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THE PARAMOUNT DUTIES OF A FREEMASON

It was my pleasure to review the proceedings of the 41st Annual Inter-Provincial Conference held at this lovely city of Banff, in September of last year. I must confess that I had more than just a mere cursory interest in making this review. First, because of my continuing interest, and past experience in the workings and accomplishments of the delegates to this Conference,

Secondly, and more important to me; that I did not want to conflict in this address, with the text of the address given by Most Worshipful Brother F.G. Fox on the date of September 3rd, 1981. Nor did I feel that it was proper to appropriate any of his material. You perhaps don't know my Brethren, that I have been accused of not only being Hogg by name, but also hog by nature.

Some of you will remember that M.W. Bro. Fox took as his theme 'Rights and Responsibilities'. In his address M.W. Bro. Fox touched on the word duties, and I feel that this points to the theme that I will lead into 'The Paramount Duties of a Freemason'.

At the end of the ceremony of my initiation into the Degree of Entered Apprentice a compelling and thought provoking charge was delivered by a senior Past Master, who had been a very good friend of my family for many years. I must tell you, that I was the only candidate that evening. Perhaps many of the Brethren felt that it was only given for my benefit; but I do feel that it was for everyone's benefit to hear it again. Indeed, it has become my favourite charge; and through the years I have never become weary of hearing it, or of having the privilege of giving it. It is my opinion, that the Charge of the Entered Apprentice Degree, is the most important charge in our ritual. No other charge equals its importance or 'Packs such a wallop' (to use the popular vernacular).

In the first paragraph of this charge, there begins with the sentence, and I quote "There are three great duties, which as a Freemason, you are charged to inculcate; - to God, your neighbour, and yourself. To God, in never mentioning His name but with that reverential awe which is due from a creature to his Creator, to implore His aid in all your laudable undertakings and to esteem Him as the chief good. To your neighbour, in acting upon the square, and doing unto him, as you wish he should do unto you. And to yourself, in avoiding all irregularity and intemperance, which may impair your faculties, or debase the dignity of your profession. A zealous attachment to these duties will ensure public and private esteem." These three great duties certainly appeal to me, as the three most important and paramount duties in all Freemasonry. No other duty or responsibility has such an impact upon the mind and moral conscience of the newly made Freemason.

I know that I am treading on old ground, because we are all very familiar with the theme I am now presenting. It is my intent however, to explore these three great principles, and to illustrate them a little more fully.

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This brings us to the contemplation of the first great duty; that which we owe to God. Perhaps one of the most salient parts of this duty, is that we should implore His aid at all times. 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall' would be rather affrighting without his admonition, for (in the words of J.H. Ward) it reminds us of our frailty, our proneness to fall. We need not, in spite of our human frailty, fall, and there are reasons why we need not.

Our temptations and trials are not peculiar, not unique. 'There hath no temptation taken you but such is common to man' . At once our attention is arrested, for, speaking quite generally, we are apt to think, and do think, our temptations are very singular in nature. 'Nobody ever had such trials to endure, or such temptations to contend with ,' we think and even say. So egotistic is the human heart that it frequently imagines itself to be especially selected for malevolent attack by all the forces of evil. 'Ill-luck pursues me'. 'I am being persecuted right and left'. 'The spirit of evil singles me out.' These are a few of the ways in which this egotism expresses itself. But the fact is though our trials and temptations are personal and we have got to deal with them, they are not peculiar - they are 'common to man'. Being human, it would be very odd if we didn't experience them. Observe, however ,we need not fall because - God is faithful and will not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able. At once we are led to do one of the first and most powerful things. Our attention is called from the trial or temptation to the contemplation of God and His character. He is faithful. May we not reverently say faithful like the sentry who ever stands on guard watching against the enemy's action, open and secret frontal and flank, weak and strong alike? The great Guardian of life is on duty- always. 'Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising'. 'Thou hast set me behind and before and laid thine hand upon me'. 'Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways'. Such confidence is imperative if we are to win through. The faithfulness of God must dominate our thoughts. But there is more than that in these words. They indicate not only faithfulness, but God's relationship to us. 'He will not suffer us to be tempted beyond our capacity to bear'. He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust'. We are flung back upon God and God's understanding of us, His Fatherly care for us. The night may be very dark, but God is in the darkness. The storm may be very fierce, but 'He rides upon the storm'. We may not know what to do or whither to turn, but He does. Is it not written: 'We need not fall because'-?

He will provide a way of escape in temptation itself. An illustration: when sailing in the intricate channels of the Kyles of Bute the passenger on deck frequently thinks a cul-de-sac has been reached. It looks as if to go forward means running into some jutting cliff, and then, at the last moment, an opening appears; the 'way of escape' reveals itself.

