the fraternity have sounded the alarms for some years with the 'call to arms' to 'rescue' our organization from a dramatic decline in membership numbers. Our fraternity (South Australia and Northern Territory) numbered some 27,000 members in 1961 which caused significant expansion activities. It is also the case that many lodges over the past decades have folded and membership is well below that of the 1960's.

If the mission of Freemasonry was to be a popular organization or one characterized by a measure of the number of members, then the detractors and alarmists have a point. If quantity of members was an indicator of strength, of vitality of purpose, then Freemasonry as a global institution in our jurisdiction would be failing. But it is not. I assure you of that.

The 'out of conformity' myth

According to the 2002 Report "The New Millennium, Freemasonry and Women"^x a view is shared that:

"Freemasonry..... is .. out-of-conformity with today's society, which at best sees Freemasonry as irrelevant.

The perception that we may be 'out of conformity' is often suggested as the chief ailment of our institution. I differ in this view.

Worse still, in an effort to 'curb' this apparent 'problem', many changes have been made to our customs and traditions in an effort to 'fit in'. Our once protected tracing boards now lie for public viewing in our Museums. How did we allow this to happen? We have 'watered-down' our own once sacred language, the use of the word 'Masonic Temple' was retracted. As though we are no longer worthy of the use of these terms. Our rituals, penalties and even forms of dress, amended to appease detractors. Have these efforts, often well intended and in some cases based on professional external advice, increased or maintained membership levels? No. Have changes made to modernize and make more 'palatable' our traditions, silenced the critics? Any? No.

What is next? Will the sacred apron be removed because it fails to 'fit-in' to the branding solution proposed by an external consultancy? Will the secret signs and tokens be abolished as they are seen by some agitators as a symbol of elitism and toxic masculinity? Where will it end? If we continue, it will end in our downfall.

We can continue along this trajectory, or we can recognize that despite our good efforts to 'manage membership decline' we may have entirely misunderstood it and have invariably also eroded our position further in some of the reactionary changes which were made.

Is it possible we have been looking at external factors too closely and seeking to change who we are to meet those factors?

To say our institution is out-of-conformity with today's institutions, I find contradictory. It is a most sacrilegious view. On the one hand we celebrate the fact that Freemasons were responsible for making significant changes in society, effectively acknowledging they were working against the pre-existing sentiments to change the world. On the other hand we now have some quarters of our fraternity see this differentiator, this trail blazing, as being 'out of conformity'. Which is it? Are we out of conformity or are we trail blazers?

We are both. Because we are an institution which challenges conventions, which harbours virtuous principles and which fights the disease of moral apathy, we are trail blazers AND out of convention.

Our fraternity has always been out of conformity, it is what makes us special, what drives us, what inspires great men to join our ranks. It is not something to be embarrassed about, it is to be understood for what it is, and promoted, indeed celebrated.

Wearing aprons, gauntlets and undertaking ceremonial and theatrical displays of philosophical concepts was as much out of conformity in the 18th, 19th and 20th century as it is today. Why did we need sentinels and outer guard's brethren? When we were in conformity with our surroundings?

If the sentiments of my arguments do not yet sway you, I urge your attention of the German Student Fraternities as a way pointer. Called ‘Studentenverbindungen or Burschenschaften’, they are considered by many, including the current-day media, to be an organization in complete unorthodoxy to norms, old-fashioned and out of touch.

They dress in old regalia, they sing old songs, they pay homage to old values, they wear large foil swords used for fencing and remain nationalistic, traditionalist and conservative.

My own family has a lineage of University Professors who have been members since inception. These fraternities, often linked with lodges, date back to the founding of the first Universities of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation such as in the city of Prague (1348) or Heidelberg (1386). These men-only organizations took part in the German Revolution of 1848 seeking German unification, an aim finally realized in 1871 when Germany beat France in the Franco Prussian War, capturing Paris and proclaiming Kaiser Wilhelm I as the new Emperor. They lie in stark contrast to the ‘open border’ and ‘international socialist’ character of successive German governments in the modern era.

