

G.W.U.

How is the Freemason adjusting to a digital world within a profane Environment?

Introduction

Over centuries, Freemasonry has survived and adapted to sweeping societal and technological changes (from horse to airplane, from quill to computer), largely upholding its traditions, teachings, procedures, and philosophy. We have been in a digital world for years and have adapted, though slowly, with emails and texts replacing handwritten invitations, and archives “in The Cloud” replacing piles of paper in dusty cabinets.

The COVID pandemic has brought a tectonic shift to our way of working and communicating. The requirement to socially distance has compelled us to long periods of confinement and of reduced in-person, physical interaction. Life itself for billions of people has turned digital at an accelerating pace. Instead of gathering in a Temple, Freemasons have had to meet virtually. As our Temples closed, some of us at first rejected the notion of virtual meetings. But there was no alternative: it was that or nothing. Our attachment to one another and to our rituals won, so we now meet virtually. However, what are the possible consequences? While it is too soon for definite answers, we can already draw some lessons from experience and ask questions for the future. This is what we will be doing Here.

Will Technology Change Freemasonry?

Adapting to some aspects of the digital world is difficult, and is in many ways contrary to millennia of human evolution. The societal changes brought about by modern digital technology are profound, and the pace of change seems to be ever increasing. Humans throughout evolution have required personal physical contact with others in order to thrive, develop, and even just to survive. The COVID-19 pandemic has made that contact largely impossible, and Freemasons are no different from the general population in suffering the consequences of enduring more than a year without that needed contact and face-to-face meetings and communication.

Many of us have adjusted by embracing the possibilities afforded by new digital communications technology. It provides the means to be in regular contact with people who for various reasons, including geographical separation, health issues, political pressure or even oppression, are unable to travel to meet face-to-face with family, friends, and colleagues. We have become consumers of these technologies at a cost that may not be realized; for example, we give away our privacy for expedient convenience.

As Freemasons, we may embrace technological progress as a way to improve mankind, materially and morally, but we must constantly question the impact of these technologies, and the role of Freemasons in the profane world. Will technology help us fulfill our role? Does it make us freer, better, more caring, empathetic, altruistic—or more self-centered? Can we remain free thinkers? Are the rights of all protected? How do we address inequality and the social divide that these technologies can carry (for example, lack of broadband Internet access)? Can we understand technologies such as artificial intelligence and bioengineering well enough to assess them? Are liberties and privacy protected? Are we successful in carrying our values outside the Temple? We should show empathy and kindness, referring to our ritual which advocates “mutual tolerance, respect for others and for oneself.” How do we continue

to create a spirit of sharing, and continue our work through these digital tools? How do we combat rampant misinformation and disinformation online?

The search for truth is a fundamental duty of the Freemason. However, how do we know what is true in the Internet's deluge of information? There is much information online about Freemasonry, but the truth of this information is not easy to verify. Physical books are not necessarily devoid of lies, but they undergo more scrutiny before publication than information on the Internet. Regrettably, public libraries have been closed early in the pandemic and are among the last to reopen.

In our Temple and in our ritual, the Tyler protects our secrets, but how do we make sure that our virtual meetings, names, and pieces of architecture are not exposed to the public? The Internet is an avenue of information but also of false claims and hatred, and it allows the dissemination of lies about Freemasonry. The astute Freemason and profane alike must be ever more diligent at discarding falsehoods and gleaning the information that has true value.

Of course, this also means that there are few true secrets outside of a military context (and even that is not certain). Almost anything, including Masonic "secrets", is available to anyone with Internet access. Our secrets are secret only to the extent that they are lost in the overwhelming amount of information, disinformation, and misinformation online. Our secrets are "Hidden in Plain Sight."

Masonic Lodge Meetings in the Digital World

Although the pandemic-imposed halt to in-person meetings may be temporary, it presents an opportunity for us to re-evaluate long-held assumptions, and take advantage of options that otherwise might not have been considered as long-term strategy. We share here our experience with conducting online architectural work as well as Lodge meetings.

