Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

November 22, 2013

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

Ours is an ancient fraternal Order, with its origins clouded in the mists of 17th and 18th Century history. Our history is something of which we should be rightfully proud. But our historical artifacts should not make us relics in the 21st Century. Our odd traditions should be celebrated, but they should not be barriers to the entry of new young members into our Lodges. We want to turn on those new members, not turn them off.

Let me give you just one example of what I mean.

The ancient "command of our Order" is to "visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead, and educate the orphan." Historically, these were important admonitions in the development of Odd Fellowship. Keep in mind that our fraternity was born and emerged in a time of no government services or support. If you were poor and sick, there was no medical service or hospital for you. If you were in trouble and had no family support, you were on your own. If you were poor and died, you wound up in a pauper's grave. If the working man in the family died, there was no social network to take care of the widow and the orphan. So the Odd Fellows (and other fraternal orders) were born to fill those vacuums. Odd Fellows established hospitals to care for the sick. Odd Fellows Lodge members supported one another and Lodges would help members who were out of work by providing small stipends and helping them find a job, and Odd Fellows established homes for the aged. Odd Fellows established cemeteries, particularly after large-scale epidemics which were quite common in those days. If a member passed away, Odd Fellows paid death benefits to the survivor. Odd Fellows set up orphanages throughout the country, and there was a time when this country boasted dozens of Odd Fellows orphanages.

Now, fast-forward to the 21st Century. Odd Fellows hospitals don't exist anymore. Odd Fellows Lodges today don't provide money to members out of work - there are government agencies to help folks find jobs and to re-train when needed. Very few Odd Fellows cemeteries remain, and most are in need of serious maintenance and repair. Only a handful of Odd Fellows retirement communities exist anywhere in the USA, and they are all open to the general public. Only one Odd Fellows "orphanage" remains in this country (in California) - and it's not an orphanage any longer, but rather a group home for foster children.

Times have certainly changed. Dramatically.

And yet, this Order continues to hang onto the ancient "command of our Order" to "visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead, and educate the orphan." How does this ancient command

translate for the 20-year-old or the 30-year-old we are trying to recruit to join our Lodge? To be frank, it does not translate well - because there is little connection to the modern world in which we live. We might as well be telling the prospective new member that one of our ancient commands is to "re-shoe your horse at least once a year."

"Educate the orphan" makes no sense to a new member, simply because we just don't have "orphans" in this country - having been replaced by the foster care system. Why don't we consider adjusting and modernizing the ancient admonition to focus on foster children, and recently emancipated foster children? "Bury the dead" is downright ghoulish for prospective new members. There certainly was a time in our history when the Odd Fellows did great community service by burying the dead (for example, after an epidemic). But that ancient admonition also needs to be modernized. There is, of course, nothing wrong with visiting the sick and relieving the distressed, but again, we need to focus on how that translates in the 21st Century.

We are an ancient Order and we need to be proud of our roots. But if we are to survive as a modern Order - we need to start living in the present.

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Dave Rosenberg, Grand Warden