



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

August 14, 2013

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

I have been reading a fascinating book recently, and thought you might be interested in the following excerpt from that work:

The first meeting of the Grand Lodge didn't take place in a grand building. It was convened in the back room of a public house. Taverns were the focal point of social life, where people met to conduct business, eat, drink and sing.

The elaborate symbolism and initiation ceremonies hadn't been invented yet. It seems, from the little we know form lodges of that period, that ceremonies were basic and brief, symbols were limited to the lodge panel, and there was no special furniture or physical tools. Symbols were drawn on a tracing board, or on the floor with chalk and coal, and then erased at the end of the meeting.

Meetings were primarily social events, involving dinner, drinking, and, more important, singing. The lodges in these early days were not steeped in the ritual and symbolism which developed during the next few centuries. Men came together for conviviality and social refuge at a time of political and social uncertainty, when new scientific and economic opportunities were being developed, and when rationalism was beginning to lay the foundations for the humanistic and empirical society which we enjoy today.

What is particularly interesting to me about this excerpt, and indeed the entire book, is that it is not about Odd Fellowship. The book is entitled "Secrets of the Freemasons" published in 2006. The excerpt above is about the early history of another fraternal order, the Freemasons (or "Masons" as they are often called). This book reveals that the Freemasons have, just like the Odd Fellows and other fraternal orders, secret signs, grips, passwords, and symbols. And another thing that is revealed is that the Freemasons, just like the Odd Fellows and other fraternal orders, are rapidly losing membership.

In fact, the decline in membership is not confined to fraternal orders. Clubs and organizations around California and the United States are experiencing similar declines. I was just invited to speak to a meeting of the flagship club in the United States - Rotary - and I gave them a list of five potential topics for my talk. Interestingly (and revealingly) what they wanted to hear from me is how I managed to make my Odd Fellows Lodge grow! And that's because even Rotary is facing membership challenges.

I just came back from a visit to an Odd Fellows Lodge that has been around since the mid 1800's. But now this Lodge has just 9 members on its books, four of whom live hours away from the Lodge Hall and never attend. So, this Lodge is limping along with five members



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(actually four members and one associate member) - a bare quorum when they can get it. Of their four members, three are in the age range of 85-95. They haven't added a new member in years. And they don't really do anything except have a meeting (when they have a quorum) and a monthly potluck. The Lodge doesn't really do more than this. Now, frankly, how can that Lodge add new members in that mode? Who wants to join a Lodge like that?

For Lodges to survive and flourish in the 21st Century, we cannot just rely on the formality of our ritual in opening and closing meetings. There must be more. We have to do two things in addition. First, we have to take a page from our past (and the past of other fraternal orders) and start to have some fun. Lodges that engage in an active social life keep members and attract new members. Second, we have to open our doors and windows and reach out to our communities with substantive community projects. Helping others has been an historical hallmark of Odd Fellowship. And equally as important, helping others in the community is what keeps members interested and attracts new members to the Lodge.

This is not rocket science. It just makes sense. And the proof is shown by the Lodges that follow that pattern. The Lodges that engage in good fellowship activities and also community service are the Lodges that are growing in this jurisdiction. Let's learn from their successes.

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Dave Rosenberg, GW