

It's Not About Us
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The opening sentence in the currently popular book "A Purpose Driven Life" by Rick Warren is a very simple observation on one of the fundamentals of leadership whether it is in our professional or personal lives. The sentence in a very few words says it all.

"It's not about you."

If we take the time to think through the meaning of that simple sentence, it's a very sobering statement that applies to many traditions of our beloved fraternity – Freemasonry.

"It's not about you."

It becomes very easy for us to lose sight of the meaning of that simple sentence because too often it does become about us. Freemasonry – as with many fraternal or volunteer organizations – accomplishes its many worthy endeavors through the recognitions of individual members. We function through recognition of each other. At many events – at many dinners – by the time we go through the introductions, we have introduced almost everyone in the room.

Almost everyone in the room is either a past something, a current something or is about to become something. We learn early on that through recognition, we can get others to take on a task, to fill a committee assignment or to sit in a chair in a lodge line. We give each other certain titles, special aprons or different jewels. We have certain protocol when addressing each other. We give each other special privileges.

"It's not about you."

But we as the leadership of Freemasonry in Minnesota today have to recognize that this protocol of recognition can lead us to a

false assumption of our self-worth and a misunderstanding of the true assets of our fraternity.

Ever so subtly our focus changes, our goals change and our perceptions change. Before we know it, we start assuming that it is about us. Suddenly, we believe we are entitled to that special recognition, that introduction – we are entitled to be at the front of the parade. However, if we understand the true assets of our fraternity and focus on those assets, we – especially the past something's and the current somethings – should be the least recognized.

“It’s not about you.”

What are our true assets? What should be the center of our attention or recognition?

Some would argue that our visibility in the community should be our focus. Just as elaborate cathedrals have been built over the years to recognize the sincerity of our religious beliefs, our lodge buildings should be maintained and preserved at all costs to show the sincerity of our fraternity. But our lodge buildings are facades, nothing more and nothing less. Just as we are reminded during the staircase lecture, dwellings – structures – no matter how elaborate or how simple – from a practical standpoint provides us with shelter from the inclemency's of the seasons – nothing more and nothing less.

Some would argue that our balances in our checkbooks or trustee accounts should be our focus. That we need to cultivate those assets to provide for our future needs. But those tangible assets are of little value merely sitting as a bottom line balance in an account to be read to the members each month at our meetings. Our lodge buildings, furnishings and account balances have little or no net worth if those so called assets become our focus. Those so called assets become little more than another form of our self recognition if they become our focal point. Unless we recognize our most valuable asset we will become old men going into old buildings doing old things.

It’s not about us.

To discover our most valuable asset does not require years of work in a research lodge, does not require membership in the Rosslyn

Templars, and does not require an understanding of the complexities of the Da Vinci Code.

Our most valuable asset can be understood by a simple reading – even a cursory reading – of the Annual Reports to the Grand Lodge – to us - at our 154th Annual Communication. Our most valuable asset can be recognized by a review of our mission statement.

An appreciation of how delicate and precious our most valuable asset should be clearly visible to every Past Master, sitting Master and the officers of each of our lodges. Anyone attending a Lodge meeting should - with a glance around the sidelines - recognize our most valuable asset. Simply put, our most valuable asset should be clearly visible to those that we regularly acknowledge through introductions, hail with special protocols and distinguish with unique aprons, jewels and titles.

Yet time and time again, our most valuable asset is not recognized for its significance, is frequently ignored and even criticized for its apparent lack of importance. When we attend events whether it be at Lodge or at a Masonic family related activity, we sit in our same seat, with our same group and discuss what we want to talk about. We plan our events and make the decisions around what we want. Why? Because it's comfortable to us.

It's not about us.

Our most valuable asset in the Grand Lodge of Minnesota is the last Entered Apprentice we initiated. The last Entered Apprentice is our future – our future leader, our future degree team, our future membership spokesman. He is tomorrow's Grand Lodge of Minnesota.

It matters not how much money we have in our coffers – whether it be our Lodge coffers or the various coffers of the Grand Lodge or Minnesota Masonic Charities if we have no one to administer the funds. It matters not what our mission statement is if we have no one to carry out the mission. It matters not how many events we plan at our Lodges if there is no one to attend

Over and over again, we discourage the young member who we perceive to be outside what we think the mold should be. Over and

over again, we fail to listen to or even seek input from the new member on proposed changes in insignificant procedures or traditions. Over and over again, we fail to consider the personal commitments of the new member that may conflict with what we perceive as significant Masonic events. Over and over again, we leave the new member an outsider.

During a recent lunch, a Brother that has been and is very active in many aspects of our Masonic family related a story regarding his son and his son's friend. These young men – in their early 20's - are exploring becoming active in one our Masonic organizations.

Simply put – they are looking us over. They are now the committee investigating us. However, the food being served at the meetings was not their preference. They decided to bring in their own fast food. They were told that some members may not appreciate their decision. But if we think about the event, we realize how insignificant it is for two young men who want to become active to elect their dietary preferences.

I know of a young man who was proud when he became a Mason and later a Shriner. Shortly after becoming a Shriner, he elected to give up a Saturday and participate in an annual Christmas basket delivery that was being organized by Zuhrah Shriners. He arrived at Zuhrah alone and went up to a group to volunteer his efforts. He was told to stand over by the side and someone would get to him. He then overheard comments about assigning him to a delivery group. The comment was made to the effect that "We don't want to haul this guy around with us today."

The young, enthusiastic member of our fraternity immediately headed toward the door to leave. By sheer coincidence as he was leaving out the door, the signer of his petition was coming in and turned the young man around and brought him back in. It's a safe assumption that if that young Mason had not been stopped when he was, even if he had continued to pay his dues, he probably would not have been active in our fraternity. It's a safe assumption that if that young Mason had not been stopped when he was, he would not be standing here today as your Grand Lodge Orator.

In closing, if we sincerely look in the mirror – if we sincerely reflect on the state of our membership – if we are honest with

ourselves – we will agree that our most valuable asset is the last member we initiated. It is that member which we need to recognize at our Lodge meetings. It is that member's family which we need to recognize at our events. It is that member's work and family commitments we need to consider when we plan our events. It is that member that we need to sit in the chair next to us - rather than direct him to stand against the wall until we get to him – because in that chair next to us we may get to know – get to understand – him. As a result, we may keep that Brother from heading to the door and never returning to be a part of our future.

It's not about us. It's not about us. It is about him.

I close with the words of Brother Theodore Roosevelt:

Far better it is to dare mighty things,
To win glorious triumphs
Even though checkered by failure,
Than to take rank with those poor spirits
Who neither enjoy much nor suffer much,
Because they live in the gray twilight
That knows not victory nor defeat.

We as today's leaders of Freemasonry in Minnesota have to take risks by changing some of our traditions of recognition – some assessments of our assets – so that Freemasonry in Minnesota can grow and thrive in the future. Membership must be priority number one. We must look for quality over quantity. But once initiated, passed and raised, retention of every new Master Mason must become one of our traditions.

Thank you for your kind attention. May God bless the United States of America, the Grand and Subordinate Lodge officers, each member of the Grand Lodge of Minnesota and in particular the young men and their families that will carry us into the future.

JAH