If we are to believe the rhetoric that old, traditional institutions, are destined to die out because they do not change, because they do not bend to the will of popular culture, then reason and logic would have us conclude that the German Student Fraternities of the 15th Century must surely be a dying breed, must have seen a sharp decline in membership levels, must be at the doorstep to demise, if not a distant figment of a historical curiosity?

They are not. They are as healthy and influential today as they were 600 years ago. In fact in 2019 these highly traditionalist German fraternities numbered, in the German speaking realm, 1,000 lodges with a membership of 150,000*. Compare this with 500 lodges and 15,000[†] members of Freemasonry in Germany.

Their success is underpinned by their recognition to remain true to who they are, they stand in great confidence and defiance of change. Young intellectual men in their thousands seek membership and are turned away, as only the best are chosen. Not a single tradition, be it the uniform, be it the rules, has been watered down, or amended to appease anyone.



Above: German Student fraternities. Assembled for the 'Weinheimer Senioren-Convents' in Germany 2010. Public Domain Wikipedia by Rabe.

Can we not learn from them? Were we not once like them?

Lack of conformity in our case is not a problem, it is a holy jewel of the Order to be revered and celebrated. Our greatest challenge is that we have been so swayed by popular opinion; so influenced by the detractors and nay Sayers; so anxious about the alarmists call to action; that we have difficulty in seeing, indeed have become hoodwinked, to our own most precious asset, - the Masonic Mysteries and Traditions.

Some see these as the weird cousin to be avoided and ashamed of. That weird cousin they shame is in fact a genius, the next George Washington, the next Lafayette. The keystone the overseers rejected.

Some have attempted to shift our Order from the holy sanctum of intellectual labour, to the comparatively dreary and vanilla blend of a social and service club. Who will have the courage to speak out and act in defiance of this transformation into irrelevance?

In the recent 'Klovekorn Global Freemasons Survey' I initiated in 2016 and the results of which are published on YouTube, '76% of respondents joined Freemasonry for its mysteries. Not its great charitable work, not its notable social experience, its mystery. Tradition and mystery is not dead brethren, it is the light.

We do not face extinction because of the levels of numbers in Freemasonry. We are on life-support because we, blind to the consequences, lie in active contempt of the traditions which made our Order the greatest in existence.

The answer to our perceived ailments has always been right in front of us. It is contained so plainly but gloriously, in our own rites. We need only to follow them.

In Viking mythology the world tree has three roots, one of which is gnawed by a dragon serpent, bringing decay to the body of the tree. In my travels to Rosslyn Chapel and the analysis of the famed Apprentice Pillar, I noted its root was adorned with gnawing dragon serpents. The Masons, inspired by the Saxon and Viking legends of the Norse, had included this symbolism to remind us to be weary of those things, those evils, which undermine us.

Our buckling to the pressures of the outside world to redact our rituals and change ourselves to meet the expectations of an unenlightened external force, is that dragon serpent now biting at our heels, crippling our forward progress.

Why do we insist on this abrasive defacement of our global order? An order whose ancient traditions are older than the Westminster system and the printing press.

Why do we strive for conformity to the masses outside of our temples, when we worked so hard to stand out from them for so long? Was it not the intention of our forefathers to give us these traditions and symbols, to safeguard them, because they were out of conformity? Did they not veil them in allegory for good reason? Are desperate changes to our fraternity in the hope of increasing membership numbers not an inadvertent betrayal of our values and traditions?

We must stop at all costs, any further changes to our traditions, rites and landmarks because of ‘outside’ pressures or a ‘perceived’ threat from membership levels.

The ‘membership numbers’ myth

A vibrant level of membership is no doubt positive and can be a joyous experience. It is not however part of our remit to make Freemasonry a public institution or one which sees all join its ranks. In fact by design we already exclude 50% of the population by gender, another large proportion by age, another by religious conviction. Clearly, we are not engineered for, nor is it in our DNA, to be ‘everybody’s’ club.

The peaks of membership of the 1950’s and 1960’s were attributed to large bodies of men returning from war looking to rebuild their communities and rekindle the same type of close relationships at home as they once had in the trenches. Our membership decline today is an entirely natural correction.

