

The Blue Friar Lecture For 1996
LOOKING FOR THE FUTURE
by Richard H. Curtis, FPS

The world has not lacked for want of a soothsayer. It is not hard to find a fortune teller who can read palms or tea leaves, or use a crystal ball or ouija board. These are not things from the past. They are still with us today.

Look at the media. Everyone wants to be a columnist or commentator. Everyone wants to predict the future. We don't need to wait to hear the results from the election booth. Each television network tries to outdo another to project the winner long before the polls close.

Predicting the future has intrigued writers and philosophers for years. They have attempted to draw a picture of their view of Utopia - an imaginary world where everything is supposed to be perfect. Interestingly enough, the word "Utopia" comes from two Greek words that translate into "no place." We tend to use the word "utopian" today to imply an idea that is far out and impractical, a "pie in the sky" philosophy. Plato's Republic, written around 375 B. C., was an early attempt by the Greek philosopher to project his views of perfection.

In 1516, Sir Thomas More was the first to use the word "Utopia" for the title of his work, in which he spelled out his thoughts on an ideal world.

Samuel Butler wrote Erewhon in 1832 using a traveler's view in a strange land. "Erewhon," by the way, was Butler's way of loosely saying "Nowhere" in reverse.

In the 1888 novel, Looking Backward, Edward Bellamy tells the story of a young man who falls asleep in 1887 and wakes up in the year 2000.

H. G. Wells wrote a number of fictional futuristic tales: The Time Machine, 1895; War of the Worlds, 1898; The Shape of Things to Come, 1933. Some of you may recall Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast of "War of the Worlds." His account of a fictional invasion of New Jersey by creatures from Mars turned the Eastern seaboard into a state of pandemonium.

And what about Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. Written in 1932, Huxley's novel describes a totalitarian society enthralled with science and machines with no regard for the individual.

American psychologist B.F. Skinner wrote Walden Two in 1948, giving his thoughts on the ideal society.

A 20th-century author whose works are still widely read today is George Orwell. His Animal Farm, written in 1945, uses barnyard animals as his characters to satirize Communism. In 1949, Orwell looked ahead to 1984 and drew a rather uncomfortable portrait of a society in which love and privacy were crimes and "Big Brother" watched over everyone.

Now you may not agree with the philosophy of many of these authors and you may feel uncomfortable with the images they present, but you must admit they have provided some fascinating reading and have evoked provocative discussion.

I ask you now to step into a time machine for the next few minutes and join me on a visit into the future of Freemasonry.

The year is 2017. It was exactly 300 years ago that Masons from four lodges in London joined together to form what was then called a Grand Lodge. It must have been a

convenience at the time to have a Grand Lodge, because other Grand Lodges sprang up around the world. They don't exist now. They became merely ceremonial and eventually faded out of sight without a whimper. Some of the stronger individual lodges survived, but indifference and apathy forced most of the 20th-century lodges to close. You see, when a lodge found it had no one to lead the members, it went out of existence.

The fancy buildings that once dotted the landscape in most communities are no longer necessary. They served their purpose in their day when members would use them to hold meetings. The Philadelphia Masonic Castle is now a museum. The Indianapolis Palace is a theatrical center.

Oh, yes. Masons still meet on a regular basis, but they meet in cyberspace. Face to face contact is rare these days, yet there is a certain closeness among the members. Actually the membership is on the increase in 2017. The worldwide fraternity just passed the one million mark a year ago. And there seems to be a growing interest in wanting to be a part of it.

Lodges are organized by various interests. Any member can power up and tune in to any lodge whenever he wishes to visit. Some lodges concentrate on the history of the fraternity. Some analyze the ancient philosophy. Others bring together members who are involved in a particular occupation or profession. A few are limited to a particular region. Most of the lodges draw membership from anywhere in the world. You see, attendance merely requires tuning in, so it makes no difference where the members are located. Some lodges limit the size of the membership, while others have no restriction. Freemasonry has evolved in the course of its 300 years. For a long time, ritualistic ceremonies played a major role in the fraternity. In fact, there were periods when it appeared it was the only role. It wasn't always that way, and it isn't that way today. When the 21st century rolled in, there seemed to be less attention paid to the ancient ceremonies. It still is a topic of conversation within a few lodges that spend time exploring the evolution of the fraternity, but there is no formal ceremony in vogue today. There are very strict requirements for admission to membership. The applicant must still believe in a Supreme Being. He must make a serious financial commitment. He must pledge to provide assistance on request with the understanding that he will receive assistance when necessary. And he must agree to serve in certain capacities such as systems manager, aid director and Master. Here in the 21st century there are "no sponges" in the fraternity.

The Master moderates the meetings. The aid director coordinates the list of services that can be provided by the lodge members and handles the incoming requests from other lodges. The systems manager controls the records to see that new members are signed on. Resignations are allowed, but the member is then required to sign off and can no longer receive the signal.

Brother John in Des Moines, Iowa, looks at his wrist. A secret tingle from a tiny cell on his wrist has told him it is time to meet. He stops what he is doing and tunes in. He touches the cell to expand the screen so he can see the action. He knows that when a lodge is in session he must place an audio cell in his ear instead of relying on the amplification from the wrist cell. As each member speaks, his image automatically appears on the screen.

Master Wilhelm in Stuttgart, Germany, moderates the discussion. He asks the aid director, living in St. Alban's, Newfoundland, to report on the list of requests he has received from members of other lodges. The systems manager from Boca Raton, Florida, reviews with the lodge brothers the new requests for membership. The life history of the applicants have been examined by the systems manager, who has computerized access to every known fact about any individual. The manager summarizes on the screen the important points. There is no need for a face-to-face interview. The members vote on the applicants by a touch of the screen. The votes are tallied immediately. The new member is then sworn in and the members chat for a while to get to know the brother better.

Brother Ron of San Jose, California, needs a part for his Flit, a battery-powered transporter he can strap to his back to airlift him to nearby Santa Clara. He can't seem to find the part anywhere. He turns in a request to the aid director for his lodge. The aid director powers up his directory and locates a brother in Corning, New York, who can help.

Brother Andrew of Memphis, Tennessee, has lost his job after 30 years. His family expenses are increasing as two of his children need medical attention. He had donated his services on many previous occasions to brothers who needed aid. Now he finds himself in need. The aid director for his lodge puts out a request. A brother in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a physician and comes to the rescue. A brother in San Antonio, Texas, offers the necessary medication.

Brother Phillip from Coudersport, Pennsylvania, is arranging a business trip to Mexico and wants to break bread with a fellow Mason while he is there. His aid director powers up and puts him in contact with Brother Pedro of Guadalajara, who is willing to airlift to Mexico City to dine with his brother.

Brother Frank from Anchorage receives word of a major disaster in Calcutta and makes cellular contact with his friend and brother Mason in India. The Alaskan Mason finds out that the disaster has wiped out the drinking water in Calcutta, so he works with the brothers of his lodge to see that water reaches the Indian brother.

There is a definite feeling of commitment on the part of the membership, but there is one aspect of the fraternity that seems to be creating the renewed interest. It is something that transcends all lodges regardless of the reason for existence. It is something that is vitally important in the impersonal world of 2017. It is something that makes this fraternity so warm in a society that is not accustomed to meeting on the level. It can be summed up in a single word - Trust. It was there in 1717, and it is here with even greater importance 300 years later.