

**“In a culture devoid of moral education, generations are growing up in a morally inarticulate, self-referential world.”**

**I’m here to tell you that masonry changes that ... if we pay attention.**

**What does the outside world look like?**

- **The general mood of sadness is increasing.**
  - Over the past 25 years, the percentage of people who say they don’t have close friends has increased x4 (fourfold).
  - The share of Americans ages 25 to 54 who weren’t married or living with a romantic partner went up to 38 percent,
  - A record-high 25 percent of 40-year-olds have never married.
  - More than half of all Americans say that no one knows them well.
  - The percentage of high-school students who report “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” shot up to 44 percent in 2021.
  - The Center for Disease Control in the U.S. reports that suicide rates have increased in the last 24 years by more than 30 percent.
  - Sadness is increasing
- **Meanness is commonplace.**
  - Rude and even cruel behaviour is an everyday experience for many.
  - Extremism in certain quarters is rewarded; while moderation is viewed with skepticism and being “in the middle” is thought to mean you can’t tell “right” from “wrong”.
  - Political conversation can sometimes borrow the rhetoric of war. Extreme views held by a part of society puts a stress on those who try to see both sides. Crowd mentality is easily spread by social media, where steady, independent reasoning is easily drowned out.
  - Hate crimes recently reported in the media have risen to their highest level in 12 years
  - Unchecked hostility is seen in places we once thought safe from violence. Nurses report increasing abuse from patients; it used to be observed in patients who were “not themselves” for some reason; not fully recovered from anesthesia, for example. That is understandable, but abuse from patients who are just being themselves is more prevalent than was previously known and is causing many nurses to leave the profession; other professions that serve the public are not immune
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- **Generosity of Spirit is in decline.**
  - Social trust is low – interest in institutions like Churches, Boy Scouts, and Girl Guides has fallen off to the point where every potential leader must have a search made of their past for evidence of crime; pedophilia is suspected and fear of it is pervasive, to the point that it is difficult to start up a Boy Scout Troup these days.
  - In 2000, two-thirds of American households gave to charity; 18 years later fewer than half did.

I want to pause here for a moment to say I’m not talking about mental illness in this talk, I am talking about mental health. People can feel lonely, depressed, anxious, and angry at the world without being mentally ill. Of course, those same feelings can be found in the mentally ill but remember that a normal person can say why; the mentally ill don’t have to have a reason to feel the way they do,

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that is the definition of mental illness. Hallucinations, or having irrational thoughts or beliefs; depression that has no apparent cause; which is inconsolable, is mental illness. They need professional help. The statistics quoted a moment ago characterize a decline in health, which includes MENTAL health, they show a decline in happiness and an increase in despondency, gloom, and discontent. COVID-19 had a profound effect on those already suffering. Many passed the pandemic by staying home – some are still there. Confinement and Isolation: two things that contribute to poor health in general and mental health in particular. – There is strong evidence that outdoors activity improves cognitive functioning, enhances the immune system, and reduces stress as well as blood pressure. Isolation contributes to many unhealthy habits – drinking to name the most obvious. Studies have found that about 40% of Americans have a meaningful interaction with another human being only once a month. Confinement and isolation are red flags we should recognize and take appropriate actions.

Let me return now to the crux of my talk, that Masonry holds a key to better health – if we practice what we preach.

One distinguished writer says, the most important story about why we have become sad and alienated and rude, is very simple: **“We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein. In a healthy society, a web of institutions – families, schools, religious groups, community organizations, and workplaces, help form people into kind and responsible citizens, the sort of people who show up for one another.”** We live in a society that’s terrible at moral development. Moral formation must be learned; and it must be practiced in order to be “improved” or our basic natures will tend to bring out selfishness, rudeness, and disrespect.

Listen to the words of Worshipful Bro. Benjamin Franklin who said, “Men I find to be a Sort of Beings very badly constructed, as they are generally more easily provok’d than reconcil’d, more dispos’d to do Mischief to each other than to make Reparation, and much more easily deciv’d than undeceiv’d.” Things haven’t changed.

**Moral development** – perhaps a stuffy term but no other word seems to fit. Freemasonry provides much of what is needed to mend and heal our bruised sense of happiness, if only members attended and practiced. Masons see moral lessons taught and practiced at every meeting. We hear them, but are we listening? How many times do we hear “to learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry,” before we LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND –that this means learning and practicing the moral lessons – it means building Character – something more important in a man than anything else, if truth be told, and character sweetens life for the individual as well as his society.

Experts say character building through acquisition of moral lessons boils down to these:

- A. Learn to restrain selfishness and self-centredness.
- B. Acquire Social and Ethical Skills.
- C. Learn Respect for Others.
- D. Find a pathway for a moral life.

1. Restrain selfishness. We say “learn to subdue my passions” – same thing; and the Seal on our Pillar Certificate says “Listen, Observe and Be Silent” – in other words, subdue a natural urge to give

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voice to your personal views and focus - consider what is being said. We cannot talk and listen at the same time. There's plenty of talk. It's difficult to see the other fellow let alone hear him if our self-centeredness is not "subdued" so we can listen.

