



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Why Do We Do That?

Ok here is another cliché for you to ponder again. “The fire service is two hundred years of tradition unhampered by progress!” Wrong! The fire service is thousands of years of tradition with sporadic and spasmodic improvements that have hurled the fire service into the forefront of community safety. I have used this argument in other Chiefs Clipboards to talk to the fire service about coping with change.

I am using this quote again, because I continue to hear it. But now it is coming from other members of local and even state government entities. They believe still that firefighters are tradition bound. They make it sound like a bad thing. Well first off let's talk about what is a tradition in our overall society. I have often stated that a tradition is anything you keep on doing once you have forgotten a reason for it. In reality, traditions are things that we should be preserving because they are symbolic of something. Something of true value with respect to what we want to stand for

Let me use a military analogy. I will of course choose the one out of the US Marine Corps being a former Marine myself. Moreover, I just looked at a cover of a national magazine with a Marine Corps General who was recently made the overall commander of NATO. He was in full dress uniform.

Why do officers in the Marine Corp carry a mamaluke tilt on their sword? The answer, the pirates of the Barbary Coast. What is the quatra foil on the top a Marine officer's hat symbolic of? It is a reflection of the rope that used to be coiled a top of an officers hat so sharpshooters firing from the rigging on ships would not inadvertently kill their own personnel. Both of those symbols are on the uniform of General Jones as he assumes his new command. Is he a different type of person from the first officer to carry either of these symbols? Lt Presley O'Bannon who faced the pirates of Barbary didn't have missiles or computers, but he earned that right the hard way: he earned the respect of his enemies and the support of his allies

You see, tradition is not necessarily the way of doing something as much as it is the why of doing something. We need to preserve our traditions. We need to know what those traditions are. I have been engaged in some fairly lively debates in restaurants, at conferences, and even in the front seat of my car with the different generations of the fire service that think that tradition is a bad thing.

I remember one period of time in which one tradition was challenged and had some interesting consequences. Some of you may not recall it. But there was an era in the fire service where it was considered to be counterproductive to be identified as a fire chief. Uniforms disappeared into closets and were replaced by white shirts and blue blazers. During that time frame individuals almost seemed to be embarrassed by being firefighters. The idea was that we had to “fit in”. I am not sure that it's a successful challenge on our concept of tradition.



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I am not sure that anybody can point to any advantage that was gained by us eliminating that image of the fire chief. Instead I believe there is evidence to show that it reduced the visibility of the service.

I once recalled a very loud debate in a class that I was teaching at Asilomar over this very idea. The class was badly divided. One half of the class felt that we should be in uniform all of the time and that we should be using the symbols of our fire service as an indication of our role. The other half of the class disputed that and felt that we needed to blend in with the city management team. We needed to look more the public works director or the finance director.

That debate was over thirty years ago. I have lost track of who was in that class but I do know this, today I see more and more fire chiefs on public display wearing their uniform rather than looking like they just stepped out of a Brooks Brothers ad.

So here is my question to you. Why do we do what we do? What traditions should we be preserving? What traditions should we be giving up? As we move into a more modern era should we be adopting the same concept that the medical profession has – that is using an ancient oath as a reflection of contemporary responsibilities?

What I am referring to is, the Hippocratic Oath. Reportedly doctors are still asked to swear to that oath. I have seen many individuals raise their right hands and swear to uphold the constitution, the city laws of their community, etc. and yet people seem to think that is a trivial act in today's society.

I tend to disagree. I believe that we should ceremonialize many of the aspects of the fire service in a much more structured and symbolic way. For example I believe that badge pinning ceremonies should be formally structured events. For my most recent memory I could not help but feel compassion for the firefighters in New York City that were all promoted in the aftermath of the World Trade Center disaster. As I watched their faces at the badge pinning ceremony I realized that many of them would have given anything not to be there under those circumstances.

Yet it was important for that fire department to recognize that event.

What I am appealing to here is an attitude adjustment. Yes, I think there are traditions that we ought to preserve. One of them needs to be the fact that we need to recognize that technology and tradition are not mutually contradictory. Regardless of how sophisticated our profession becomes we have to retain the concept of the phoenix – the badge – the fireman's cluster.

I would even go so far as to say that we ought to restore the concept of membership certificates to fire departments. I have a couple of originals of these in my personal collection. As you go and look at



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those works of art you can't help but feel that the person who received that must have had a strong sense of pride in whom they were and what they were.

