

Lodge History—Does It Need to Repeat Itself?

By Tim Boyd

Anyone who has been in the TSA for a while has witnessed a cyclical phenomenon. It is something more common in older groups, and the cycle goes something like this. A TS group comes into existence. Inspired by the teachings and moved by an energetic individual or group of individuals, the group grows. For a time it flourishes, attracting new members and forming a real nucleus, a community where fellow members can share and speak in ways that would be impossible outside of the lodge. For many people there is a genuine sense of family. Because of the sense of the importance and uniqueness of this spiritual community some of the members feel moved not just to work for it, but give substantial donations. One of the things which has allowed the Theosophical Society to grow and endure has been the generosity of its members. This is true at all levels of the TS, from the international, to the national, to the individual lodge. There have always been members of the TS and occasionally even people who have never been actual members, who have been touched either by the teachings or by the example of someone living the teachings, and are so moved that they feel the need to give something back. Within the TSA there are numerous examples of people bequeathing money and property to a local lodge in an effort to perpetuate the group that has been so meaningful to them during their lifetime. How these new funds are used will depend on what stage in the group's growth this infusion of resources occurs. Some buy a building, a permanent home for the group, while others regard it as a nest egg to use judiciously into the future.

One of the ironies of life is that there is nothing that is entirely good or bad. For example, before a group owns its own place the main concern is, where can we meet? After a group gets a place, a whole new set of concerns arises. Now the questions hinge on maintenance. How can we keep the place up? Where will we get the funds to make periodic improvements? We need insurance. What about our 501 3c status for tax exemption? What about burglary, vandalism? Should we rent out our space for income? To whom? And so on. The same applies to money in the bank. When we don't have it, our main thought is that we need it. When we get it, we now must focus on how to make it grow, how much to spend, where to invest it, how to protect it, etc. In responsible lodges, committees and the board of directors spend time and effort addressing these concerns.

An almost universal feature of groups in the TSA today is that there are not enough members willing or available to take on positions of responsibility within the group. Everyone is busy. We seem to be surrounded by pressing responsibilities at home and at work. Volunteering to take on yet another task is asking a lot. This is especially true when it comes to taking responsibility for a TS lodge which is often inhabited by people who can be contentious or uncooperative, just like people everywhere; where your role could include everything from financial planning, to program planning, to janitorial duties. It is understandable that few step forward when asked.

In groups across the country, it is frequently the case that the same people occupy the same positions of responsibility year after year. Often these group leaders are strong individuals with strong personalities—people who get things done. In the face of such people, members often

defer. And why not defer? Things are getting done. The lodge is functioning. Nothing is really wrong. However, this is not necessarily a healthy situation.

Sooner or later, there are problems which arise. One problem is inevitable: at some point we all weaken or die. In a group where direction has been vested in one person and that person no longer is available to do the job, there is no one who has been prepared to step in. Because the concept and the culture of succession has not been developed, this can lead to a once apparently stable group suddenly finding itself adrift and at a loss to figure out what to do next. It is good to be strong, but it is better when strength is used to make others strong. We have all seen it or done it ourselves. “He/she isn’t doing it right.” “It’s easier to do it myself.” “I would gladly let someone else do it, if I could find someone to do it right.” “Give it to me. I’ll do it.” While it is certainly more difficult in the short run to train someone, in the long run we make it easier for everyone when we share the burden and its opportunities for growth.

When a vacuum in leadership occurs within a lodge there is also a different, darker scenario which can occur—one which eventually finds its way into the considerations of the national board of directors. There are numerous examples of groups that because of declining or aging membership have weakened and have been taken over by those with a personal agenda. The specifics of each situation vary, but the pattern is always the same: individuals clearly operating in a self-serving manner use the bylaws of the group to become elected officials. They run off members who disagree or try to stand up to them—often long time workers in the lodge. By employing various methods of intimidation, they restrict membership to a controllable few. They assume control of the group’s assets and turn them to their personal uses, violating the principles on which the lodge was founded and the purposes for which the donations were given. The list of cases such as this is saddening and long: lodge buildings converted into family residences for the controlling “president,” lodges that are taken over and converted to churches, lodge property that is sold and distributed among family or friends, lodge bank accounts that are emptied for personal use or used in place of mortgages to conduct personal business deals, lodge libraries sold off, and on and on. It is an unfortunate history which only seems to repeat itself.

