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LAYING NEW FOUNDATIONS No. 2: THE FUTURE IS IN OUR HANDS

By

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I am honored to address this dinner of the Social Lodge No. 1 F. & A.M., P.H.A., a Prince Hall affiliate, the oldest Prince Hall affiliated Lodge in the District of Columbia. The purpose of this dinner is to "raise money to assist others in humanitarian and educational efforts."

I am pleased to see that there are some young people in the room this evening representing the future generation of our people and the future leaders of our nation and masonry.

Personally, this is a special opportunity for me. I am the son of a Free Mason. My father, who has been deceased since I was nine years of age, was active in the Masons in Omaha, Nebraska. As a matter of fact, it was from him that I first heard about Prince Hall. Since I was so young, I thought that Prince Hall was the son of a king. My father laughed at my statements.

I remember that my father had a little black book. He left orders with my mother and with his children that we were forbidden to touch this book. I discovered where my father hid the book and I tried to read it. The book

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was in a black leather cover and opened by a zipper. I didn't care anything about the content of the book, but, boy, did I love to play with the zipper.

Once, my father, for whom I am named, caught me with the book: the consequences were rather great. Needless to say, I never read the book again--even after he passed on. I do know that the men of masonry who came to my home before and after my father died talked about helping the society in which they lived to be a better one, through friendship, morality and brotherly love. And, these men of masonry admonished me, as I was fatherless, to strike out against injustice and to "strive for excellence in whatever endeavor [I] engaged."

Therefore, you can imagine what a great personal pride I feel this evening standing before this august body. I am proud to say that I am the son of a Free Mason.

Before turning to the theme of my address this evening, "Laying New Foundations," I want to share the words of a Black lawyer, John G. Jones, a 33° Mason, who on October 28, 1897, in Providence, Rhode Island, gave a speech calling for the construction of a building for Masons in the District of Columbia. Mr. Jones stated:

The time has come when we must take some definite action and adopt some plan so that colored Masons in th United States will have at Washington, D.C., which is the capital of the United States, a proper hall and building that will be a credit to the members of the Masonic fraternity in this country. I recommend at this session the corporation to be formed to be known as the Masonic Temple Building Association of the United States, and that the stock will be sold at one dollar a share and that a lot be purchased at Washington, D.C., and as soon as practicable a suitable building be created thereon.

See Allocution of John G. Jones, 33° Sovereign Grand Commander To The United Supreme Counsel of the A. A & S. Rite of the Southern and Western Jurisdiction of U.S.A., 28th Annual Session, Providence, Rhode Island, October 28, 1897 at 3.

I do not know whether the efforts of Mr. Jones spurred the creation of such a building but his words suggested that the future was in their hands.

The words of another great Mason more directly focuses on the theme for this evening's occasion, and these are the words that B.F. Rogers, the Grand Master of Illinois spoke over a century ago, on June 20, 1867.

Listen carefully to the words that he spoke on that day:

In view of the origin and true nature of the institution of Masonry, its high importance to the world, the sacredness of its principles, its harmonizing influence and the whole excellence of the system, whether it be considered in a historical, benevolent, moral or religious point, your minds must be solemnly affected and your hearts seriously engaged to maintain the purity of its precepts, not only as a plan and reasonable duty, but as examples waiting to be imitated by those who shall receive the administration from your hands. Brethren, your profession is built upon a tried foundation; you stand solemnly pledged to the world to maintain the cause of truth against all the assaults of vice, or the inroads of errors. Your several Lodges are, or ought to be, so many temples of virtue and schools of moral and religious instruction; each individual should be a watchful sentinel over the happiness of mankind, ever on the alert to rescue injured innocence, or to avert impending dangers. (emphasis added).

When I read Grand Master Rogers' remarks, the words "your profession is built upon a tried foundation" inspired the title of my comments this evening -- "Laying New Foundations: The Future Is In Your Hands."

As Black Americans we can be proud of the significant contributions we have made to survive against social, political and economic barriers.

No one can quibble with the investment of energy that Black Americans have spent in keeping this country strong and free from internal and external aggression. Many of you in this room have served your country in the military or CCC Camps, and most of you are the sons and daughters of the slave system which restricted liberty, and delayed the contribution which Black Americans are now making in this nation.

All of you are the "tried foundation[s]" of your family, of your church, of your community, of your profession, of your lodge, and of your nation. But, as tried and true as you are, and as productive citizens as you are in the vast world in which you live -- are you positive that you are laying new foundations for future generations of Black Americans in our beloved democracy? Do you accept the conclusion that the future is in your hands?

When Grand Master Rogers uttered his first communication as leader of the Free Masons of Illinois, he acknowledged the past and those who had gone before him. However, his blueprint for the future was to build a society brick-by-brick which would shield Black Americans from "impending dangers." As B.F. Rogers said, one of the duties of mankind is to "avert impending dangers." Do you see any impending dangers facing the Black community in which you live? Is the denial of one's self as a worthwhile human being an impending danger? When a Black child is told that he/she is ignorant, stupid and dumb by teachers in any school system -- does the impact on that child create an impending danger?

When you hear a citizen say that "I've paid my dues and there is nothing more that I can do to assist in solving problems of the community" -- can this attitude be defined as an impending danger?

When you see students walking the streets during normal school hours and who believe that working for a living is dishonorable -- don't you believe that such a view creates an impending danger?

When you hear statements that Blacks have made it because two or three people have achieved modest success and salaries while substantial numbers of our people stand in line to receive food stamps -- can you deny that there exists an impending danger?

When you see the renewal of Klu-Klux-Klan activities of burning crosses on the lawns of Black and Jewish citizens of this country -- can you deny that there exists an impending danger?

