



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

June 13, 2014

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

Here is an article by our new Grand Warden Peter Sellars, which looks at the past, the present and the future of our Order. In his article, Peter urges some introspection - and that is a worthy exercise.

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Dave Rosenberg

Deputy Grand Master

REPEATING THE MESSAGE OF MEMBERSHIP

Every year since the inception of our Order, it seems membership has been a focus. Some years, during the fast growth years, it was about promoting of programs to further expand membership. Other years, it has been the addressing the severe decline. Since 1927, the latter has been the concern.

Sit down and take a deep breath or two and look at the condition of our Order. Membership is an important topic. For some it is an issue worth arguing. It deals with the requirements for membership, dues, retention, and implementing proposed changes needed to adapt to our ever-changing world.

Really, stop and think about our Order and its current condition in 2014. How do we look as a whole? How do we appear to the non-members within our communities? Really. How do we appear in our communities?

This is the starting point. If you feel our Order is strong and thriving in your community, then your Lodge is probably a little more progressive than most other Lodges. You have heard the word “progressive” surface quite often lately. This could mean two different things to you. It could mean pushing the Order and the Ritual(s) to reflect a modern and changing attitude, by updating verbiage and older terminology or removing unacceptable language. Or, to some, it could mean the goal of inclusiveness for all people within our communities. It could mean the application of both directions or goals. Both require change.

That brings us to the word “change”. This seems to be the slowest aspect of our Order and the most controversial. But, change has taken place over and over throughout our Order’s history, and every single time there has been reluctance. Because change has been too slow to respond to a fast-paced world, we are now behind.



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If you think our Order never needs to change, and that you are one of those folks who say to those advocating change, “then you should not have joined.” Think again. Take that deep breath again. I joined when this was an exclusively male organization. I learned from the oldest members and I taught our membership the Ritual when I was a Grand Instructor – three times in fact. I know that change must occur if we want to enjoy our Order. Our late Brother Don Smith, with whom I was a friend, also realized change was needed. We want our Order to survive and flourish and not become one of those numerous other organizations that just faded away.

Over the past few decades, the Odd Fellows have removed restrictive requirements from our membership, but only after miles of dialogue and the wasting of valuable time. Here is an example of our jurisdiction wasting time: In 1965, the Sovereign grand Lodge was redefining the term “white blood”, moving toward the removal of that term. But, here in California, the term was being defined as “a person of pure Polynesian, Chinese, Japanese, or Korean blood, or such bloods mixed with Caucasian blood, shall be considered as of full white blood.” (Section 717 of the Code of California Odd Fellows Digest) While progress is being made at Sovereign Grand Lodge (SGL), it seems we are still wasting our time. Once SGL implements a change to modernize or is in the process of making changes, we need to accept and implement those changes.

I bring this up because of the many other changes that have been available to us. And yet, each year we spin our wheels and argue about moving toward what has already been changed by SGL. Here are some more examples: A few years back, I presented legislation to allow 16 year olds to join our Lodges because SGL allow it to occur. During the sessions, the reluctance for change was evident. Still, the legislation passed. Why the reluctance? Another example. This past session (2014), a conformity change was presented to the body, so that our Code would be updated. Despite the change having already been implemented by SGL, our Grand Body voted it down. The change by SGL was a progressive change, but the majority of our representatives voted it down. The particular passage in question involved changing or removing an upper case “The” and “A” as it related to religious ideology. This was a sensitive topic for many members, but it still was a non-progressive reaffirmation to remain in the past. Despite what our Grand Body decided, the proponent of the legislation can use the lower case passages and be in compliance with SGL. We move at a snail’s pace.

Some changes have been mandatory, such as allowing women to join the Odd Fellows Lodges (2001). Still, to this day, we have Lodges with no women. Okay. It may not be an issue to those members in those Lodges, but it is not progressive and it does not reflect the direction of our society. There have been many changes to our Rituals, too. We allow the use of videos of in place of a physical degree. The officers’ charges have been changed, from the Vice Grand’s charge, to whom we offer the sign, to removing the alter, and more. But, we are still far behind



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and need to move faster. We change at the SGL level, but fail to accept and react to those changes.

Our Ritual of the Encampment demands change. We still use terms such as “black” and “brown” and “yellow” in conjunction with “race”. Despite my presentation of legislation to SGL, in 2008, to remove these terms along with other more offensive language from the Golden Rule Degree, and substitute those words with proper cultural aspects, only ignorant remarks were given in response to the proposed change. Some of our own members in California defended the language used during the degree stating that the degree is beautiful and should not be changed. Racist language is never beautiful. I know when I attended my university in California, I was required to take a minorities class where race used along with color is an unacceptable concept. Take a breath.

The irony of all this is that 70 years ago, there were changes made to this very degree when the words “colored race” and “white race” were removed.

Not only do we need change, but we need it to occur faster. We are in a sprint to help our Order evolve and survive. How can the message of each Grand Master or the efforts of each Membership Committee bear fruit if change is not accepted? These entities maintain the integrity of working and sending messages - but without change, we shall continue on the path to declining membership and ultimately, failure. Our membership must be progressive or we cannot survive as an Order.

Outside of San Francisco, our numbers look like this for our state: 2,700 members. That’s it. As I stated, think about where we stand as an Order and where you think we are headed. Your growing and healthy Lodges want all of our Lodges to thrive and succeed. We want to bring back the good works and the fraternity spirit.

In friendship, love and truth,

Peter Sellars