If we need to sell lodge buildings, so be it. If we need to correct our administration, tighten our controls and make necessary adjustments to cope with more sustainable and ‘normalized’ membership numbers, then let us get to work on making those refinements. These initiatives are to be praised not criticized.

Let us not be shaken or disturbed by these events, and let us not, in the quake of perceived vulnerability, make lasting and disturbing changes to the fabric of our traditional order as a consequence.

We must consolidate in the face of natural attrition, and in a parallel form, re-establish the global mission and context of Freemasonry. To work to inspire men to join us. To work in

the quarries of life to bring about exciting and demanding projects of our workforce for the betterment of our members and the protection of the values our Order enshrines.

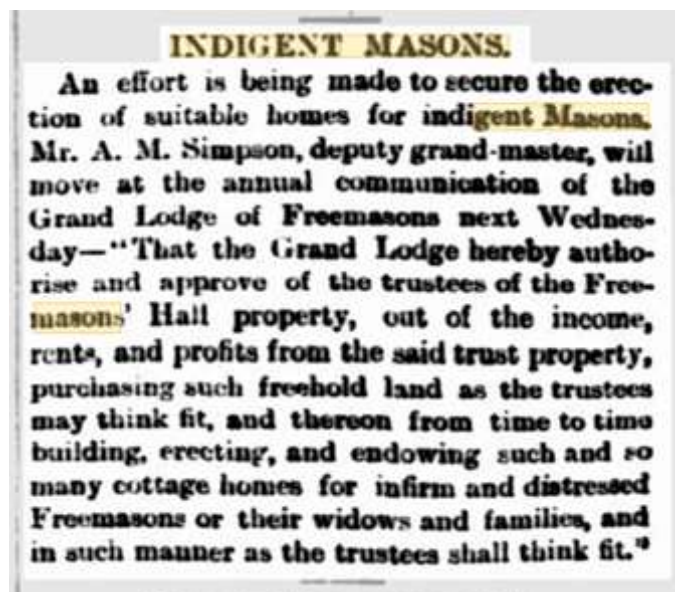
Here we look to the charges of Freemasonry and our own ritual.

A return to virtues and mutual benevolence

Freemasonry is distinguished by virtues, by acting morally, by opposing injustice, through personal development and aiding a brother in need. These are the targets and objectives by which our order is to be judged. Not by numbers.

Having understood, or reconnected with the idea that our primary aim is mutual benevolence and the pursuit of enlightenment, we must refocus our efforts to those great tenants which made our fraternity great in the first place.

As part of this re-recognition of our true self, we must reawaken the five points of fellowship. We must ensure that charity, starts at home and that our first duty is to our family and our brethren.



Our forefathers in Adelaide understood the principle of charity to focus first and foremost on our own circle. Our charitable efforts herein were focused on infirm and distressed Freemasons. In an article in the Advertiser of the 15th of April 1898, Deputy Grand Master Simpson announced he would recommend the purchase of property for infirm and distressed Freemasons or their families. Is this not what the five points require of us?

Freemasonry is the oldest still continuing philosophical movement on the planet Earth. What makes us great, what makes us ancient, what has given us resilience, is that we have transcended traditional barriers. We have overcome barriers of religion, of politics, of race, of creed, of economy, of status and have sworn to a much higher luminary, that of virtuous living, critical thinking and the perpetuation of Masonic Values, both within our walls and in society at large.

Our planet and the species which make it, are an extraordinary anomaly in the abyss of the universe. We continue to explore the mysteries of the observable universe, over 90 billion light years in diameter. Many of us continue to harbour a religious faith of one or other, however the virtues which underpin our fraternity are unyielding. They are a ‘manifest reality’ which hold true irrespective of religious, scientific or political challenge. This is the true secret of our Order.

When the Operative Masons of Europe some 1,000 years ago began working across borders and nations, across different forms of government, cultures and languages, our fraternity were one of the first organisations to comprehend both the diversity of our planet, as well as the importance and necessity to work together for the common good, to transcend difference and find points of universal accord amongst the fabric of difference.

