

THE SPIRIT OF FREEMASONRY

by

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The Spirit of Freemasonry is not found only in what we see and hear - it lies in what we sense or feel. It does not belong in our tools and ritual alone but in something much less obvious and definable. Perhaps too often we depend upon our eyes and ears and lose the power of our other senses through disuse. But our eyes may not necessarily tell us the truth and our ears could be equally misleading. So it seems that we never catch the real Spirit of Freemasonry for the most important part of it is neither seen nor heard but is intangible, indefinable and indescribable. Yet it unifies us all, gives us a sense of belonging and pervades all life.

The Spirit of Freemasonry is the cornerstone of your life my brother, as it is the cornerstone of mine. It is the 'take-off' point from which we view the social, political and economic environment of our world yet it is an integral and essential part of that environment. It is the ashlar on which masons build the edifice of personal experience and knowledge, and whether the cowan knows it or not it contains the seeds of universal Truth and a part of his world as well.

Look at these current quotations and see how closely the writers echo the spirit of our great Order:-

"I would not judge a man by the presupposition of his life but by the Fruits of his life. And the fruits - the relevant fruits - are, I would say, a sense of charity, a sense of proportion, a sense of justice. Whether the man is an atheist or a Christian, I judge him by his fruits, and I therefore have many agnostic friends. "

- Reinhold Niebuhr, theologian.

" We Jews are probably freer today to express ourselves than we ever were, but we don't want to express as much Jewishness as our grandparents did a hundred years ago. The Irish who came to this country were 'wild Irishmen'. Irish Americans are freer today but not so wild. Something bland seems to come into our characters when we have been Americans long enough."

- Rabbi Eugene J. Lipman..

"The persistence in just being human could unite us all - intellectuals., non-intellectuals, people of every nation, race, ideology, religion, all who believe that mankind has no right to liquidate itself."

- Arnold Toynbee, historian.

But to understand this spirit, to understand any spirit or motivating force, it seems that we must constantly have before our eyes some practical evidence of its existence. We need a happy blend of the concrete and the abstract, for anything too abstract for us leads to gaps in our understanding and to strain our credulity and anything that is too concrete, precise or

scientific makes us suspicious because we do not trust science as we used to. It doesn't seem to be so popular - it is too inhuman, too uncontrollable, too full of danger for us, - too full of fear.

The spirit of freemasonry arises from that perfect fusion of the abstract and the practical. Its morality and allegory represent the abstract, its landmarks are founded upon geometry, (the purest science of all), and on the instruments of technology - the tools of mason and architect. The result is perfect because it gives rise to no dogma or doctrinaire attitude to life, yet it contains all dogma. It is practical and reasonable because it asks of us the possible, - To "guide our reflections to that most important of all human studies, the knowledge of yourself" It does not expect us, you see, to actually know ourselves or even to become the ideal of a freemason but it does expect us to make an effort or strive to that end. It is practical also because, knowing the difficulties involved in this search for knowledge, it offers us the conditions necessary for doing what it advocates and protects them by its secrets and landmarks.

So the spirit found in freemasonry is one of universal unity. It fuses science and art; it unites technology and humanity. It is a total spirit common to all but never reduces all to some common denominator. As in the perfection of Geometry, which finds itself perfect in every other symmetrical creation as well as in the theorem of Pythagoras, it implies that perfection can be seen in countless ways. It exemplifies this in a great brotherhood of many different individuals united in a common search for Truth and bound by a common and sympathetic understanding.

Let us try to catch a glimpse of this spirit. Let us pause for a moment so that we can try to see what it means.

As we look around, before our eyes, our Lodge ceases to be a room or building made of plaster, metals, wood and wire. It is made of people and by people, - made by many hands and yet by no hand. We begin to realize that whatever Lodge we enter we can feel at home for we can conjure up identical imagery, - we can feel the same things. The altar is not a piece of furniture or a block of wood, it is a living dynamic thing and part of each one of us.. It is the focus of every meeting we have ever attended in any lodge. (It may not be in the same place every time but it is still there!) So it is with the chair of King Solomon, the apron, the ashlar, the Tracing Board. When we look at the floor it is never bare and empty, it comes alive with people, it sparkles with movement and ritual.

