

**Multi-district Educational Program
Saturday, September 9, 2000
At Kena Temple
Keynote Address
Rt. Wor. Edmund Cohen**

Freemasonry: Rebuilding the Public Perception

This morning is a great Masonic occasion, for me and I hope for all of you. There was no obligation for you to come. We are all here because this is an opportunity, hopefully the first of many, to get together to talk and think about Freemasonry. And that is the essence of Masonic education, thinking about Freemasonry.

I billed this talk as a keynote not because what I have to say is more important than the presentations that follow or should be accorded greater weight, but because I thought I might try to tie the program together in some fashion.

As you know we had to make some choices in deciding how to organize this multi-district educational session. We could have picked a single theme or topic and then had workshops, or used a panel or discussion format to drill deeply into the subject. And this is a possibility for future sessions.

But for this first effort, we opted for breadth rather than depth and selected a smorgasbord of topics on Masonic history and philosophy, Masonic law and lore, and on Masonic leadership.

We did this for two principal reasons. First, we believe that there is an appalling lack of knowledge about the Fraternity in our communities and in the country at large, and we believe that too many of our members, despite their personal love of the Fraternity, are

unable to articulate what we stand for, explain the richness of our history and traditions, or the grandeur of our values and principles.

And second, we are concerned also that even some of our Lodge officers are unclear as to our purpose and unable to motivate their membership. We are concerned that some of the brethren have lost the spark. They are no longer sure why they should attend Lodge. They find meetings to be form without substance, ritual and rote without meaning, and on the whole, a waste of their time. They no longer are clear why they joined, and not clear about the value of their continued membership.

I think it is safe to say that none of us here feel that way, but many of us do believe that we need to do more to fan the spark of excitement that motivates a man to apply for membership and go through initiation, passing and raising, that we should be able to fan that spark into a raging flame of enthusiasm and commitment. And some of us believe that we can do more to maintain the interest of our members so that they become leaders and remain active contributors rather than passive dues payers. And in fact, Masons who are educated about Freemasonry are generally active Masons who also will attract others to our Order. Uneducated Masons are generally less engaged, lose interest, and gradually drift away from both the Lodge and the Fraternity.

So Masonic education is not only interesting and exciting in its own right, it plays an important role in making Freemasonry more relevant to its members. And Masonic education also is a tool to help convince society as a whole of our relevance in this time and age.

Now there has been some concern about the health of Freemasonry, most often expressed as a concern about declining membership. A lot of ink has been spilt on whether and how we

should seek new members. The debate has been about whether to change our rules and ask people to join or continue to wait until **they** ask to join. This is the wrong debate and over the wrong question. The issue is not declining membership; this is merely a symptom of a larger problem. And that problem is the declining public knowledge of the Fraternity and our failure to market the organization. So, if there is serious question as to the permissibility of recruiting, there is **no question** as to whether it is permissible to tell others about our Fraternity. It is and we should.

The theme of this talk is that we need to proselytize Freemasonry, not by asking people to join, but by giving them information about us and then asking them to think about what we stand for in the context of their values and their own lives. The sad fact is that most Americans do not know very much about Freemasonry and often what they hear is both wrong and scurrilous. The good news is that we can be confident that if people know about Freemasonry and if they think about Freemasonry, they will support us and many will want to be a part of our organization. And this is because Freemasonry is in a position to play a stabilizing and unifying role in a changing and fractured world. So a part of Masonic Education is educating America about Freemasonry.

After World War II our soldiers came back from the horrors of war to get their education under the GI bill, to get jobs and build careers, to get married and start families. As busy as they were, they joined Freemasonry in droves. Coming out of the military, they were attracted to the idea of fraternity and a night out with the guys. They liked Freemasonry's values, its combination of fun and seriousness, its charitable instincts and sense of mutual obligation.

But we are told that today is different. And it is. Today there is little likelihood that an individual coming into the workforce can now

expect lifetime employment with the company they join, and there is every likelihood that they will have many employers before they retire. There also is less likelihood that an individual coming into the job market can expect to retire from the same occupation or field that he enters. There is less likelihood that our children will grow up and establish their families in the communities in which we live. They will follow career opportunities all over the country and sometimes all over the world. And these trends are magnified by the ever more rapid rates of technological change, which brings with it a certain amount of social upheaval.

These days if you go to a seminar or lecture or listen on TV to a futurist or a pundit, you will likely hear that the world is changing and that change is virtually the only constant. One may come away energized and ready to face the challenges of a new millennium, but more often one comes away feeling exhausted and even fearful. With information increasing exponentially how will we keep up? And with change occurring so rapidly is there anything you can hang onto or become comfortable with?

