

The Handicapped Brother

by Kenneth H. Sternkopf

Most Worshipful Brother Kenneth Sternkopf has set a shining example of how a Brother can overcome adversity and serve our Craft in an outstanding manner. We thank him for sharing his thoughts on how we can reach out to our physically handicapped Brethren .

God grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

These words have long been a challenge to me for I spend my days confined to a wheelchair, unable to walk, a situation that I have come to accept. During 1987-88, it was my privilege to have served the grand jurisdiction of New Jersey as its Grand Master. Probably the only Grand Master to have served his term of office in a wheelchair.

Although being unable to walk makes me different from those who have gone before, I, like them, am a plain Master Mason. I have tried to play down the fact that I am different, for like others, I have goals that I have set in my life and in this fraternity. One of these goals I attained in being able to serve this craft as a Grand Master. So to those who see a person like myself or someone like me, I would like to explain that we are all ordinary Freemasons – the only difference being our inability to stand or walk.

With these thoughts in mind, perhaps it is time for someone like myself to address the issue as to how the members of our fraternity view and accept those of us that project an image of being "Handicapped". When, in fact our only handicap is not being able to function in the same manner as our brethren.

There are in my mind two forms of being handicapped – one being a physical handicap that many of us suffer and two a mental handicap that many of our lodges and brethren seem to suffer in their dealings with the physically handicapped.

Have you ever stopped to realize that a major portion of our membership suffers from some form of handicap? Those that wear glasses, hearing aids, false teeth, arch supports, and those that take daily medication all exhibit some form of handicap. The Grand Master that I served as a Grand

Chaplain in 1971 alluded to the fact that even being a Master Mason is a handicap for people expect so much more from the members of our craft.

Why then is a person in a wheelchair, on crutches, or one who uses a cane looked upon in the eyes of our fraternity as a person needing a special dispensation to share in our brotherhood? Why then is our aged brother or one using a cane or crutch left out of our fraternal family because some of our lodges meet on the second or third floor of buildings that are not barrier free and no provisions have been made by the members or committees to accommodate these brothers?

Because a brother is handicapped in one form or another does not mean that his mind is affected. Loss of the ability to walk or stand is not connected to or indicative of loss of brain power. Why not involve physically handicapped people in the programs and in the officer lines of our lodges? Why not initiate volunteer programs in our lodges, in our districts, and at our Grand Lodge level to aid those of our brethren needing physical assistance as well as those in need of charitable assistance?

The Hospital Visitation Program of our Masonic Service Association tends to the needs of the veterans in the many Veteran's Hospitals across our land. Perhaps it is time that a service program be initiated within our fraternity to tend to the needs of those who find barriers in their way, making it difficult for them to attend and participate in their lodge functions.

Having accepted the fact that there are those with physical handicaps within and without our fraternity, and that these handicaps cannot be changed, we can then move on to adapt our thinking and our buildings to incorporate those changes necessary to draw into, and back into, our lodges those brethren in need of special assistance.

Brother Franklin Delano Roosevelt governed our great land from a wheelchair and certainly had the wisdom to recognize what could be changed and what could not. I, with all humility, tried to emulate this great man by using him as a role model during my life and during my Masonic career. I hope that as his contribution led to changes in our country, perhaps what I have had to contribute to this gentle craft of ours will lead to some changes in the way we think. Especially in those who find it easier to make personal excuses rather than involving themselves in the strengthening of our Fraternity.

Another great man, Mr. Bernard M. Baruch, once stated, "There are no such things as incurables – there are only those for which man has not-yet-found a cure." Perhaps the time has arrived for our fraternity to change its thinking and begin a search for a cure that will aid our handicapped, both those with physical handicaps and those brethren and lodges that suffer from mental handicaps that prevent them from having the wisdom to recognize that which must be accepted and that which can be changed. Certainly changes can be made to aid those unable to attend

lodges because of their particular problems, just as changes can be made interesting those of our members "Handicapped by Apathy" to overcome their self imposed barriers.

It has often been stated that "We do not have problems in our fraternity, but what we do have are challenges." Hopefully those challenges facing our fraternity today will lead to God granting us the serenity to accept that which cannot be changed, a large portion of courage to change those things needed to strengthen our beloved craft, and last, but by far not the least of these, the wisdom to recognize that there is a great difference between the two.

So hopefully, brethren, after we recognize the fact that there do exist differences in people, be those differences physical, mental, or other handicaps, perhaps we can get on with the job of being Freemasons aware of, who we are, where we come from, and what it is we purpose in belonging to this the greatest and oldest fraternity on the face of the earth.

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