

Keynote Paper – “Maple Leaf Speaker Series”  
September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Templum Fidelis Lodge No 746  
Bath, Ontario.

-Brother Christopher Hodapp

My Masonic life began thirteen years ago. I joined Broad Ripple Lodge No. 643 in Indianapolis in November of 1998. I was passed and raised in a one day class on the ides of March in 1999. I was immediately jabbed with an officer's pike into the Senior Steward's chair, but I never actually sat in it. I was made Senior Warden in December 2000, and elected as Worshipful Master in December 2001, just two years after joining. I don't recommend it. And then, two years after that, I sat as Master of Lodge Vitruvian #767 for two years in a row. So, in my first six years as a Mason, I spent 50% of my time as Master of a lodge. In these short thirteen years, I've visited lodges in almost every state, plus several foreign countries. I'm the luckiest guy in Freemasonry, and it's given me a chance to see a lot outside of the borders of my own state.

I got to write all of my books because of the threat of Dan Brown. Eight years ago, Brown said the sequel to *Da Vinci Code* would be about Masons in Washington DC, and then he kept the publishing world on pins and needles waiting for it. So for six years we got stacks of books about Freemasonry from mainstream publishers, TV shows, *National Treasure*, comic books and more, all hoping to cash in on Brown's sequel, *The Lost Symbol*.

Released September 15, 2009, Brown's *The Lost Symbol* is a 509-page love letter to the fraternity of Freemasonry. Every Mason needs to read it, because it may very well be where the majority of our new members for the next ten years first learned about us.

Up until a few years ago, most Americans HAD NO OPINION ABOUT US. Our job wasn't just attracting new men, it was teaching society about who we are. Because of almost three generations of men who never joined the fraternity, we fell off of society's radar screen. Well, not anymore.

*The Lost Symbol* sold one million copies on its first day. That's likely to about 990,000 who really didn't know who or what the Freemasons were, who were reached on the first day of sales. Two million were sold in the first week. The initial English language version print run was 6.5 million copies, with 5 million in the U.S. alone, followed by another 4 million paperbacks.

When it was released in paperback in England, it set a record for the most copies of a novel ever sold in a week. It continues to set sales records. Not bad for a dumb novel that gives a pretty truthful explanation about Freemasonry, especially in a country that is culturally very suspicious of Freemasons.

The great news is this book doesn't present Masons as treacherous bald headed, cat stroking super-villains, but is almost reverential in its treatment of the fraternity.

The very real Washington D.C. headquarters of the Scottish Rite Southern Jurisdiction, the House of the Temple, is the setting for important sequences in the thriller. In fact, our Scottish Rite brethren in the Southern Jurisdiction get to be the stars of the show. The double-eagle is on the cover of the book. Even the release date 9-15-09 added up to the number 33.

How many of you are Knights Templar? If you read the book then you know that Brown had to interject the coolest parts of the Knight Templar ritual into the opening scene to make the Scottish Rite more interesting...

You've heard of a sonic boom? I think we are poised for a Masonic Boom, a very real golden age. Dan Brown and the threat of his book almost single handedly created new interest in the fraternity. More than 70 mainstream books from popular publishers have appeared in the last 7 years, and dozens more are coming, along with TV shows, comic books, movies, magazines. My wife and I were just interviewed for a History Channel Show that aired back in January, and more are coming every day

The movie version of the *Lost Symbol* is due to be released next year, with the same team that made *Da Vinci Code* and *Angels & Demons*, and those two films combined made over \$1 billion at the box office. Nine months after that will be a DVD release. We know it's about us, we know how the story goes, we know how it ends, and we're the good guys all the way through. We are fools if we let this opportunity pass us by.

Some will say, who cares, it's only a novel? Here's why the potential influence of this book had better interest us.

- In May 2006, a Catholic group calling itself the *Da Vinci Code Response Group* sponsored a survey of 1,000 adults in the U.K.
- The *Da Vinci Code*, at that time, had been read by 22% of the adults in Britain.
- A massive 60 per cent of the adults polled believe there is truth to the claim that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had a child after reading the book – compared with just 30 per cent of those who have not read it.

THAT is the power of a dumb novel.

In the first three days after *The Lost Symbol* was released, the Grand Lodge of Missouri received 25 phone calls looking for information on how to join a lodge.

