



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

December 26, 2013

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

The Trials & Tribulations of Being the Grand Master, and Possible Solutions: A Mix of Benevolence and Altruism

Many of our Past Grand Masters talk about the stress involving this job, and it's no secret that several years ago, one quit mid-term, ostensibly due to illness, but certainly stress played a key role. It's a tough job, with no pay, and little thanks. Often times, when we make an official visit, lodges are great inviting places but occasionally they are dark empty cavernous buildings with few members and little or no possibilities. The code specifies remedies, but at each lodge we are dealing with individuals who have feelings and although they may be one of only a few remaining in their lodge they feel that their position is imperative. It's hard to define the issue that the code describes simply. In other words, everyone knows a quorum of five members is required for an official meeting. But it's tough to tell the last remaining members of a lodge that they are no longer a legal group. The question that each Grand Master must resolve to his or her own satisfaction is when is it too late to keep a lodge going? I have had three official visits canceled due to insufficient membership turnout. Should I close these lodges? Each situation is different. Some lodges with elderly members have problems of illness; some lodges have many members on their per capita sheets, but few come to lodge; other lodges are experiencing turmoil or dictatorial central lodge members. In other words, an examination of an individual lodge can illuminate some of their issues, ones that perhaps even their own lodge members fail to see.

I have a joke I tell that I feel is especially for Past Grand Masters and they can tell you it's true. When members like what you say, they nod in agreement and say you're the Grand Master – when they don't like what you say, they question your authority. It's true that the Grand Master in a state is merely a figurehead, just the latest member in charge, but it's important to remember that each of us who become Grand Master have been elected to our position by a majority of the members so somehow it should be assumed that each Grand Master enjoys universal support but it is sometimes hard for the Grand Master to see it for themselves. Our state is different from most if not all other states in that we have a Grand Lodge Board of Directors as well. Because of our state's greater income levels, our two homes, our management of buildings and grounds, and the sheer expanse of our corporate reach, we need a board of directors along with a grand master. Some have questioned this, but I can tell you as Grand Master that they fill an important role, and to be frank, not every grand master is well versed on financial issues nor are they required to be. I like to think of the Grand Master as being the heart of the order and the board as being the brain. I say this because while the board may see the closure of a lodge necessary, the grand master has to deal with the souls within the lodge and often times this is a more emotional vantage point. While legislation has been written, but failed, in the past to disarm the board, I



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feel that the board must exist if only to inform the Grand Master of the fiscal end of things. I do feel that the Grand Master fills the primary role as fraternal head, and should be the last word on all things fraternal and this is underlined within both the Robert's Code of California and the Sovereign Grand Lodge Code.

Some out there seem to question the need for a membership group but in my travels this year it becomes more and more obvious that the issue of dwindling membership is the most prevalent issue we face. If we see a lodge being run poorly, it is generally due to the absence of members. If we see a lodge not meeting, it should be obvious to everyone that it is due to a lack of members. If we see 5 elderly members cowering around one table in a dusty room, this ceases to resemble a lodge. Five members may make a quorum, but making a quorum should not be our goal. Being happy, and without ill will should be our goal. The other end of the spectrum exists as well, which means new members trying to make a difference sometimes making big changes quickly. Let's face it, some changes are needed pretty darn quick, but we should all agree on a middle path and go with it. Finally, here is something you might want to ponder: at one time we were one of the largest fraternal groups in the world – now we are one of the smallest. If we are not going to react to this issue now, then when do we begin to react?

In my own point of view, one of the answers to the stresses of our order involves membership. While a quorum level of five is good, I believe that each lodge should establish their own danger level – that is, a level at which they feel their livelihood is threatened, which should compel a proper reaction. In many cases, I feel that would be at least 10 active members. Also, each lodge should realize that change is good – often times a failing lodge has had the same people in the same positions for a long time. While in some cases this is fine, such as a lodge secretary, since that tends to be the most difficult position, I think it is advantageous to rotate other positions. Some troubled lodges have had the same Noble Grand for many years. There is no reason for this, and eventually brings that person to believe that they are the only valuable person in a lodge. Also, of course, this eliminates the right to representation for others from that lodge at sessions, hence more isolation. Many lodges that have internal difficulties have been sitting with the same people in their higher positions for many years; and we have quite a few lodges that have a fair amount of members and yet only have 1 or 2 qualified to vote at Grand Lodge Sessions. All of us have concerns or thoughts for improvements so all of us should be able to voice them on a statewide level. By limiting our own lodges to one or two voting representatives we only succeed in limiting our own lodge's viability.

