

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1997**

**Grand Orator
Ronald L. Koretz
"Quality = Making A Difference"**

Most Worshipful Grand Master, Past Grand Masters, my fellow Grand Lodge Officers, Distinguished visitors from other Grand Jurisdictions, members of Grand Lodge, and, most importantly, my brothers

The charge of the Grand Orator at this time is to deliver an address upon matters appertaining to the craft. For the past year, our Grand Master has traveled around the state of California emphasizing his theme: "Quality is the Key - You Can Make a Difference!" Hence, for 1996-97, the issue of making a difference has been a matter appertaining to the Craft. My remarks to you today will reflect on that topic.

First of all, on behalf of all of this year's appointed and elected line, I would like to thank Most Worshipful Alan B. Gresham for his efforts in leading Grand Lodge. His work has most certainly made a difference in improving the direction and image of Masonry in California. On a personal note, I must thank him for the opportunity he provided me to participate in this process. As one who was permitted to share some of the public spotlight, I must thank the other Grand Lodge Officers, as well as all of our ladies, for their ideas and words of encouragement, and acknowledge their hard work and personal sacrifices behind the scenes. But, perhaps most importantly, I must thank the people whose stories inspired me during the past year. These were all individuals who, in their unique ways, made differences in their own communities. I was able to use many of these stories in local addresses, and I would like to share four of them with you in a symbolic trip around a lodge room.

We will start in the East. Its symbol is the Square, the emblem of virtue. Last October, the Grand Lodge officers were in San Jose for two separate events. In the time between them, the Grand Chaplain and I walked around the Scottish Rite Building. We met an elderly gentleman who was rolling up old newspapers in one of the storage rooms. The man was Bill Nelson, an 82-year-old Past Master of Palo Alto-Roller Lodge #346. For the past 11 years, Bill has been raising money for the Scottish Rite by using donated newspapers Rite to make 25 pound rolls of double-sheeted paper. In order to do so, he had to open each newspaper, separate out and remove the single sheets, and then place the remaining double sheets one on top of another, each one slightly offset from the one below. When 25 pounds of paper were so stacked, he rolled the pile up. Thus prepared, the paper could be sold to wholesale florists for \$ 180/ton, netting an extra \$ 170/ton over what the paper alone was worth. It took Bill an hour to make one roll, for which the Scottish Rite received an additional \$2. Bill estimated that his project brought in about \$3000 each year. In other words, he donated about 30 hours per week to this project.

The issue was not the money. There are certainly many people who could simply write a check for \$3000 and not think anything about it. The issue is that Bill provided his time and his energy; his work was an act of love. It would be nice to think that the flowers that were subsequently wrapped in that paper became a little brighter or stayed fresher for a little while longer.

Bill Nelson showed me that you're never too old to contribute to your community. He taught me to measure the virtue of charity not by the size of the monetary donation, but by the size of the donor's heart.

The South is the station of the Plumb, a symbol of moral rectitude, of doing the right thing, if you will.

Jerry and Sally Freeman live in Los Angeles. For the past 36 years, they have cared for over 200 very special foster children. Each one of these children was afflicted with some major physical handicap, defects which usually cause people to become uncomfortable and turn away.

Some time ago, they were asked to take a 5-month-old boy, Jacob, into their home. Jacob had a progressive degenerating neurologic disorder, and he was not expected to live for more than a year. After a great deal of soul-searching, the Freemans accepted Jacob and made the decision that, for however long he was alive, Jacob's quality of life would be as good as this couple could make it. As Jacob developed, it became apparent that he would need some surgical procedures if he was ever going to be able to walk on his own. Initially, the doctors balked at doing anything. They believed that the long term gains, which, given his life expectancy, were mostly hypothetical anyway, would not outweigh the short-term pain the surgeries would cause. Sally Freeman saw the situation differently; to her, Jacob needed the surgery to improve his ambulatory capacity, and thus his independence and quality of life. She ultimately prevailed, and the surgeries were done.

I met the Freemans this past spring, when my own lodge presented them with an award for their years of compassionate work. Sally told us that, after the orthopedic procedures, he did learn to ambulate independently. She told us that, while his disease had limited his verbal development, he had learned to communicate using a computer. She told us that the neurologic process had progressed to the point where he now needed a walker or wheel chair to get around.

Most importantly, she told us that Jacob had recently celebrated his fourth birthday.

The Freemans gave love and compassion to another human soul. The consequence was an outcome that was better than would have occurred otherwise. They did the right thing.

We find the Level in the West. It is a symbol of equality.

Arnold Astrada was a Green Beret in 1981 when he made a practice parachute jump from an airplane at 1200 feet. The exercise became anything but routine when the chute failed to open. He survived the ordeal, but he was left permanently paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheel chair. After working his way through a major depression, he focused his attention on wheel chair athletics, the shot put in particular. He went to the Wheel Chair Pan-American Games in 1986 and won the Gold Medal. He took the Silver Medal in the Wheel Chair Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988 and again in Barcelona in 1992. He returned from Spain determined to win the Gold when the Games came to America in 1996.