Theosophists as a group tend to shy away from controversy and confrontation. We seek peace and try to behave in ways we consider to be “spiritual” or “peaceful,” often failing to realize that it is not synonymous with “passive.” By the time these unscrupulous individuals have seized control of a group there are few avenues for recourse. Ultimately, such cases fall into the lap of TSA’s national board of directors, and then, the courts.

The more than 100 TS groups spread across the country are the public face of not only the Theosophical Society, but of Theosophy. Their image and conduct strongly influence the way someone responds to the ageless wisdom teachings. Even though a number of the co-opted groups teach what one might call core Theosophy, the disconnect between words and deeds soon becomes apparent. People become disillusioned and leave, often scarred by the encounter. It is, and has been, the position of the national board of directors that the selfish misuse of the name and resources of the Theosophical Society is unacceptable.

What can be done? It is a repeated source of frustration at the national level when these cases appear. For years, lodges have been encouraged to look closely at their bylaws and provide for a

number of possibilities. The old truism that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” should be the watchword. Although there is no absolute protection from determined and unprincipled people, the best insurance for the continued health of a group requires two things: 1) an involved membership, and 2) strong, clearly written bylaws.

Probably few people relish the thought of sitting down to compose lodge bylaws. However, the beauty of our situation as TS members is that we don’t have to reinvent the wheel each time bylaws are required. A simple template for lodge bylaws has been developed and has been available to our groups for a number of years. Many groups, large and small, all across the country have adopted it.

A word should be said about a concern that pops up from time to time, largely in anonymous internet postings. The concern is best stated as, “Beware. The national organization is out to seize the assets of the local groups.” Those who share this point of view point to the dissolution clause in the bylaw template which provides for all of a lodge’s assets to go to the TSA if and when the group should ever become defunct. This clause confirms their suspicions. Their reasoning goes something like this: since the national board of directors has the power to close a group, all that the board would have to do is revoke a group’s charter and then take control of everything that the group owns. For those who harbor suspicions about the motivations of the national board of directors, this argument is persuasive. The power of its persuasion lies in the fact that, on the face of it, it is accurate. The national board could, in fact, behave in exactly this manner, and for some this is a frightening possibility. This whole argument begs the question of why. Why would the board choose to behave in this way? What would “it” stand to gain?

From time to time, there are groups that have ceased to function and have been closed. The most frequent cause is that over time members move on or die. At some point, always after repeated efforts to revive the group, a determination is made in consultation with remaining group members to close it. When the group has property or money, there is an established process that occurs. In cases where there is property, it is sold. All of the monies from that group are then deposited in an account which is separate from the TSA’s operating funds. All of the money in that account is restricted in its use. It can only be used for TS group activities in the geographical area where the former group existed. There is absolutely no direct benefit to the TSA. In fact, it is something of a liability because the TSA accounting staff must track these accounts that are also audited regularly by an independent accounting firm.

What is often lost in all of the fear and suspicion about potential board machinations is the sense of what that board is. When we say, “the national board of directors,” it gives an impression of some sort of faceless bureaucratic monolith. The fact of the matter is that the national board is composed of members, usually long time members, from groups all across the country. They are people who for years have volunteered countless hours at lodges, study centers, bookstores, and camps. They come from groups that are large and small, groups that own property, and groups that have none. They are elected from every region of the country and their terms on the board have specific time limits. Their decision making powers are defined by a set of bylaws, and they are guided by a tradition and precedents that extend over the section’s 130 year history. They serve with no financial compensation beyond the plane ticket it takes to get them to the meetings.

Twice a year they use their vacation time and leave their homes and families to attend to the business of the Society. This is not the makings of a power-hungry, asset-grasping cabal.

It should be noted that many of our groups with the most assets (New York, Seattle, Detroit, Milwaukee, Portland, Miami Deerfield) have chosen to use the bylaws template precisely for the reason that while they are clear that the TSA would have no designs on lodge assets, it is a strong discouragement to individuals who might. Historically, it has often been those who beat the drum of suspicion the loudest that have been the very ones who have personally assumed control of a lodge's assets.

At the outset of this article it was stated that this is not a situation that is likely to resolve itself. The purpose of this consideration has been to examine some of the habits and thinking of our groups with an eye toward improving the future. One of the central facts of life is that everything is impermanent. Members, groups, the Theosophical Society itself will all one day cease to exist. However, while we are here, while there are groups, and an American Section, it is our duty to ourselves and the causes which we value to do all that we can to function at the highest level we can reach. Attending to the health and stability of our groups is something that is clearly within our reach.