

What I Learned in Freemasonry

Unknown

(This Bulletin is adapted from an address given in 1966 by M.W. Brother Thomas Sherrard Roy, Past Grand Master of Massachusetts, at a Masonic function in Virginia. We are indebted to M.W. Brother Roy for graciously permitting its use as a Short Talk Bulletin.)

I have been a Mason for almost fifty-five years and tonight, for a little while I want to talk about some of the things I have learned in Freemasonry during these years: the things that I have learned about the world as I have looked at the world through the eyes of a Freemason.

It started on the night I was initiated. The minute I moved toward the door that would open for me into Freemasonry, I should have learned one of life's greatest lessons, and certainly one of the greatest lessons being taught the world by Freemasonry today. Until that particular time I had been a completely independent individual. I had been on my own, practically supporting myself since I had been thirteen years of age. I thought that I could get along very well without very much help from any one. I was on my own, and proud of it. But I did not get very far before I found out that I was not going any place in Freemasonry on my own. In that experience, the first contact that I had with Freemasonry my boasted independence was torn to shreds. In this first contact I had with Freemasonry there was revealed to me the universal principle of dependence, or interdependence in life.

All across this country are men who are referred to as self-made men. We refer to them as self-made men because they started with nothing and have become unbelievably successful. Perhaps they have become immensely wealthy. We say that they did it all on their own. How ridiculous can we be! When I was in college I took a course in Political Economy, and the book that we studied gave as the three factors of wealth: land, labor and capital. In the years since then I have discovered that they do not mean just what they seemed to mean at that particular time. What is land? It is not just the ground we walk on or the property we own. Land consists of all the physical resources of the planet on which we live. Land is the fertility of the soil, the wealth of minerals in the ground, the fish in the sea, the very air we breathe. No man has ever achieved success without making great use of these physical resources. Yet he created none of them.

What is labor? I used to think of labor as men, skilled and unskilled, working with their hands to produce the things that we need. But labor is all of society. Labor is this group of people on this side who manufacture what the self-made man has to sell. Labor is also this other group of people on this other side who buy what the self-made man has to sell. Without either of them, and certainly without both of them self-made Henry Ford would have been repairing bicycles all of his life. He did not create the labor on which he was dependent. In the old days when they established the assembly-line system of putting cars together, Mr. Ford boasted to a group of manufacturers that he was turning out a car every two minutes. To which one man replied that he was not supplying the demand, as there was one born every minute.

What is capital? It may be the money that you have in your pocket, and which I do not have in my pocket. We think of capital mostly as money. But it is much more than money. It consists of all the human resources with which we were born – the personality gifts that enable us to get along with people. It is the potential executive ability we brought into the world with us which we may have developed, but which we certainly did not create. Take away from all of the things upon which he is dependent for his wealth, and which he did not create, and what have you left? One man has said that all you have left is "a blithering idiot standing upon air." Certainly we cannot say that we have left a completely independent, self-made man. We have left an individual who has been dependant upon things he did not create, and upon individuals for whose existence he can claim no credit, for such wealth he has been able to accumulate.

One of the great contributions made to us as Masons, and through us to the world, has come through the dramatization of the fact of our inter-dependence. We do more than dramatize it in Masonry. We spell it out. I don't know about your ritual, but we have some ritual in Massachusetts that we give to individuals before we turn them loose as Master Masons. We say to them: "It might have pleased the great Creator of heaven and earth to have made man independent. But as dependence is one of the strongest bonds of society, mankind were made dependent on each other for protection and security."

We are not ready to live a constructive life in this world as men and as Masons until we recognize how much we are dependent upon others. There is a very interesting story that is told in the book that we call The Volume of The Sacred Law, about an individual, not unknown in Freemasonry, named King David. When he was King, he was beleaguered one time in the cave of Adullam. From the entrance to the cave he could look across the plain to the little town of Bethlehem where he was born, and where he had grown up, but now in the hands of the Philistines. As he looked he expressed aloud a longing that was in him as he said: "O that some one would give me to drink of the water of the well that is by the gate in Bethlehem." Three mighty men who stood near heard him. They broke through the host of Philistines, got the water, and fought their way back with it. They gave the water to the king, and we can imagine the eagerness with which David lifted the gourd to his lips. Then his eyes fell on the men who brought the water, their faces streaked with blood and sweat, their clothes torn, and he said: "I