Just as the returning soldiers after WW II craved order and stability, so "Boomers" and "Gen-xers" and their progeny will crave something more than an effervescent present and an uncertain tomorrow. It is not that they will become Luddites and reject technology or change. They will not. But, they will want some anchor, some stability in a sea of change. The kind of stability they will be seeking will be a greater sense of community in cities and towns that have no center and neighborhoods that have no focus. They will be seeking continuity of relationships in an environment in which people change jobs and move away more frequently. They will seek organizations that have some depth to them. They will want organizations that are more than an extension of work such as professional and trade associations. And they will want an

organization that cuts across boundaries and is not stove piped by occupation, or age, or religion, or issue, or politics. And they will be attracted to a values-based, family-oriented organization that cares for its members and cares about the enduring issues of our time.

We already can see a reaction to the fraying of our social fabric in the growth of religious fundamentalism which seeks to ensure that the old values will once again hold sway, deviant conduct will be eliminated, and social chaos will give way to order. And we see a reaction to the fraying of our social fabric in a retreat to the security of gated communities, where a safe society can be recreated for the few, while the hordes of barbarians outside the walls are kept at bay.

Neither of these solutions have much chance of success. American society is too diverse for one religious group to be able to impose its orthodoxy on the rest. And gated communities can neither stem the tide of moral decline nor even isolate its members for very long from the larger societal rot.

There is a third way and that lies in a grass roots movement that is slowly taking back the streets from the drug dealers and gangs, and turning suburban communities from a sterile environment characterized by social ennui to a place of social concern and activism. And I believe that at the center of this grass roots movement will be community and voluntary associations, youth groups, and fraternal organizations.

In examining this third way, Freemasonry, the epitome of a value based organization, is exceptionally well placed to be in the vanguard of what will be a dominant feature of 21st century America -- the development of new community structures that unite people across diverse sets of characteristics, different age and occupational groups, different faiths and interests, all united by a common set of ethical

standards and all dedicated to restoring high moral principles in the context of a democratic framework where free thought is valued and free expression is protected.

Given the social conditions in which we find ourselves, I believe that Freemasonry is not only relevant, it is central to where we hope to go as a nation. Our natural constituency, therefore, are those who are concerned about restoring values in our society, but who take an inclusive view as to how we are to get there.

In a sense, we are in a period reminiscent of the time when our founding fathers had to determine how to build upon the philosophy of the old world to create a new nation. It is not surprising that many of the founders were Freemasons. And it should be no less surprising that Freemasons will once again be called upon to build upon the successes of 19th and 20th century America, and create the foundation for our continued success as a nation in the 21st century.

So what do **we** bring to the table?

We offer a remarkable intellectual tradition that is liberal in the sense of honoring democracy and toleration, free thought and expression.

A tradition that is conservative in espousing a belief in God and certain unchanging ethical and moral principles, and in valuing an old-fashioned courtesy and respect for others that is in rather short supply these days.

We also offer a fellowship that is not based upon a search for economic advantage -- we are not a business or trade organization.

We offer a fellowship that is not based on wealth or social snobbery -- we are not a country club.

For those who are tired of associations formed around a single issue or problem, they will find in Freemasonry an organization that caters to the whole man.

For those who are unsatisfied by the sterile, situational interactions of modern life, they will find in Freemasonry a fellowship based upon caring and friendship.

And for those who find the pace of modern life too fast, too intense, and often too meaningless, they will find in Freemasonry an oasis of calm and stability, where we value each other for the internal not the external qualities of the man, where we do not need to posture or pretend with each other, where we can let our hair down, be ourselves, share our confidences, seek advise and counsel, and do all of this in the security of knowing that we are speaking to a brother to whom we are bound by common oaths and obligations.

But how do we reach our potential and deliver to our members the kind of Lodge environment they have a reason to expect and how do we carry our message to the larger community. The answer, in large part, is through Masonic education. By cultivating a fuller understanding of our history and philosophy, our roots and traditions, our values and principles, we equip ourselves to be leaders within the Fraternity able to create and maintain healthy and vibrant Lodges, and through Masonic education we also equip ourselves to become ambassadors of Freemasonry to the larger communities in which we live.

But finally Masonic education is about building Masonic leaders who can guide and move us forward in the 21st century. And this is

why, in addition to Masonic history and philosophy, Masonic law and lore, we need to focus on Masonic leadership. Because in the end, it is not knowing but doing that counts.

It is important that we know what Freemasonry stands for. But that is not enough, it is important that we live our Freemasonry.

It is important that we are able to explain to others what Freemasonry is all about and what it stands for. But it is not enough for us to be able to talk about Freemasonry, we need to be able to show, by example, what our Fraternity stands for and what kind of a man a Freemason is.

So we hope that the session today will add to your stock of Masonic knowledge, reinvigorate your interest in Masonic education, and inspire you to go forth with renewed energy and confidence as a Masonic leader to help us prepare our Fraternity for the new millennium. With **your** active leadership we can restore the momentum, regain the influence and moral authority we had, and thus propel Freemasonry to new heights as a force for good in our great country and around the world.