

## **Masonic Apathy**

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### **What is Apathy?**

Recently the members of the Grand Lodge of Manitoba Board of General Purposes got together to engage in some brainstorming as part of the development of their strategic plan. When performing a big picture SWOT analysis or identifying the Masonic jurisdictions strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats what became apparent as a major threat to the organization was apathy. Apathy it was agreed was a central theme. So one might ask what happened to the vibrant and honorable organization whose mission it is to develop men and improve the world?

Consider apathy in our society today. For example voter apathy is widespread because people have a general feeling that despite whatever party they vote for nothing ever appears to change. When traumatic events knock people sideways they often react by collapsing into themselves. People withdraw from the participating in the outside world and retreat more and more into that which they believe is a safe haven, away from trauma and hurt. People believe in protecting themselves from the shocks and bruises that life may hit them with from time to time. While it can be a very good thing to give ourselves space, peace and quiet to re-centre ourselves, if we hang out there too long, we become apathetic. Once apathy and disengagement takes a hold of an entire organization then things really become seriously flawed. People don't care, they don't step forward to volunteer and they don't attend or participate.

Apathy is a state of disinterest in the world. It is difficult to get motivated. There doesn't seem to be much point in doing anything or doesn't seem to be much meaning to anything. After a death, it is a common feeling to say "what's the use, no one gets out alive anyway." The day to day drudgery of work, paying bills, making ends meet, trying to make things better and added responsibilities drags us deeper into feeling that whatever we do is pointless and therefore worthless. Why bother? Its easy to see why so many Freemasons are throwing up their hands in futility and feel apathetic with Lodge closures and amalgamations, with less people doing more of the work, with declining numbers and the more senior members fondly recalling "the good old days" when things seemed to be better. We hear the statements "we can't do that" or we don't have the money when the Grand Lodge or Lodge coffers lie full. Any efforts or changes are discounted, blocked or retarded and Lodge meetings seem to be just exercises in moving through minutes of past meetings and endless reports. Even ritual itself has become a mechanical dis-spiriting exercise rather than the powerful transformative psychological experience it is meant to be. Where one might ask are the opportunities for improvement? For doing something meaningful? Where is the intellectual stimulation and the camaraderie we often wonder? With more work done by fewer people finger pointing becomes commonplace as does the "blame game" and people become agitated at their treatment by others and they become disengaged.

So what is the purpose of apathy? Apathy teaches us that we only have one shot. In this life there are no guarantees. Only this moment in time is real and worth spending time in, apathy is bread by living in the past and not seeing a possible future. After all what is the point of planning and engaging in preparation? What is the point in applying effort and resources when things will never be the same as they were? Why should I ask or put my neck out when the answer is always "no." Apathy after all contains no planning, no preparation, no application, apathy is a strange land of nothingness, of loss of energy and the death of spirit. Apathy is running from being overwhelmed, it fears complication, it presupposes unfavorable outcomes. It is guessing that a particular scenario will be a letdown. But then in many cases such things have not occurred they are just states of mind and a particular choice of view.

## Contributing Factors to Apathy and Possible Fixes

What might be the contributing sources of apathy in the Manitoba jurisdiction?

- Lack of opportunity for participation;
- A perception that the organizations mission/vision no longer aligns with their own;
- Peoples time and commitments are in conflict with those of the organization;
- Members may feel that they do not play a significant role in the processes that drive their organization;
- Loss of membership;
- Loss of pride equated to loss of membership and influence in the general community;
- Loss of facilities and Lodges;
- Loss of authority in a dramatically changing Committee structure;
- Misunderstanding between brethren;
- Feeling of worthlessness brought upon by misunderstanding between brethren;
- Resentment and negative thinking grounded in misunderstanding at the need to have an adequately staffed and resourced Grand Lodge;
- Too few people doing too much;
- Lack of information, education or knowledge;
- Nothing new or different- meetings are the same, the same people “run” things, the same things to eat, the same things said- not enough variety, not enough interesting events/activities or people.
- A perception that Grand Lodge, Committee or Lodge is failing to improve anything.