The problem with all of this is that some people quarrel over what is tradition. As a matter of fact sometimes resistance to change is based upon the fact that people do not want to change the way they behave. That is not preserving tradition at all. In fact that is playing into the perception of the naysayers of the fire service that we hidebound traditionalists. I have accepted the idea that tradition is more internal than it is external. It is how we feel about ourselves in the context of our profession that gives us our deepest sense of pride. It has nothing to do with the type or design of protective clothing we are wearing, the size and shape of our fire trucks, whether we wear leather or synthetic helmets, or even the nature of tasks that we perform in our society. Some of us only fight fires, others are in medical business. All of these types of responsibilities have changed over time and yet the common thread that holds the fire service together has been retained by some and lost by others.

I was reading an article the other day by one of my good friends Billy Goldfeder in which he lamented the fact that some people have tried to be divisive in the fire service over the word "the brotherhood". Obviously that could offend the female firefighters – is it not true there is a "sisterhood"?

Or, is there, as Father John Sammon is often quoted as saying, "the family of the fire service." Mother, Father, Sister, Brother. What label do we really want to retain in order to retain the tradition of all looking out for each other?

And lastly, here is another question. Is there anything necessarily wrong with being traditional and at the same time a futurist? I hope not. Because that is exactly the way I feel about how I have approached my career. I truly respect the past of the fire service. I see layer after layer of the legacy and heritage deposited by individuals who have taken both moral and physical risks to improve the fire service. Many of their names have been lost to the fire service. Yet, each and every one of the individuals who is in a fire station today owes a debt of gratitude to those individuals. We didn't get to be the way we are by accident. People had to sacrifice and in many cases compromise to achieve the things that many people take for granted today. Yet, as I look into the future of the fire service I see more of the same. It sort of reminds me of the Roman God Janus. We use this Roman god's name today to denote the month in which we begin our annual calendar – January. Janus was a two faced God who looked forward and backwards at the same time.

As Tevya in "Fiddler on the Roof" would say "TRADITION". Even as he sung those words he was looking out of the window realizing the world was changing around him. And so it is for the fire service. We should never take for granted what we are doing or how we are doing it. We should preserve those things that make us special and at the same time help create traditions for the future of the fire service to reflect upon.



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What is your contribution? The people that I referred to earlier in this column are not our enemies at all. They are our friends. They come to visit our fire stations. They take the money contributed by our labor groups. They call us America's Heroes – and then vote down important issues a year or two later.

Why the contradiction? Unfortunately, I think it is as much our fault as it is theirs. We, as a profession, tend to resist change as if it were as possible a threat as anthrax. We do not embrace ideas of change easily, yet our overall society is accelerating the adaptation of change even more rapidly.

What is the solution? There is probably no one solution that is going to make any difference here. But, it is also true that a lot of little differences may make the difference. It could be as simple as how you and the members of your department respond to the challenges faced by your own organization. No matter where you are, not matter what type of organizational structure you live within, the traditions of the fire service should be defined and respected. I won't even begin to try and suggest that I know what they are all are, nor will I suggest that they are the same for every organization. But, I do know that they exist. And, I do know that they are often ignored. Conduct a little audit of your own to determine what symbols and traditions exist within your department that deserve preservation.

Then make sure that those same symbols do not get used as an excuse for doing the job right now. Again, I can't give you a lot of specifics for your department, but I can give you an example from my own. I recently had a firefighter ask me why I always addressed his boss as "Chief" instead of using his first name. This was in context of working at a staff level with the organization. The firefighter stated that I could just as easily have addressed him by his first name. Sure, I could have. But that ignores the point of this column. I called that person Chief out of respect for the rank. That is his title within that organization and if I did not respect it, others could easily choose to do likewise. The fact that we have opened up the management input to many other levels in the organization does not mean that we should denigrate the chief's role, because after all, that role is to serve as our representative behind many closed doors where key decisions are made.

As time goes on the fire service will continue to be challenged. There is a target rich environment for the fire service to become even more of a value to the communities we serve. We need to make sure as we move into that situation that we preserve the integrity of our image as problem solvers. We need to preserve our image as the go-to people for handling problems. Keeping the image alive tomorrow may also include the need to be the advocates of change instead of the resisters of change.

Wouldn't it be nice to see a Fire Chief on the cover of Parade Magazine in about 10 years, complete with Gold Badge, The Maltese Cross and the rest of the symbols of the fire service?