In 2009, just 67 people contacted the Colorado Freemasons through their website, seeking information on joining the fraternity. In 2010, that number soared to 497. Now, it could be that Freemasonry has turned a corner. It could be the Dan Brown effect, the explosion of social media, or just an unprecedented amount of exposure in media to Masonry that has resulted in these kinds of increased contacts. Maybe the Grand Lodge of Colorado just improved its website last year. But whatever the reason, everywhere I go, every Grand Lodge jurisdiction I've talked to shows these kinds of increases, and almost every lodge I talk to tells me initiations are up all over the country.

The residual effect of this book will go on for years, from boys who first find out about Freemasonry in the book, but are too young to join. The seed is planted and comes out, maybe as late as after college.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Baby Boomers are retiring in massive waves now. They are doing beach reading. Books like *The Lost Symbol*. They haven't been joiners in the past, but their Dad or Grandpa was a Mason, and the book sets off a spark.

My 60 year old brother-in-law just joined a lodge in Texas. Most of his life, he was pretty unengaged by

society. Face it – he wanted to be a garbage collector because he thought they only worked one day a week. What did he tell me? *"I have never joined anything in my life. My parents joined the Boy Scouts for me. But I have missed an awful lot in life with that attitude. I want to be a part of something more important than just me."*

Anecdotally, I'm seeing more and more men in their 20s and 30s bringing their 60 and 70 year old Baby Boomer fathers into their lodges.

I'm telling you, brethren, this will be bigger than we imagine, over a long period of time. If we allow ourselves to succeed. And if we are careful about how we present our image. Because there is a struggle going on now around the Masonic world that is wrestling over the very definitions of what Freemasonry is.

It's funny. We tend to think of English Masons as our betters. We get fooled by the accents. Face it. They believe in crop circles. Grand Secretary of England Nigel Brown told the press that it would be intolerable for a Mason to tell a non-Mason there are secrets we can't tell them. That cuts the heart right out of the essence of the fraternity. *Of course we have secrets*, that each man must find for himself. Like almost everything else in Freemasonry, secrecy is symbolic. Secrecy is a symbol of our honor.

There is greater interest in Freemasonry right now than in the last five decades. But if prospective men are told, *"Really, just a big happy charity here, with some silly rituals and these wacky apron thingies. No big deal,"* how many will bother to petition? Why should they?

Some think the fraternity needs to get much smaller: I disagree. I am not one of those guys who thinks the best experience is ten guys marching in their socks around somebody's living room, pronouncing that the rest of the Masonic world is doing it all wrong. I want us to grow and again take our proper place at the center of our communities. That won't happen if no one knows who and what we are. That's our job, yours and mine, every single day.

And professional men, business leaders, won't stand for amateur night at the Ritz, fiscal incompetence, or having their time wasted arguing over whether to fix the roof or raise the dues \$2 a year.

As wonderful and laudable as our charities are, Freemasonry isn't about CHIPs programs, hospitals, ambulance services, or retirement homes: Freemasons support those things, but they should never define what we are. Freemasonry isn't a charity or a church or a business, but it seems that some of our members disagree on just exactly what it IS. I tell Masons everywhere to work on their elevator pitch so they don't get caught tongue tied when someone asks what Masonry is about. Not some canned Grand Lodge speech memorized from the back of a brochure. Tell a man why YOU joined, why YOU come back to lodge every week and give up your free time to do this. Why it means what it means to you. Because THAT'S the story HE wants to hear. He wants to know why a man he admires or works with or is related to gives up his time and treasure to take part in Freemasonry.

Next time you walk into your lodge, do it with the eyes and ears you had the first day you decided to become a Mason. I want you to try right now to forget everything else you've experienced in Masonry, good and bad, and fix in your mind: *Why did I join? What was I seeking? What did Freemasonry offer that I wanted to be part of?* That's the starting point of where to begin to lead your own lodge to a successful future. To do all you can to make it the lodge you expected it to be.

A little girl went up to her grandfather one day and asked him, "Grandpa, can you make a sound like a frog?" "Why, yes, I think I can," he answered. "Why do you ask, honey?" "Because Dad says we get to go

to Disneyland when you croak.” We’ve all heard the old bromide that this fraternity won’t change until we have a few more Masonic funerals. Well, I don’t make that joke anymore, because they might be talking about me.

Anybody who says this fraternity needs to change hasn't been looking around. Part of it is cultural, part is technological, and part is generational. But the Freemasonry we are living through today is definitely not your grandfather's fraternity.