The point is, we understand and work with difference in the world for the common good, to respect another’s right to self-determination within the framework of good morality and extend our hand to progress Humanity, starting at the source of that great temple and worksite, at improving and developing ourselves.

The world continues to be tested by extraordinary challenges, the severe degradation of our biodiversity and ecosystems, the supply of sustainable energy sources, the overpopulation of our species which threatens our future existence, the maintenance of the rights to free speech, freedom of thought and the protection of the vulnerable. Is this not where our forefathers laboured the ashlar of society? Why have we abandoned this quarry?

There will always be a desperate need for Freemasons in the world, builders – not just in stone, but in deed. People who uphold virtue and reason. People who uphold those virtues irrespective of what religious or political context they find themselves in. Who face the challenges of the day to improve the future of humanity, often a future they themselves may not experience.

Our great Order must again apply the great principles of Freemasonry and work to implement these in the world, which so desperately needs to overcome these challenges and many new ones. Something we can only achieve, by working together.

The virtues we espouse, truth – justice – loyalty – honour – sacrifice – are unchanging precepts. They do not change, and nor should we change to meet the often ‘vain’ needs and deliberations of the outside world.

In Conclusion

Those who argue our fraternity needs to change because we are ‘out of step’ with society, fail to understand that:

Freemasonry always was unorthodox to the moral decay of the outside world. Indeed, it was formed to stay in perpetual insubordination to unconscionable conduct, corruption, unfairness, unprincipled and unscrupulous practices which, wave upon wave, have consumed and drowned human existence since time immemorial.

We must discard the idea that we should change, we must shake ourselves free from the illusion that our success is defined by membership numbers, we must fight that serpent dragon at our heels who hinders our path, who undermines the true nature of who we are and what we can become.

Freemasonry is that unerring light of truth, it is that temple of humanity built upon the pillars of wisdom, beauty and strength, inculcated with the cement of justice, loyalty and integrity.

Our ancient traditions and customs embody the master plan to that sacred temple, in which every mason who works on his ashlar, seeks to contribute his work. Lastly and most sacredly, is our solemn obligation to each other.

As our Bro. Dr. Oliver once wrote about the five points, to "assist a Brother in distress, support him in his virtuous undertakings, praying for his welfare, keeping inviolate his secrets, and vindicating his reputation as well in his absence as in his presence".

How many of us have borne the privilege of aiding another brother in distress? How many of us have been on the receiving end of brotherly love, and touched by its grace? Have you felt the call in your breast to defend a brother's reputation in their absence and can you recall the tingling sensation in your spine when told how another brother defended your name when it was unjustly challenged? The feeling that your vulnerabilities and workings upon your rough ashlar can freely and securely be shared with another brother and his fears and anxieties find no prejudice, but only comfort and encouragement when divulged to you. That sense of gratefulness for having been mentored by the wise and senior brethren, some now passed. The great pride in being in a position to support new members in the same vain.

To inculcate a great temple of humanity and brotherly love, whose consecration commenced millennia ago and has been a work of compounding wisdom and passion, where we all contribute our labours. This sacred geometry of fraternal lore is what defines our Order of brotherhood. In this do we find our most hallowed purpose and mission; irrespective of numbers. The first step forward, is the step back to the traditional observances of our Craft.



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^x Autumn edition 2002 of the SA and NT Freemason

^{*} Burchen, Buende und Verbaende, Spiegel, 2012

[†] freimaurer.org official website of the United Grand Lodges of Germany.

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Bro. Klövekorn was raised in Lodge Concordia 226 in 1998 under the Grand Lodge of Antient Free and Accepted Masons of South Australia and the Northern Territory Inc. He is the Deputy Director of the Grand Lodge Community Relations Committee, Lodge Information Night presenter, Grand Lodge Tour Guide, Mark Master Mason, lodge lecturer

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This Paper presents personal views and is not made on behalf of, nor representative of, any body or organisation Henning A. Klovekorn is a member of, including the Grand Lodge of Antient Free and Accepted Masons of South Australia and the Northern Territory Inc.

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