In 1993, he developed a lung condition and his doctors told him that he would never compete again. Somewhat later, he met with two other wheel chair athletes, both of whom he had coached in the past. The three of them made a pact to compete in Atlanta in 1996 together. They went to the US trials in San Diego in 1996, where tragedy struck. Both of Arnold's friends died there, one day apart. Grief stricken, Arnold made the team and vowed to represent all three of them in Georgia. Shortly after arriving in Atlanta, his lungs again began to act up, and he also found out that he had a broken bone in his shoulder. Nonetheless, Arnold believed that he had to compete. So, burdened by these additional emotional and physical problems, he went out and put the shot.

He won the Gold Medal.

There is a metaphor regarding effort which is appropriate for this story and for the Level in the West. It is: "We all have the same sky, but we all don't have the same horizon."

The North has no station or symbol. In Masonry, it is a place of darkness.

Alex Swan was the Grand Chaplain in 1992-93. I met him at that time, and we became good friends. He even became an officer in my lodge. A man in his 80's, he was a practitioner of Christian Science. This religious pursuit accepts the existence of Divine healing, and its adherents do not seek what much of the rest of the world would view as traditional medical care. It was hard to argue with his choice of health care, because, even at his age, he was so robust and cheerful.

It is important to understand this background because of the events that accompanied the last few months of his life. During that time, his health did decline, and it was during this period that he had his most profound impact upon me.

It is easy, in the abstract, to talk a good fight. It is another matter entirely when one actually has to fight it. Alex had a stroke. While he initially appeared to make a satisfactory recovery, he subsequently developed major problems with his respiration; he spent the last many weeks of his life being short of breath all of the time.

I would ask all of you, for a moment, to put yourself in such a condition. Just hold your breath long enough to experience the mild anxiety that occurs as your body becomes oxygen

deprived. Now imagine that anxiety not going away. That is akin to how Alex felt. As a traditional physician observing him, I concluded that Alex had heart failure, and I believed that there were medical interventions available which would allow him to breathe with much less effort. I am sure he knew the same. Many people would find it easy to trade an abstract religious conviction for such an opportunity to breathe more comfortably. Alex never succumbed to that temptation; he remained true to his belief.

In what proved to be one of the last times I talked to him, I asked him what he would want done if he suddenly collapsed in the lodge. This was not an idle question; if such an event were to happen, I had no doubt that I would be asked to make the medical decision. His response, given only a few words at a time, was that he wanted people to pray for him. We were to call his wife, not the paramedics.

During those months, Alex Swan became, for me, a testament to courage and belief in one's convictions. While his bodily functions did cease last November, his spirit will certainly live on, at least in me. I may practice a different type of health care, but I hope that I can emulate his dignity and faith at the end of my days.

The North was never dark to Alex Swan. He died with the light of faith.

These stories, as well as many others that I do not have the time to tell, are all inspiring ones of people who made differences. But why tell them-? Yes they are inspirational and do exemplify the Grand Master's theme. But I am relating them to you for another reason.

These people did not behave the way they did with the intent of impressing others. They did what they did because it was who they were and what they believed in. It was only as an incidental side effect that they became inspirations.

So it is with each of us. In our day-to-day lives, we do not do what we do simply to make a difference to others. Nonetheless, we wind up making differences all of the time. For example, small acts of kindness or anger are magnified in the recipient. Have you ever been driving on the road and had someone let you in ahead of him or her? When that happens, it creates a warm sensation in you that far outlives the few seconds you saved at the time. On the other hand, when someone suddenly cuts you off, it sets up a negative feeling that lasts far longer than the delay incurred when you had to step on the brakes. I would suggest that, in both instances, other people made differences to you.

In fact, we can't help but make a difference with each of our actions. If you stop and think about it for a moment, you will realize that society is nothing more than a collection of individual people. As such, its behaviors represent the sum total of each person's behaviors. To provide you with a concrete example, let me paraphrase the slogan that came out of the anti-littering campaign: "Every litter bit makes a difference."

In this regard, let us consider the society in which we are now living. It is far different from the one our parents grew up in or that some of us older people remember from our own youths. Materialism has become our primary focus. We measure people by what they have, not by how they got it. Self-promotion is taking the place of brotherly love. Greed is replacing relief. Marketing is overwhelming truth.

I have purposely cited our three principle tenets, because Masonry is one of the few remaining repositories of what is commonly referred to as "traditional values". We all have values, although no two of us have exactly the same ones. Values are the things which you intrinsically desire, the things you go to bat for, the things that you would describe as being really important in your life.

Through the millenia, human beings became "social animals", that is, they developed skills and behaviors that allow them to live together for their mutual benefit. They rely on each other. Such a group of interdependent people must have certain rules to live by. If they routinely killed each other, or lied to each other the social structure would collapse. Hence, traditional values, such as brotherly love, relief, and truth, are things which society as a whole has found to be important to promote. They are the things that a society would describe as being really important for its life.

If you will, these traditional values are biologically important to the survival of a society just as the drive to eat is biologically important to the survival of the individual. Society, as the ultimate beneficiary of traditional values, will ask its members to make sacrifices in the interest of this greater good.