The Executive Secretary of an organization that really is entitled to speak for Freemasonry and has the backing of the Conference of Grand Masters of North America was on an NPR show last year. He was asked about Masonic references to popular music and music videos by Lady Gaga, Rihanna, and JayZ. He said he didn’t know anything about Lady Gaga or JayZ. We’d better learn, and fast. Because for an increasing wave of new men, we no longer control what our image is. The culture does.

There’s a Prince Hall lodge in Illinois, Olive Branch #94 in Chicago. A link to their website was sent to me by a brother who was aghast over a video they had that showed animation of Masonic symbolism accompanied by a rap song about the lodge,

Whether Olive Branch's music or their video appeals to your taste or not, every lodge has its own personality. They know who their target audience is, and that new members come from the friends and families of their existing members. And every lodge that has an active lineup of new candidates and a regular rotation of officers coming through is going through a major evolution in programs, interests, vision and personality, right now. That means a lodge can be a very, very different place in as little as five years. The Internet and social networks like Facebook are allowing that evolution to happen at a faster rate than ever before in the history of the fraternity, as ideas are shared all around the Masonic world, instantly. Long-forgotten Masonic books that haven't been available in dozens and even hundreds of years are now available on Google, Kindle and iPad. We have greater opportunities for Masonic education than at any time in our history.

I keep saying we live in exciting times. We have greater variety among lodges than at any time in three centuries. While there have been clashes between traditionalists who want things to remain as they were after WWII, versus exuberant young men who want instant changes, the fraternity seems to be finding a middle ground. There are lodges that concentrate on pitch-in dinners and a hot hand of poker, but there are also a growing number of lodges that are focusing on the more esoteric aspects of Freemasonry’s 300 years of ritual ceremonies, philosophy and symbolism. While once there were lodges of hundreds, or even thousands of members, new lodges are forming with just handfuls of men, in search of a smaller, more intimate and active experience. Traditional Observance and European Concept lodges are springing up everywhere. Allied Masonic Degrees is the fastest growing appendant body in the U.S. right now. Why? Because AMD councils are, by design, small and limited in size, formal, with concentration on education, and a ritual that can be opened in a restaurant. If their members want to concentrate on its wide range of degree rituals, they can, but it’s not required. AMD Councils are endlessly customizable, and not cookie cutter.

We need to back off of worrying so much about putting new butts on seats and start worrying about how we keep them there. It’s when lodges stop serving the needs of their active members that they fail. Because no one HAS to come back to next month’s meeting. If CSI reruns are more interesting than lodge, shame on us. If your lodge is nothing but a place you meet and flee from, it needs to fix itself or close.

Lodges don't have to have 200 members to be a big success. And lodges don't have to be all alike. They just have to serve their members' needs for friendship, affection, education, philosophy, along with some fun. And good food, of course. Honestly, we all weighed 110 lbs when we joined this fraternity, right?

There's no age limit to good leadership. Hold X-box tournaments, chili cook offs, or bus trips to the casino. Shake up your stated meetings – hold them in the dining room as table lodges. Have new brothers write a paper before they advance to the next degrees – you'd be astonished at what you can learn from the observations of someone else experiencing the degrees for the first time. Bring in a history professor from the local college to talk about medieval architecture or comparative religions. Have debates on symbolism. If you can't get enough members to put on degrees, form partnerships with other lodges and share the work. If all your members are over 75, have wheelchair races in the hallway. I don't care: your only limits are the ones you place upon yourself and your lodge.

The most important lodge meeting in a Mason's entire career is the fourth one – the next meeting after his Master Mason degree. It's the meeting he'll measure the fraternity by, the meeting in which he sees whether his lodge lives by the precepts they taught him in his degrees.

Lodges are closing every day because they don't understand why no one wants suspicious meat sandwiches and generic pop, or furniture from the Coolidge administration that stinks that should be cleaned and then burned, and two hour meetings that consist of reading the minutes to tell them nothing happened last month either, followed by guys stabbing each other in the back as they argue out in the parking lot.

I visited a grand lodge last year and an older guy was in the front row. He had that hooked Past Master's talon that he started wagging at me. He asked if I thought that Grand Lodge was destroying lodges with its rules and regulations and per capita payments. No, I said. Grand Lodge doesn't make your lodge boring, filthy, with no education and lousy food. Grand Lodges can provide tools and advice, but only the local lodge can demand greatness of itself, and not become that most terrible of things, *Ordinary*. Every lodge has the potential to make itself the very best.