Life is like that. Everything seems hopeless, there is nothing to do but 'give up', or so it appears: and then out of the darkness 'a light shines' . God has found a way of escape for us. But best of all God Himself is the way of escape. In fact, the only way. To overcome trial and difficulty, to conquer any temptation, fill your mind with God. Think of His love and power. 'This is the victory that overcometh the world even our faith'

Our next contemplation is the duty we owe to our neighbour. You will

notice that the word is neighbour, not brother. Freemasonry places a much wider and broader scope to our moral vision, encompassing as it does in this instance, the whole of mankind.

When we human beings say to the troubled, 'Try not to fret', 'Don't be anxious', 'Be brave', 'Keep calm', or whatever phrase we deem most fitting for the occasion, we make an endeavour to the best of our ability, to comfort the aching heart and undoubtedly, up to a point, we succeed. Human sympathy is a mighty social factor, and those who have the gift and use it, are wonderful benefactors of their kind. But in this, as in everything else it has to be in the way of service. So here is revealed the way to power, to real power: the way to eminence, true eminence. It was and is, revolutionary for it wars against the so-called natural propensities of man. An examination of man's nature as we know it reveals a deep seated repugnance to effort. Most of us suffer from inertia, . readiness to take the line of least resistance, to drift with, rather than to battle against, the stream. We are very easily persuaded that our strength is not equal

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to the task. Acedia-sloth, torpor, lethargy-regarded by the Latins as one of the seven deadly sins, is very prevalent. It takes a war or some first-class calamity to rouse some people to effort. Work is regarded as a curse, not as a blessing.

Coupled with this inertia is pride-self conceit. We consider ourselves too big, too important, too exalted 'to gird ourselves with a towel' and perform the menial task.

Or again: social values make 'being served' rather than 'rendering service' the important thing; to dominate by wealth and position and compelling force is considered to be nobler than to gain mastery by ministry. Men fail to see in the revolutionary transvaluation of values which moral worth and teaching brings to human relationships. They do not discern the dynamic of service to their fellow man. To do so means that the old nature with its acedia, its pride, its conception of values, its self-regarding self importance, and self-exaltation, must be dethroned. Let us ever remember that everyone of us owes to his neighbour kind services and graceful courtesies.

Our last contemplation is the duty we owe to ourselves. The charge simply abjures us to be temperate and to maintain a worthy image; but I feel that we owe to listen to another voice as well, namely our conscience.

What is conscience? Bishop Butler says: 'There is a superior principle of reflection, or conscience, in every man, which distinguishes between the internal principles of his heart, as well as his external actions; which passes judgment upon himself and them, pronounces some actions to be in themselves just, right, good; others to be in themselves evil, wrong, unjust. Which, without being consulted, without being advised with, magisterial exerts itself, and approves or condemns him, the doer of them accordingly', (end of quote').

We see, then, that conscience is a 'knowing' power; a 'judging' power; a 'commanding' power; and 'approving or disapproving' power. It also calls forth some of the highest feelings of our nature. Goodness, charity, compassion, long-suffering, courage, sacrifice, heroism, whether discerned in ourselves or in others, bring a glow of satisfaction, a feeling of well-being, a harmony which is in no way affected by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We rejoice in the approving testimony of our conscience even though our feet are shackled and our physical condition may be quite wretched.

On the other hand, though surrounded by every comfort, even luxury, and apparently freed from every care, conscience can and does engender feelings of desperate misery, hatred of ourselves, inward pain and disease. Low and debasing thoughts produce this constant dissatisfaction. Dishonesty tends to arouse inward reproach. A cheat lives in constant fear of detection. Acts of violence flow back upon the doer in a river of dread. The habitual transgressor knows perpetual sadness and remorse.

Conscience thus understood as the judgment of the real and essential man upon himself is the voice of God proclaiming man's spiritual nature and pointing the way to happiness.

This way is indicated in simplicity of behaviour. 'Simplicity', says Charles Wagner, 'is a state of mind. It dwells in the main intention of our lives. A man is simple when his chief care is the wish to be what he ought to be .. At bottom, it consists in putting our acts and aspirations in accordance with the law of our being, and consequently with the eternal intention which willed that we should be at all... True life is the realization of the higher virtues - justice, love, truth, liberty, moral power -- in our daily activities whatever they may be.'

Simplicity is the way. Conscience testifies of this. There is no greater delight than to be conscious of sincerity in self-examination. This should be our aim and constant care - the testimony of our conscience, for loss of sincerity -- will if followed, automatically and effectually exclude worldly wisdom's way. Obeying

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the dictates of conscience we most quickly and surely enable ourselves to enjoy the fruits of happiness.

My Brethren, I realize, that I have perhaps wearied you with a subject that could be phrased in the popular vernacular as 'old hat', as this ground must have been covered many times before. It doesn't in my opinion lose any of its power or importance, by being repeated. Indeed, I feel that I am being charged with new strength and inspired by new determination, every time I hear it.

It is my sincere hope and humble expectation, that I have been able to in some measure, explore and express to you my Brethren, my thoughts and feelings as they are related to this great Charge of Freemasonry.

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(The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the Author and are not necessarily those of the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research.)

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