Masonically speaking, we all start from the humblest circumstances, in darkness, and we learn from the beginning that Masons don't look at a brother mason or indeed any other man like the outside world does. Starting as that poor and penniless Entered Apprentice, we grow in masonry through teachings and lectures; degrees we receive, and those we watch being given - observing each time and learning... if we just listen. Money or position in the world is not what determines a man's true character. This point was well-illustrated by President Theodore Roosevelt when he attended his Lodge, where his gardener was the Worshipful Master. Masons learn that we are all on the same level of life, the gardener, and the President of the United States. Bro. Robby Burns poem teaches the masonic lesson in just a few words:

What though on hamely fare we dine,  
Wear hoddin grey, an' a that;  
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine;  
A Man's a Man for a' that:  
For a' that, and a' that,  
Their tinsel show, an' a' that;  
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,  
Is king o' men for a' that.

2. Social and ethical skills. Masonry teaches *constantly* the cardinal virtues of **Temperance** – in word and deed; **Fortitude** – **Prudence** – **Justice**. These cardinal virtues were recognized by the earliest civilizations as necessary for a well-governed life, and necessary for being a good citizen, neighbour, and member of society. They are not only masonic as much as Universal and quoted in classical texts. Each virtue could be the subject of a book of Masonic Education. The point is, Masons come to lodge to work to improve themselves. First, we must hear the moral lesson, and more importantly, listen to the message. We learn most virtues through the repetition of many small habits and practices, in a community of common values, whose members aspire to earn one another's respect. That's what we are in our lodges, and we must carry these characteristics into the community and Be an Example. "How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in harmony"; and a lot more fun.

3. RESPECT Masonry teaches respect. We practice respect in lodge meetings, first by supporting one another by being there; we generally dress up to some degree and enter the lodge room properly clothed; we wear our apron, we look like we belong to something worth belonging to. Masons greet one another, even if its just a handshake, and "nice to see you, Brother". We pay due respect to the officers appointed to govern our ceremonies and we participate in lodge business in respectful, if not always formal ways, and we do so with civility. So much for the routine one-on-one, but not so fast, do we look at the brother while shaking his hand or do we glad-hand and move on to the next voter? Do we see him? Ask yourself, what does the other mason see? A welcoming greeting or just going through the motions. Is "How are you?" an empty phrase, not to be taken literally? Do you even care about the reply? Masonry asks, "What are you going through, brother?" - and care about the answer.

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The value of a friend is incalculable in terms of health; a friend gladdens the heart, it lightens our darkness, even helps lower blood pressure, and eases the troubled mind.

What we often neglect is the absent brother. Why is he not present? Is he in need? Is he ALONE? Is his darkness too great to share; is that why he isn't coming to lodge? The refrain we hear that we need to recruit new members has a hollow ring if we don't pay attention to the ones we already have. Where is the brotherly love if a brother is absent and the lodge does not make every effort to learn Why? The seeds of depression and dejection are named "lonesome", and it is no wonder such a brother may see us no better than avaricious money seekers when he only hears from his lodge when its time to pay his dues. Senior brethren in my lodge may remember the letter preserved in our archive, from WB Hugh Goodwin, who lay dying in Blackett's Lake, N.S. With his response to a dunning letter for his past dues he enclosed a note of rebuke. His note expressed his sadness, and the loneliness only one who is facing imminent death alone can know; and the anger that came, as he saw it, was rooted in our neglect. He taught us a painful lesson, that a sense of rejection, of being invisible, unheard, disrespected, registers as an injustice - because it is. We should have done better by him. How many others just suffer in their isolation, neglected? Neglect at any time is an injustice and shows disrespect; it evokes hopelessness, anger. Can any lodge become so engrossed with its other business that it neglects to pay regular attention to every brother?

4. Help people find a purpose in life. Freemasonry teaches fundamental truths about life – knowing full well that moral formation doesn't succeed in making people angels, it tries to make them better than they otherwise might be.

Masons are moral realists, whose code of conduct is built on core principles. Character is destiny and Character improves with practice. Improving your character helps to maintain your health.

We are not so much in the public eye as we might, most public moralists are self-righteous prigs or hypocrites. Masonry on the other hand is generally humble, and our fraternity is one that ideally makes brethren feel included, seen, and respected. If we're not doing that, we are failing each other. "Listen, observe and remain silent" is a fine motto. As masonic Character matures – then it should become "Listen, Observe, and act accordingly."

We do charitable work, and are proud of it, but it must come second to the care we owe one another.

Masonry holds a singular place in teaching and practising the time-honored virtues that make a better, Healthier world, but we must not forget, our principal duty is to one another. Failing our brethren just greases the slide into darkness, while nurturing them is an example to the world, and a magnet to worthy men to come knocking on our door.

**NOTE:** statistics material has been lifted from David Brooks in his article " *How America Got Mean*" in The Atlantic, September 2023