can't drink it, for it's the blood of the men who went in jeopardy of their lives." And he poured the water out upon the ground as a libation, as a drink offering unto the Lord. For once in his life anyway, David was a completely civilized human being. For the mark of the civilized person is the ability to see the things that he uses, even the commonplace things of life, in terms of their human cost. The things you use – this life of yours that you take too much for granted and use in such matter of fact fashion; that education of yours that has broadened your vision, increased your abilities, enriched your life; that religion of yours that gives you hope for time and eternity, where did they come from? You did not create them. They are the sweat, and the blood, and the tears, and the sacrifice of the men who went in jeopardy of their lives to procure them for us. We must not use what has come to us to satisfy some vagrant longing such as David's, nor to satisfy selfish ambitions. We must use all to help build a world in which all men everywhere are going to have a chance to find fulfillment of life. That is the first thing I learned in Freemasonry.

The second thing I learned is that there must be emphasis upon reality in life. I don't know what it is, but we seem to have an inborn aversion to facing life realistically. We see it in so many ways. I don't know about Virginia, but in Massachusetts we legalize gambling through parimutuel betting. Then we appoint a Commission to devise some way to reduce gambling and take care of the results of gambling.

We try to empty a tank by running the water out at the bottom while we keep running it in at the top. We create the conditions that make for that which we wish to see destroyed. I listened to a man broadcasting a baseball game one day, and one of the things he said was that we should be very careful in driving. "Please, please," he said, "when you are out driving, be careful on the highway." Then he blithely began to advise people to partake of the commodity he was advertising, and which would make it absolutely impossible for them to drive carefully. How unrealistic can we be?

Freemasonry teaches us realism when it places in our hands what we call the working tools of our profession, the working tools of the different degrees. When they placed in my hands the twenty-four inch gauge and common gavel, they implied that just as it is impossible to build a cathedral, or an ordinary building, without these working tools, so is it impossible to build a human character without working tools. As these represent laws that must be obeyed in the erection of a physical building, so there are laws to be obeyed in the development of life. It is very difficult for me to believe that Russia and the United States can develop the brain power that enables them to build space ships, put men in them, launch them, keep them in orbit, and then bring them back within a fraction of a second of a given time, but have not brains enough to develop a political plan that will enable us to live together in peace and security. The only answer is that while we have the brains, we have not been able to develop the character power that will enable us to do this.

I was playing golf one day during my vacation some years ago. My two big occupations were golf and fishing. If only I could have reversed the scores, I would have enjoyed both occupations more than I did. I hit what I thought ought to be a good shot, but instead of going straight, it hooked up onto some high ground I found that between the ball and the green there was a grove of trees. I knew that all I had to do was loft the ball high enough and far enough and it would land on the green. If the ball had gone twice as far as it did, I would have made it. As it was, it landed in the grove of trees. While I was looking for the ball I talked to myself as I always do under such circumstances. I told myself that I should not have tried that shot, but should have wasted a shot by hitting the ball out into the clear where I would have had a clean shot for the hole. I answered myself by saying, "Of course I should have tried it; Palmer would have tried it." Then I said to myself: "Yes, but his game is strong enough for that kind of shot. Your game is not strong enough for that kind of shot." And then the thought came to me that this is what is the matter with the world in which we live. We have the ideals, the vision of what is needed in the world, but we do not have the character power great enough to accomplish the things that we desire to accomplish. One of the reasons for it is that we do give the consideration we should to all that is represented in the working tools. They represent the absolutes in life. They tell us that there are absolutes to which we must submit. The man who is building a cathedral must come to terms with the square, level, and plumb, or his building will get nowhere. So we must come to terms with the laws of life, the absolutes in life. Our difficulty is that we are not willing to recognize those laws, or that absolutes are just as necessary in the building of a life as in the building of a cathedral. We hear about the absolute laws that have come down through the ages, but the only authority that we say they have is the authority with which we invest them. I think of the three baseball umpires who were discussing balls and strikes. Tommy O'Connor said: "I call them as I see them." Bill Stewart said, "You do, eh? Well I call them as they are." Bill Klem said: "Listen, you fellows, until I calls them, they ain't nuthin'." So we say that ancient laws have only the authority with which we invest them. We say that they were true for yesterday, but not necessarily for today; valid for you, but not necessarily for me; relevant to that particular situation, but not necessarily for this. We don't realize that we arrive at a position of selective anarchy in which every man does that which is right in his own eyes. We are trading very recklessly with the realities of life if we do not acknowledge that no enduring structure can be built, whether a cathedral or a life, that is not erected in obedience to the laws of God. I have learned nothing more important from Freemasonry than this fact of reality.