Freemasonry is fundamentally about sharing a connection: the bonds we share, the trust that is developed, the ideas crafted after hours of research and discussion are the only things that remain at the end of the day. The COVID outbreak has put an end to meeting in person; the Temple is closed and the table is not set for the agapes. We have instead moved our meetings into cyberspace, seeing each other through computer screens that are in our offices, living rooms, and kitchens. It is not easy to leave our metals at the door of the Temple when the Temple has no doors.

Some see Zoom and other similar online media as a barrier that reduces us to a mere image displayed on a screen. It protects us from the virus, but also traps us in the profane world, preventing us from truly giving ourselves to our work. Some think that the quality of our Masonic work has suffered, as an unintended consequence of the remote meeting process. Indeed, some members have refused to participate in virtual online Lodge meetings. Reasons may include perceived loss of anonymity or lack of security (what is a "tyled temple" in an online digital world?), inability to use technology, or lack of access to it, personal discomfort both physical (e.g. eye strain and back pain) and emotional (e.g. "Zoom fatigue").

How is the Freemason adjusting to a digital world within a profane environment?

Essentially, the Freemason is adapting by reforming old traditions and methods into new paradigms. A direct translation is at best bound to be a marginal success. For example, "Tying the Temple" had a specific and useful origin, and just saying "WM:., the Temple is duly tyled" in a virtual meeting does not

replace that specific meaning and intent. The traditional roles and functions of all officers must be adapted.

In a modern digital world, the role of the Tyler would be to make sure that everyone in conference is a mason, that they have their cameras on, that the conference code is secured with a password, etc. This is the traditional role of the Tyler, and is performed in on-line meetings by a co-host assigned to monitor security.

The Worshipful Master is not the online meeting host (a job with technical duties) but is in charge of the meeting, moving through the agenda, and granting permission to participants to speak one at a time, in an orderly manner.

The Senior and Junior Wardens share responsibilities for the two columns, coordinating and tracking requests from members to speak, when given the floor by the WM:. The Expert has the infinite online library at their fingertips. The Orator is the arbiter.

For some years GWU has operated a hybrid blend of in-person Lodges in Temple combined with online virtual access that allows Freemasons to assemble from very distant places. Unlike French or Belgian Freemasonry that is widespread with established lodges at high density in the large cities, we cover an enormous surface with a small number of lodges. The Internet makes distance irrelevant.

The profane world can and will intrude during a Zoom meeting; it's an inevitable reality. Certainly there are technical issues, including inability to see the entire room, audibility issues, Internet dropouts, and much more, but with practice these technical problems are being addressed and occur much less frequently than they did when we started online. Properly executed, Lodge meetings can proceed without issues, but attempting to use old thinking to manage a new environment is doomed to fail.

Conclusion

Assumptions held for decades (centuries?) are no longer valid, for example that there will be a physical temple for meeting and that members will meet there. But this is not a mortal threat to Freemasonry. We still gather, albeit remotely. Despite the problems, the pandemic, and the general uncertainty if not outright insanity of the last year, we have witnessed our fellow Freemasons persist with their duties and carry on. The bonds formed between us remain, tested by adversity and stronger than ever. The pandemic has forced us out of our Temples but it hasn't forced us apart from one another.

It is said that the Internet is the best and worst thing to ever happen to Freemasonry. It is the best because it makes the knowledge of Freemasonry available to anyone with a computer. It has spread the word of Freemasonry more than any other forum. It is the best because it allows lodges to have better communication. It allows Freemasons who have moved great distances, and even to other countries to still remain active in their lodge. It allows the profane to learn about Freemasonry.

It is the worst because the secrets we would like to keep are secrets no longer. It is an avenue of false claims and hatred. It allows people to disseminate lies about Freemasonry. We cannot control the Internet. Clandestine and irregular Masons are going to continue as always, posting false information. Regular Masons and lodges will continue to have a presence on the Internet. We need to continue to use the Internet to spread the truth. Like many technologies, digital technology is a double-edged sword; the sword itself was

new technology at one point, and has long been the metaphor for any idea, method, or thing with both good and bad aspects. Freemasons long have adapted to developments that brought bad change as well as good change. As Freemasons, part of our training and purpose is to recognize both aspects and focus on developing and promoting the good. So, to answer the question, how is the Freemason adjusting? Remarkably well. The pandemic hasn't shut us down, we may be worse for wear, but we are still here and our chain of union is unbroken.

We have spoken.