But why would an individual make a sacrifice? Because it feels good to do the right thing. I would suggest that we each have in us a biologic need to do things to benefit society. Being true to, and fulfilling, these needs produces self-esteem and a sense of worth.

In fact, one could speculate that these social drives are genetically implanted in us. Young children seem instinctively to know right from wrong. They trust without question, at least until someone teaches them not to. I would remind you of the lyrics from a song from the musical South Pacific:

"You've got to be taught to hate and fear,
You've got to be taught from year to year,
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear,
You've got to be carefully taught."

One could even view these innate drives to act morally and to help others from a theologic perspective and conclude that their presence represents tangible proof of the existence of a Supreme Being.

We would all agree that these traditional values are good for the individual and for society. On the other hand, the pursuit of materialistic values is detrimental. Materialism is, by its very nature, shortsighted. If a man lies to obtain some advantage today, who will believe him the next time he speaks? If he sells all of his heritage and mortgages his future for some transient self-indulgence how will he buy the next one? Such short-term gains invariably lead to long term losses.

Moreover, while the practice of traditional values makes us feel good there is no innate need to drive an expensive car or wear an expensive watch! Satisfying materialistic values is biologically unfulfilling. Marketing campaigns would have us believe that we are what we wear, drive, eat, or tell time with. In the short term, these campaigns are effective. We begin to believe that the world really is what it is depicted to be in those commercials. As more and more people buy into this myth, peer pressure begins to exert itself and the myth becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, self-worth is not for sale. If a person does not feel good about him- or herself trying to compensate by buying some thing is doomed to failure. After all, if such a worthless person can obtain it, it really could not be very valuable. Groucho Marx said it best when he commented that he would resign from any club that would accept him as a member. Self-esteem is free, but we have to find it in ourselves, not in our environment.

Traditional values and materialism are the antitheses of each other, and they must invariably come into conflict. In such a contest, nobody can sit on the sidelines. The common peer justification for materialistic behavior is the argument that "everyone does it". If you remain silent and do not challenge that statement, it becomes true, at least as far as you are concerned. Even if you do not practice materialism yourself, being passive gives others the permission to continue. Hence, if you do not become part of the solution, you will be part of the problem. To paraphrase Edmund Burke, the only thing necessary for the triumph of materialism is for supporters of traditional values to do nothing.

There is a song from the stage play Annie, which provides some insight into this conflict. At the beginning of the musical, as well as at the end, Annie sings a song called "Tomorrow". I would like you to think about one of the lines of that song. In particular, I would ask you to fill in a missing word: "Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love you tomorrow, you're [fill in the word] a day away". What is that word?

Those of you who know the play probably thought of one of two different words. Those words were either "always" or "only". But which is the right answer? Actually, they both are. In the beginning of the story, Annie is a poor orphan girl who, while having great dreams, lives in a reality in which they are not likely ever to come true. These dreams of her tomorrow are always a day away. At the end, she has found a new family and she is on the verge of achieving those dreams. Now, tomorrow is only a day away.

The lesson for us relates to the question: When will tomorrow actually come? To the materialistic mind, it is always a day away. Taking shortcuts and living only for the moment and beyond one's means pretends that the future will never come. Inherent in this behavior is the expectation that, at the time of reckoning, someone else will pay the piper.

For traditionalists. Masons in particular, tomorrow is only that one-day away. In fact, these people will sacrifice in the present to build for that future. Our ancient brethren created edifices that have stood the test of time; those structures are still there centuries later. In taking the extra time and effort to get them built right, some of these men paid a price. Doubtlessly, a few of them fell off a roof while being engrossed in performing the job correctly. A colleague of mine had a 94-year-old woman as a patient. Every week he would visit her in a nursing home, and every week she recited the same lengthy list of complaints. One time, he asked her if there was anything good about being 94. After a brief pause, she said "Yes. There is no peer pressure." Materialism, through such devices as marketing, creates an artificial peer pressure that keeps that value system going.

But peer pressure, like society itself, is simply the net sum of each person's input. Since each of those people will have an ingrained sense of right and wrong, each one can be touched and his or her behavior can be changed. When enough individuals have changed, society changes. Why not use peer pressure to emphasize traditional values?

This is the real promise of Masonry. Masonry fundamentally deals with men on a one-on-one basis. We try to provide an environment in which a person can become better, through his own efforts and with the encouragement, or, in other words, the peer-pressure, of the rest of us. Our charge is to practice out of the lodge those great moral duties which are inculcated in it. It is not unreasonable to expect, even to demand, that non-Masons do the same. These moral duties, these teachings of our fraternity, these traditional values, are not our property. Everyone in society shares them. You do not have to be a Mason to be a Mason.

The battle between traditional values and materialism is being waged as we speak. We cannot remain neutral in it. We can choose to take as much as we can and hope someone else will pay for it, or we can choose to build for the future. In making your particular choice, I would remind you that, in two days, tomorrow will be yesterday. Realize that the sum of each of our choices today will determine which of the possible tomorrows we all will then look back at. Each of us will make a difference. You must decide what the difference is that you want to make. Thank you.