More important, you never know what you and your lodge will do that will touch lives in ways you never think of.

I said earlier today that I'd tell you why I joined. I think it's important, because we don't always see ourselves the way others do. My father-in-law lived most of his life in Indianapolis, but for whatever reason, he decided to retire to Dallas, Texas. He and his wife lived there for about fifteen years, and he was very involved in the VFW and the American Legion. He was also a 50-year Mason, although he didn't attend lodge in Texas. When he died, my wife and I went down to arrange the funeral, and we decided that most of their friends were in Texas now. Sunday night, we were in our hotel room, and my wife said, "You know Dad was a Mason, and I think they do some kind of funeral service." Neither one of us really knew, so I pulled out the phone book and started calling Masonic lodges. Remember, this was a Sunday night. God love lodge secretaries – I found one who was at a lodge working late who answered the phone. I told him the situation, and he said, "Wow, I don't know what I can do this late with such short notice. Let me see what I can do."

The next day was the funeral, and it was a very large chapel. We figured all those friends would fill it up. Well, no one came. A couple of neighbors, the family, that was it. None of those VFW and American Legion friends showed up. But ten Masons did. Ten guys who had never sat in lodge with him, who didn't call Grand Lodge of Texas or Indiana to make sure it was okay, who didn't call the Masonic Service Association to check protocol, who didn't bother the dead man's family to go through his wallet and check

for a paid dues card. All they knew was that a Mason's family had called on a Sunday night needing their help. And they put on a service that was far more moving than anything the rented minister said who kept mispronouncing his name. And when it was all over, they waited in the back of the room, and as we left they said, "We know you're from out of town, we know things are going to come up that you'll need help with. Here are our names and phone numbers. Call us if you need anything." The next day on the flight home, I told my wife I had to be a part of that.

Brethren, Freemasonry isn't about ritual, because honestly, who would voluntarily join a memorization club?

And it sure as hell isn't about the trappings of lodge mechanics and politics, because I've never yet met a Mason who joined because he wanted to be a lodge officer. It's not about the THINGS we do, or the minutiae of how we do it. It's about what we ARE. It's about connecting one to one, brother to brother.

Now, my wife says I talk in my sleep. And everybody knows that a guest speaker talks everybody else's sleep, so I'll wrap this up.

Brethren, Masonry is not ordinary. And I can tell you stories from around the world to prove it. The Grand Lodge of New York secretly operates lodges in Lebanon and Syria lodge, secretly because, especially in Syria, if you are found to be a Mason by the wrong government official, you could wind up in jail, or worse. Those men are literally risking their lives to be Masons. Up until last year in England, for a dozen years, if you were a police officer or a member of the judiciary, you had to publicly declare that you were a Mason. Not a member of a stamp collecting club, or a rugby team, or even the IRA. Only Freemasonry was singled out. In the Ukraine, their Parliament narrowly defeated a measure that would have meant 18 years in jail if you were a member of the government and caught being a Mason. During the Holocaust, more than 80,000 were killed in camps just for the crime of being Freemasons. Men fight every day around the world for the privilege of putting on a Masonic apron.

The leaders of tomorrow are in this room. Don't ever make the mistake of thinking that you as an individual Mason can't influence Freemasonry, that the work of just one Mason can't make a difference. Even a dummy. I am here to tell you, one Mason CAN make a difference. Each and every one of you has the potential to shape the Freemasonry of tomorrow.

It is truly an exciting time to be a Freemason. We've been given a new chance that Masons have laid awake nights dreaming of. And we have so much to offer. Something legendary, something mythical, something extraordinary. The Freemasonry that has inspired millions of men the world over. The Freemasonry that inspired YOU to join.

That same Freemasonry is about to be introduced to a massive new wave of men. With one book, Dan Brown has done more than any membership committee or Grand Lodge PR department ever could. *The Lost Symbol* has the potential to affect this fraternity more than any development in the last 60 years.

Yes, Dan Brown has made us seem more mystical, maybe more interesting than your lodge really is. If you didn't have the motivation before, now is your chance to make it the very best it can be.

When we have vision, when we believe this fraternity can truly build temples in the hearts of men, when we believe in the power to change society and the world around us by making better men one Mason at a time, Freemasons can, and do, and WILL accomplish great things. Freemasons have been making and shaping history for more than 300 years. I believe we are poised to make history all over again.