Therein lies the Spirit of Freemasonry. The things which it conjures up in our minds are pleasant things, human things, irreplaceable memories of the past, understandings of the present, and hopes for the future all bound together by the abstraction of and the discipline of ritual.

Therein lies the reason why our ritual must be carefully adhered to and our landmarks carefully guarded. For common ground must lead to common effort so that peace and harmony may reign and man in brotherhood may find personal purpose. Our ritual and our tools symbols are freemasonry's means of sensitizing each one of us, they reinforce the spirit of every lodge and are the means to a common end They are not ends in themselves.

Let us think about this for a moment because we spend a great deal of time during sessions of Masonic education in examining and dissecting our words and other symbols. Though it is a fascinating, interesting and necessary pastime

because it hightens the spiritual drama of our order and sustains its underlying purpose, we should always remember that the examination, definition and contemplation of these things should be stated in such a way that we are constantly aware of their purpose and their place in the whole Spirit of Freemasonry. This seems to me to be the responsibility we assume when we undertake the duty of masonic education. For if we make these things or the history of our Craft ends in themselves, we are discrediting the important place of freemasonry in modern society, we are binding ourselves to the past, we are emphasizing the archaic, and we are internalizing the masonic experience to such an extent that we forget that the spirit of our order does not belong to freemasons alone but is a spirit which is common to all mankind.

We love the past because there is a mystery about it that seems to sustain and attract much of our reverence. We delight in contemplating pyramids, temples, operative masonry, craft guilds and so on, but we should be careful not to shut our eyes to the future by closing out the present. We remember the great historical associations of freemasonry and the work of famous individual freemasons like Ben Franklin, Voltaire, Michael Ramsay, Garibaldi and George Washington, but we must not forget that the ancient craft guild was formed in consideration of the individual, the common man seeking craft perfection, and
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looking for some way to reconcile his personal place in the society of his day. For if we remember this we will remember that one of freemasonry's main tasks is still to help fit each of its brethren into that increasingly complicated society which is still growing up around him

As I came to this point I realized how close I had come to paralleling Charles Dickens' "Christmas Carol". Perhaps you remember that miserly, old Scrooge is visited in his dreams by the three Spirits of Christmas, the Spirit of Christmas Past, The Spirit of Christmas Present and the Spirit of Christmas Future.

The Spirit of Christmas Past shows Scrooge the happiness of the Christmases he has had in the past; the Spirit of Christmas present shows him Bob Cratchit and his family getting ready for Christmas, poor as it is for them; and the Spirit of Christmas Future shows him what is to happen to poor, little Tiny Tim - an empty stool and a friendless hearth

It was in the offering of the Spirit of Christmas Present that Scrooge recognized the error of his ways for he had a great empathy for Tiny Tim and saw that it was in the present that lay most of the answer to the future.

So it must be in freemasonry.

Problems may not be solved - Tiny Tim will still die., and the hearth may grow cold and friendless, but the important thing to us is the idea of the future in the present.

"Let the emblems of mortality which lie before you lead you to contemplate your inevitable destiny, and guide your reflections to that most important of all human studies, the knowledge of yourself."

All of freemasonry contains this present spirit which is going to be the essence of future man. All of freemasonry offers hope and makes no promise: asks for continuous, present effort and guarantees no reward. All the comfort we have is that we must still hunt for our own reward:

We remember that the Word has been lost but glean only the hope that it will return, - never the promise of its return. We know that in Speculative Freemasonry it is never found.

We also recall the Ideal of a Freemason found in the charge to the Brethren: -

"... let me endeavor to portray to you the ideal of a Freemason.