And when you see our young people unable to find jobs to make them good and productive citizens -- do you recognize the existence of an impending danger?

Grand Master B.F. Rogers knew then, as I suspect, that all of you know now, that life and the progress of society -- however simple or complex -- survives because men and women of vision "lay new foundations" upon which future generations may firmly stand. Is the future in your hands? If you "lay new foundations" today you may "avert impending dangers" which knock at the door of Black America.

Look at any institutions which have survived rugged times: look at the descendants of Prince Hall. What would this world be today without the contribution of "Negro Masonry?" Look at the Black colleges of this nation. Where would America be today without the graduates of Black institutions of higher education, such as the Howard University School of Law? Look at the U.S. House of Representatives. Where would Black Americans be today, but for the prodigious effort of the Congressional Black Caucus? Look at

Washington, D.C. Where would it be but for the contribution of Howard Law School graduates like Mayor Walter Washington? Look at the legal profession. Where would Black Americans be today without the scholarship of one of the nation's finest lawyers -- the late Charles Hamilton Houston, the deeds of Ollie May Cooper, and the jurisprudence of Judge Barrington Parker, all of the District of Columbia. And, where would any individual in this room be this evening without the kindness, the thoughtfulness, the care, the understanding, the sacrifice, the love, the devotion, the tenderness, and the concern of somebody?

Today, Black Americans must rekindle the spirit of intelligently and systematically laying new foundations because the future is in our hands. A new generation of Free Masons must be qualified and prepared to carry on the beliefs and the traditions of the foundation that others have laid. However productive Black colleges have been in the past they must look to the future and plan their curriculums and tailor their rhetoric to accommodate the change that comes with the passing of time; and yet, maintain their course of educating Black Americans, who, for sundry reasons are still being classified as unqualified for admission into some of the top universities in this country.

Whatever the accomplishment of the Congressional Black Caucus -- and there have been many -- it cannot rest upon the laurels of yesterday. The Caucus and the Black elected officials of this nation must cast their nets to the future and by this act assess political alliances which will secure the presence of Black Americans and other minorities as permanent participants in this country.

The citizens of Washington, D.C., must be what Mayor Marion S. Barry,

Jr., is to this city -- an explorer for new settlements, a conscriptor of more knowledge, a commander of better public educational institutions, a lover of the arts and the patron of starving painters, opera singers, and ballet dancers.

Today, we must enlarge and you must demand that we enlarge our scholar community. Black Americans will not be able to face the fierce competition they will face in the twenty-first century, unless the Black community provides and cares for the thinkers of our years. We cannot afford or allow our scholars to be abused and discouraged by those who refuse to afford them the opportunity to teach in their universities or refuse to allow the publication of their thoughts in books, and those who close their art galleries to art which records the soul of Black America.

The civil rights movement was born out of a spirit to lay new foundations. Hence, leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., cleared a new section of the forest so that new settlers could move in and lay new mortar, new brick, new hopes and new dreams.

Since the 1960's, we have seen products of the civil rights movement flee the cities, abandon their communities, turn their noses up at homeless people as they drive to the suburbs to watch the Monday night football game, and cop out of the struggle for civil rights for minorities, and even question the need for affirmative action.

These people have ceased to lay a new foundation, which casts a net broad enough to encompass the masses. They are blind to the future. The poor and the uneducated are with us, but I am not one who believes that the poor must always be with us in a land as rich as our own and in a land in which equal opportunity is said to exist.

In this, the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution -- we should be seriously concerned about the future conditions of our nation. It will do us little good to celebrate the 200th Birthday of the U.S. Constitution if we do not lay new constitutional foundations sturdy enough to carry young people into the twenty-first century.

I believe it is clear that Afro-Americans must lay new foundations to create for themselves a sense that they are somebody.

Afro-Americans must never isolate themselves from new and provocative thought. We must lay new foundations in the realm of thought and probe and actively challenge the thoughts of others who are asleep to the needs of Black people.

Afro-Americans must recommit themselves to a sense of community and take pride in group identity. If you don't know who you are, it is impossible to lay new foundations for yourself or for future generations.

Afro-Americans must exert their collective power to make their presence felt in every nook of the nation. Ignore those who are talismen of doom. Seek and demand justice now, not tomorrow; seek freedom now, don't wait for it to come in a box wrapped with a red ribbon.

Afro-Americans must pay homage to their fallen warriors. However, if Dr. King could speak to us he would say that many Americans really didn't hear what he was telling us prior to his death. He would say that his contribution to America was an extension of other advocates for justice, such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. If Washington and DeBois, Mary Church Terrell, Robert Morris, Arthur Davis Shores, George Boyer Vashon and others had not laid a new foundation in the struggle for the survival of Black America, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., may never have surfaced as the strong leader that he was.

Do not mistake my concern for harsh criticism, but it is time for Afro-Americans to begin to debate every issue -- in the words of Grand Master B.F. Rogers -- "to avert impending dangers." Drugs in this society are an impending danger, the use of which may rob Black America of its leaders of tomorrow.

Men and women often complain about the conditions around them, however, complaining has never removed the condition. Black people complained about segregation for years, but it was only when they said, "no more" that the future for all of us was secure. But, let's not create false images of ourselves. The future of Black people resides in those who do -- not in those who say. Blacks who hide behind glass houses, weaving and bobbing in shadows, waiting for praise when none is deserved, plotting to overthrow their institutions, but who are incapable of replacing them are as much an enemy to the future as anyone.

The future is in our hands. Let us lay a foundation tonight strong enough to secure the Social Lodge No. 1 F. & A.M., to secure the young people before us, and to honor the future that our God will surely grant to our people.

JCSjr:mt