



Independent Order of Odd Fellows  
Dedicated Members for Change

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The Three-Legged Stool

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Since the end of World War II in 1945, this great Order of Odd Fellows has lost 90% of its membership. If you aren't shocked by that fact, let me put it another way: For the past 65 years, the Order has without fail, lost members, year after year. The California jurisdiction had 50,000 members in 1946 – it now has less than 5,000 members. And, as we all know, 5,000 members really means (at best) 2,500 “active” members. Further, many of our Lodges can barely muster a quorum, and some Lodges have members no younger than their 60's, having effectively skipped a generation or two of new members.

Anyone who doesn't believe that Odd Fellowship is at the very brink today ignores history and is doomed to watch the continuation of that decline. This Order will not long survive, I'm afraid, without some fundamental revitalization and change. The irony of all this is that we don't have to do anything radical to save this Order. Instead, we only have to look at our own history and revisit the things that once made this Order great in the 1800's and 1900's. In those days, people sought out membership in the Odd Fellows. It was the place to be in the community. Why is that?

Odd Fellowship was strong (and can be strong again) by viewing the fraternity as having three great pillars of support, or to put it in more mundane terms, as a three-legged stool. If all legs are strong, the stool will support the body. If one of the legs is weak, the stool will totter and fall. If two legs are weak, the stool will certainly collapse. Odd Fellowship was strong in the past because Lodges were supported by three strong legs of the stool. Odd Fellowship is weak today because most Lodges simply rely on one leg and have de-emphasized, ignored or forgotten the other two legs of the stool. So, what are these three legs which should support and can transform our Order?

### **Fraternity**



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We begin with the great fraternal history and substantial assets of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. We have, indeed, a distinguished past on which we can build. We have fine and dedicated members. We have Lodge Halls which stand in the heart of many communities. We have a tradition and rituals which (while needing modernization and revision in some instances) have served us well for over two hundred years.

This leg is quite strong throughout the Order. The other two legs, however, are in need of strengthening in virtually every Lodge.

### **Community**

We have to re-connect with our communities. Once, long ago, the IOOF Lodge was the very center of the town. It can be again. But too many of our Lodges have withdrawn into their four walls and have become virtually invisible in their towns. That has to change. Lodges need to open themselves up to the community. This can be done in many ways. Lodges should have open meetings from time to time – a great way to invite prospective members to see what the Lodge does as well as get to know the Lodge members, and for Lodge members to get to know prospective members. Lodges should sponsor events on behalf of charitable and community groups. Two or three such annual events can go a long way to establish a Lodge's reputation as a leading community organization. Those Lodges that own Lodge Halls should make those Halls available for the community for appropriate events.

### **Fellowship**

We are members of a fraternal order and that involves much more than passwords, signs and grips. A fraternal order is a fellowship. And that means that the Lodge must foster events and functions that bring members together to enjoy each other's company and socially interact: breakfasts, lunches, dinners, hikes, trips, movie nights, game or card nights, wine tasting, beer brewing, dances, whatever the members feel will encourage good fellowship.

Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves: Why does anyone wish to become an Odd Fellow in the 21st Century? If we are brutally honest with ourselves, we would have to conclude that very few people join because of the ritual. Realistically, people join because of two reasons: (1) IOOF does good works in the community, and (2) IOOF provides a social network where members can enjoy each other's company and have a little fun.

In my Davis Lodge we have not just talked the talk, but we have walked the walk. So I know it can be done. When I first joined the Davis Lodge in 2004, our membership was under 40, and we could barely scrape together 12 members for a meeting – a situation in which many Lodges currently find themselves. So, as the incoming Noble Grand of my Lodge in 2005, I instituted my "three-legged stool" approach. This simple change in attitude made a huge difference. We



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have had so many applicants in the past few years that we have had to schedule two initiations each year. In 2013, the Davis Lodge has 192 members, 25 applicants for membership for our Fall Initiation, and 12 others who have already applied for membership in the Spring Initiation. In just the last 8 years, we have increased our Lodge membership by over 500%. Our Lodge, currently, has an almost equal number of men and women. And we continue to grow, attracting new members of all ages. What is especially gratifying is that many of our new members are in the age-range of 16-36.

How is this possible? It's possible because we have focused on all three legs of the stool: fraternity, community and fellowship. We can stop the slow diminution of our membership. We can grow this Order. I know, from personal experience, that it can be done.