Finally, we are asking that Grand Lodge Elective Officers make amazing sacrifices. This is one of the reasons our order has become mainly an order of the retired and the elderly. By our own code, Grand Lodge Elective Officers are to visit 1/3 of all lodges in the state each year, which at this point, is about 41 a year, which is an amazing burden, particularly when we combine that with the rising number of troubled lodges, receptions, and other events the officers are required



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to attend as well. We want our officers to make great changes yet we don't think our officers should make any adjustments to today's world. Today, gas is \$4.00 a gallon, yet we treat each official visit like its nothing. I have often driven somewhere involving a day of my time, losing that day's wages, only to appear somewhere where they are either not meeting or have barely a quorum. Annual trips are getting more and more expensive, where only a few attend, and those few are even straining financially to do so. Certainly, the officers receive a budget that does not reflect adequately on the hidden expense financially and emotionally an officer must endure. In the earlier times, the Grand Master and his officers were driven around the state in horse and buggy and were squired to members' homes so while they did spend a great deal of time in transit, they were cared for completely by the order. If we want our order to continue much further, we might consider either a basic transition back to this, or, what is more logical, an adaptation to today's world. The code does answer this issue somewhat by saying that the Grand Master may assign out quite a few visits but in general most officers are reticent to do so. We have to transition. I have asked quite a few affluent people if they would like to join our order, but generally their response is that they are too busy to do so. If we are going to ask people of all walks of life to join our order, we are going to need to realize what this means. Trips should be paid for up front if we expect the Grand Master and his entourage to appear 400 miles away. Again, there is a budget, but if you look at what it covers, gas and meals, it is woefully inadequate. Do we increase the budget? Not necessarily, but we need to look at what it is we are asking of our members. A lot of the old-timers will say that they did it, but I submit that eventually, these positions may become impossible to fill, because no one in their right mind will be willing to accept the sacrifices involved. Also, if you look at the Past Elective officers, they tend to fall out of the active roles, because to be frank, they are tired of trying to carry the torch when no one is willing to carry the torch for them. In order for us to survive, we must help our members as a total group survive and stop acting like there is some kind of hidden machismo to personal sacrifice.

The Odd Fellows on line are defined as a Benevolent and Altruistic Group. It remains to be seen, however, if altruism in a perfect sense is possible. In other words, most if not all sane men gain self satisfaction from an altruistic act. I submit that somehow our order has somehow become totally extroverted while losing all sense of self-satisfaction. Recently, the Odd Fellows and Rebekahs got together to discuss a merging of ideals and goals. To me, this is an important step forward, but first, I believe, we have to shed any feeling that one or the other side is gaining anything substantial beyond the other side. We need to remind ourselves that by helping ourselves, we ultimately help all of our members. Let me give an example: Let's say that your lodge decides that it will no longer hold any social functions, no longer serve refreshments, no longer give donations, just basically have a meeting twice a month and then go home. What happens? I submit that within a couple years, that lodge will go completely defunct. It's inevitable. *Summation: members expect something for their loyalty.*



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We have become an order based almost entirely in hypocrisy, specifically, we want our members to do nothing for their own benefit and yet the definition of our order is that of a benevolent group – a group that by definition helps both its own members and society in general. This ongoing debate we have is merely a way to hurl insults at those we don't like for other reasons. And, of course, a thorough study of our history would show that our members were supportive of each other particularly in its early history. It is time to stop accusing each other of issues, financial and fraternal, and seek to find a solution to our dwindling membership, which by its own definition shows that these issues are becoming more and more entwined. There are parameters to benevolence, in other words, it would be ludicrous to help only one person, whether within the order or without, but even more ludicrous would be to help no one. Particularly, at this time of year, if we help no one, we serve no purpose. Some lodges have hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings yet still give \$50 to a cause. It seems funny to say that we need to both modernize our charitable response and yet also learn from our early days and see that most members have always joined for a mix of reasons – a) to meet with people of their own environment and b) to feed their own hungers including not only physical hunger, but mental and social as well. The definition of a benevolent group as defined by Webster's Dictionary is: *Benevolent* comes from the Latin *bene* "well" and *volent* from the verb "to wish" so you can imagine that this word brings goodness with it. A benevolent society is a charity group organized to serve itself and the neighboring community through programs, sponsorships and donations. In summation, our order must reward its own members while staying historically viable, and benefit external society as well. Merry Christmas to everyone and let's remember we are all together and should act as one. Have fun, and smile at your fellow brothers and sisters. In Friendship, Love, & Truth, Rick Boyles, Grand Master