The third thing that I have learned in Freemasonry – being a preacher I always have to have three – is the fact of obligation in life. I suppose that the last thing we want to hear about is obligation. We will accept anything else but obligation. My doorbell rang one Sunday afternoon. I went to the door and there was a couple there, the man no longer young, who asked me if I would marry them. I invited them in, looked over the wedding license and found that it was in order I had them stand before me and proceeded with the wedding ceremony. I said to

the man: "Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife," and so on through the question. I looked up and waited for him to say, "I will." But he looked me straight in the eye and said, "In as far as possible." I told him that it was not good enough, that it had to be, "I will" or "I won't," "yes" or "no". After they had gone and I started to fill in the license before returning it to the City Clerk, I discovered that this was his fourth marriage, and concluded that experience had taught him a reasonable caution.

We want to qualify our obligations in life, as he did. But what Freemasonry teaches us is that there can be no qualifications – no evasion, reservation, or equivocation at all. We must accept our obligations and seek to fulfill them. At the heart of obligation is responsibility. And we do not much like to accept responsibilities. From the very beginning of man's experience in this world he has been trying to get rid of responsibilities. We go back to the story of Adam and Eve. Adam was hiding and God asked him the reason for it, and if he had eaten of the forbidden fruit. You remember what he said: "The woman thou gavest me, she tempted me and I did eat." He started a very popular practice on the part of mankind, for men have been saying it ever since. Actually Adam was not blaming the woman, he was blaming God. "The woman thou gavest me! I didn't ask for her; you gave her to me; and now look at the difficulty she has made for us." And ever since then men have been blaming God, or they have been blaming fate, or they have been blaming the stars. They have been blaming everything else except themselves for the situation in which they find themselves in life. Shakespeare had it right in the words he gave to Edmund in King Lear, who said: "This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behavior – we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves and teachers by spherical predominance, drunkards and liars by an enforced obedience to planetary influence." Shakespeare had his own answer to this in his Julius Caesar, where he has Cassio say, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings." We must accept responsibility for keeping the obligations that come to us in life.

We sometimes think of the matter of our relationship to Freemasonry as an engagement into which we have entered with one another as to what our actions shall be. But there is no engagement into which we enter that does not mean responsibility in a wider sense. Some one said to me one day, "What do you know about freedom?" I said, "I don't know anything about it; I'm married." I heard a man say one time that he had been married so long that he felt as though he had been born in captivity. I have been married fifty-five years and I don't feel like that at all. But when I say I don't know anything about freedom because I'm married, it is not a reflection in any way upon the woman who took my name and shares my fortunes and misfortunes. It is a plain statement of the fact that every relationship into which we enter places limitations upon our liberty, and places obligations upon us from which we cannot escape. We talk about our

rights, and people are talking a lot about their rights these days – political rights, religious rights, social rights, – and fail to realize that every right carries with it a corresponding duty.

What we have learned in Freemasonry is that our obligations cannot be taken lightly, for in our figurative language we make it very plain that there is no broken obligation without penalties of some sort. There is not a law on the state books of any community, or state, or nation that does not carry with it a penalty for its violation.

We go back to 1914 when England and Germany had treaty obligations to respect the neutrality of Belgium. When England insisted upon living up to its obligations, she was condemned by Germany for going to war over "a scrap of paper." An obligation had become nothing but a scrap of paper. And the whole world paid the penalty for Germany's broken obligation. During the second World War the world paid the penalty for Hitler's broken obligations. I have had women come to me as a minister and weep because of what was happening to their homes; and always it went back to a broken obligation. The individual who breaks the obligation may not suffer, but somebody is going to suffer, and the broken hearts of those who talked to me were the penalties of broken obligations. So we find that Freemasonry has much to teach us, and through us, therefore, a contribution to make to the world. It tells the world definitely what I have been trying to say here tonight – the great fact of our interdependence; the fact of reality in its insistence upon obedience to the laws of the universe in the building of life; the fact of responsibility for the discharge of the obligations we have accepted. We must give these things to the world with something of the same passion as that of William Blake as revealed in his poem "From Milton: "

"Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In (all this) green and pleasant land."

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