

Sibelius

WM, Officers and Brethren.

Thankyou Bro. for the way you proposed that toast and thank you members of Sibelius Lodge for the way you received it, although your welcome came as no surprise. This Lodge has always been the acme of Masonic warmth. Note Brethren that word was 'acme' and not 'acne' - although if the average age of this lodge gets any younger, the latter may become a problem.

So thankyou Members of Sibelius for the way that you have welcomed us today and for the riches you have laid out before us in both your working and your festive board.

I was so impressed this afternoon by

So thankyou, WM and Brethren, for showing us what Masonic hospitality is about: making your guests feel at home - even if you wish they were.

This is the second time I have risen in Sibelius to reply to this toast and I do hope it will not prove the truth of the old adage: once a diversion, twice a perversion. After all, speeches are like babies – easy to conceive but difficult to deliver - and twins doubly so. However, after a good dinner, such as we have had this evening, one can forgive anybody, including one's own relations.

It is reputed that the first after dinner speech ever was given by Christopher Columbus, who started with the words, *Brethren, a funny thing happened to me on the way to India*, but whatever the truth of that, it has always seemed to me that the best audience is one which is intelligent, well-educated and a little drunk – rather like this one.

Let me however turn to more serious themes.

Membership of our order has been falling. Candidates have been hard to find and many lodges are wondering what to do at meetings. The list of Lodges closing exceeds the number being founded. Let us take heart in the fact that the decline in Essex has slowed but the fact of the matter is that while our problems may have unique features, we are not alone. Rotary, the Round Table, the Townswomen's Guild and many others are also suffering.

So what is wrong - and in particular what is wrong with Masonry? The short answer is 'nothing'. Freemasonry is wonderful, an island of peace and friendship in an increasingly frantic world ... and that is the issue. It is not Freemasonry that has changed - but the world around it.

It is the different between commitment and consumerism. 'Commitment' societies are those which depend for their existence upon the members taking responsibility, making a commitment to regular attendance, to contributing to management and to taking office. The Rotary, the Round Table, the Townswomen's Guild and Freemasonry are such societies.

An example of a 'consumer' club might be a golf & country club, owned and run independently from the membership. Reduced attendance is actually a profit opportunity for such a club as it enables more memberships to be sold without overcrowding. In fact, the ideal member is one who pays the fee and never attends.

In the case of the consumer club, members 'snack' on their membership. The world has become one of snacking while we require and indeed demand commitment.

So what do we do? You may argue that the Women's Institute is still very successful but I doubt whether a nude calendar of the Brethren here today would sell.

If Freemasonry attempts to change too much, to become more like a consumer club, it will only hasten its own decline. We must stick to our values.

If you asked Brethren what they get out of Freemasonry, they might say many things. However most would agree that they gain immense fellowship, mutual support, a feeling of doing the right things, a sense of continuity with the past and indeed with the future, the satisfaction of ritual well performed, perhaps an enjoyment of the 'theatre' aspects, a great deal of laughter, a few drinks, a good meal ... and something special, not easy to put into words - a feeling of something beyond oneself, something that lifts us onto a slighter higher plane of behaviour, that makes us want to live up to the ideals of Freemasonry.

This 'something special' is our differentiating factor. Lose that and we lose everything. This 'something special' may not appear to be fashionable today. That does not mean that all is lost. Sibelius Lodge, and indeed my own following the lead that Sibelius has given, have proven that here are many men out there who

appreciate and even hunger for this 'something special'. We just have to make an extra effort to find them.

Freemasonry will not be successful if it just sits back and waits for candidates to appear. The Sibelius website and our own set out our ideals, enables right thinking men to find us and encourages them to make contact.

This lodge is experiencing a flow of excellent candidates and St Laurence Lodge no 5511 has a candidate to initiate at every one of its meetings from November 2011 right through 2012 - including the installation meeting and an emergency meeting.

This is not the only or indeed the full answer but I have gone on long enough.

Brethren have asked me how I time my speeches. I usually answer that I stand up when they nudge me and sit down when they tug the hem of my jacket. I can feel the tugs now so I will close by thanking Sibelius for its lead and by expressing my gratitude for the inspiration this lodge has provided.

WM and Brethren of the Sibelius Lodge, may your right hands always be stretched out in friendship but never in want and may your home always be too small to hold all your friends.