If you see a man who quietly and modestly moves in the sphere of his life; --- you will have found the ideal of a Freemason."

No one has yet found such a brother, but the spirit of Freemasonry lies in the search and not in the attainment. It stretches on and on into future infinity just as it roots far back in the past. You and I are its present and thus at the same time we are its future

It is nothing if it does not suffuse the whole being of the individual -sight, sound and feeling; similarly it is nothing if we look at it in isolation and as belonging only to freemasons. Our spirit is shared with all men. It is as relevant in the outside world as it is in this hallowed sanctuary. Many have found those eternal truths that freemasonry teaches but they have found them in different ways. None are led to them so easily and so directly as we who are guided and protected by the land marks. None can find them so easily as those who set out purposefully and actively to look for them in the true masonic spirit. It seems obvious, however, that what we do here must be related and applied in our experience of the world outside, for without this relevance, freemasonry would remain an anachronism in the midst of an advanced technological society - it would have a future without a present.

We may talk platitudinously and self-righteously about truth and honesty in a world of Credibility Gaps, 'Buyer-beware', accident-chasing lawyers, and political double-talk, but by this we are not getting very far - there is nothing platitudinous or self-righteous in the spirit of freemasonry. It is a spirit which unifies the old and the new but in it we find challenge without platitude. It is practical and not just theoretical. By it we are motivated to carry ourselves out into modern society to do fearlessly those things we feel ought to be done, and to face with equanimity the complications and perplexities that there exist. As freemasons we should be secure in the knowledge that so long as we carry with us the eternal spirit and basic tenets of our order we cannot be wrong. As Shakespeare put it:-

"This above all, - to thine own self by true;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

But this does not mean that we should rush off as a masonic body and involve ourselves in rehabilitation of criminals, or drug users, the resettlement of Ugandan refugees, or the protection of Native Indian rights, for in so doing we could easily destroy the dominant spirit and mystic tie of freemasonry. For that spirit is great because it inspires us with the primacy of the individual - the uncommitted individual, - the independence and personalness of his effort, and the freedom of his associations.

The central spirit of freemasonry is found in brotherhood to all, yet to none but a brother committed; love for all, and yet to no faction bound; faith in all things and in all men, yet with bias towards none. For this is the necessary spirit which cultivates the individual self and restrains personal choice by no

bonds save those of moral rectitude. What you and I may do of our own free-will or who we may support is our personal responsibility. But any support we may offer or any personal stand we may take on current social problems must not, while we are in the free spirit of lodge brotherhood, compromise any other masonic brother - it must not inhibit or restrict his freedom of decision or his freedom of association in any way.

For the spirit of freemasonry is that we search and work towards understanding ourselves and our place in society, and that we share our personal experiences with our brother recognizing his fundamental right of personal association and freedom of choice in every sense. It reminds us to impose no clandestine experience upon him but by using the all-embracing spirit of lodge brotherhood, its allegory, its landmarks and its security, to help cradle his own effort to seek his own answers. Just as each brother must want to join freemasonry he must want to strive, to search and to know.

So let us make sure of one thing. Let us exert our Lodge efforts in education towards making the landmarks and principles of freemasonry relevant to our brethren, for in lodges where there are few candidates today, the latent spirit of freemasonry can so easily get lost and be replaced by the artificial and materialistic trappings of the service organization. (And in this statement I mean no disrespect at all.) We must be careful that the lasting and all-embracing spirit found in Masonic brotherhood is not replaced by the more transient and expedient principles found in temporary friendships and companionships.

We must think positively about the present and not be overwhelmed by the negativism of declining membership and failing attendance. For the Spirit of Freemasonry has taught us the important aim-

"---- to please each other and unite in the grand design
of being happy and communicating happiness."

Other problems will fall into place, brethren. The Spirit of Freemasonry is practical, perfect, and positive. Let us steep ourselves in its truths and realize that when it is around to inspire us, the most oppressive and dispairing problems of life (including membership and attendance:) fade into insignificance.