Do you notice the words above? Lack of..., loss of..., too few? Apathy is often created by conditions where a few people make it difficult for the large component to be engaged. For example, in the real world, many people feel that corporate power has already transcended the decision making capability of the government and that too much power and wealth is winding up in the hands of the few. Therefore feelings of helplessness and disengagement become pervasive within society. Similarly, if too few people are “running the show” at Grand Lodge (the same can be said for Lodges) and the bureaucrats at large wish to maintain status quo at all costs then what happens to the organization over the long term? Again, people will not feel part of the larger organization because whatever they do doesn’t matter or won’t affect the big picture. How do we snap out of this malaise? To begin we must change our mode of thinking at this particular point in time. It requires being involved right NOW at this point in time, not attached to the past or to what we think we know or interpret but how we *could* see things differently. The moment people become fixated on the now and with *living in the NOW* then *engagement* becomes a possibility. It takes no motivation. It takes no organizing. It simply requires choice in understanding that we all have the choice here and now, this then begins to dissipate apathy. From this choice vibrant living becomes possible, nothing has to be based upon the past, this is a new moment you yourself and or others have created. To quote a line from the movie The Shawshank Redemption, “*get busy living or get busy dying!*”

Part of chasing apathy out of the ranks of the Craft lies in:

- **Identifying the needs of the membership and involve people-** a needs analysis may identify what is needed or important to the membership at large.
- **Having a Positive Leadership-** presenting choice, a life of involvement and creativity, of potential and positivism. All Grand Line Officers and Board members must be seen as positive, progressive, helpful. As leaders with vision not as bureaucrats who do not promote involvement, growth and change.
- **Value -added Meetings-** *business should never take precedence over people.* After all, centrally Masonry is about the mechanics of ritual involvement vis self-discovery, growth and learning and not about minutes and per capita- *save it for the GP meeting.* Less business more sharing ideas, thoughts, ideals, philosophy. We must also consider that

Grand Lodge must set the tone –if Grand Lodge meetings are comprised of minutes and maintaining the status quo and not meetings that engage and inspire and entertain how can we expect Freemasons to attend? Lodges mirror Grand Lodge. Just as people mirror their leaders.

- **Education-** On Masonic philosophy and symbolism and the meaning of why we do what we do. The psychological and organizational importance of ritual and its impact on the Craft. On learning new leadership skills- vision, strategy, interpersonal, computing and administration skills.
- **Products and services** that emphasize variety and usefulness to its members.
- **Interpersonal development-** many companies and no-profit organizations are engaging their employees or volunteers through “soft” development seminars and workshops. Many useful tools exist which may help people identify their personality and intelligence type, emotional IQ and how they may develop themselves more fully. The benefits to the organization are obvious, people become more aware of themselves and others. Committee work may become enhanced via the team concept and more evolved and mature relations may result.

While most people abhor change it is *necessary* that Masonic leaders nurture a culture of constant improvement and change because life itself is change, growth and transformation. If leaders seek to keep things status quo the organization itself suffers due to the fact that people lose interest because a basic fact of human behavior states people always look for more, for something else, something that will benefit themselves (“what’s in it for me”- a basic motivator) or people they care about. Status quo can never sustain an organization long term because ultimately apathy will prevail (think of the former Soviet Union which refused to participate in a global market economy and whose population were totally apathetic towards government, production and individual achievement—this political, socio-economic model was ultimately unsustainable). Leaders within an organization have a very serious stake and a responsibility in always seeking to improve their organization, its programs and services for their stakeholders (all Freemasons in our case). While it must be recognized that “managership” and bureaucracy have their place as organizing factors in organizations they *must* be kept in check. Management and bureaucrats are after all *supposed* to keep things ordered and *as they are*. However great organizations and societies have never been built by managers or by bureaucrats, great societies, organizations and efforts have been founded, grown and nurtured by effective leaders who express vision, imagination, and possibility by positivism, growth, effort, variety and choice. Leaders are visionary and break new ground and take people and organizations to places they have never gone. So when organizations bog down in apathy the leaders must have the understanding and the capability to engage and involve their people in the process of making their organizations better than they were, more useful and more purposeful.

Apathy can be ultimately reduced and minimized if Masonic leaders are ready to do what it takes for their organizations and their membership. More than ever organizational leaders must respond with foresight and be ready to inspire action for the benefit of all.