

Sunday Masonic Paper No. 737

RELIEF

Author Unknown

The tenets of Freemasonry are brotherly love, relief, and truth. These are the doctrines of the Fraternity, the speculative truths which are taught to initiates. A tenet is something held firmly; a doctrine is a working principle. The tenets of Freemasonry, therefore, are the working principles which every Brother should hold, and practice with fervency and zeal. " 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished." Unfortunately, there is a wide gap between the ideal and the actual practice of the "average" Mason. While this is characteristic of most human endeavours, a Builder cannot use that fact as an excuse or justification for his own failure or insufficiency. Freemasonry's doctrines are not dogmas; they are not authoritatively imposed. They are accepted by each initiate, of his own free will and accord, as part of the universal truth which the Fraternity attempts to teach and to exemplify before the world.

Among the reasons why some members of the Craft fail to make their tenets working principles may be insufficient instruction. Brotherly love, relief, and truth are described in the third part of the lecture for the Entered Apprentice degree; but how many members remember those explanations? Indeed, aren't there many who have never heard them? Too much Masonic instruction is stream-lined or omitted, in order to make meetings shorter. "The great aim we have in view" is sacrificed for the sake of mass appeal, while the individual's need for Masonic indoctrination is ignored and then forgotten.

This paper is intended to help those Brethren who have not received sufficient instruction about the second tenet of Freemasonry, - relief. It will attempt to show that Masonic relief is not merely the giving of alms or contributing to worthy benevolent enterprises. It will emphasize relief as a working principle, a necessary mode of conduct for the individual Mason in his efforts to discipline himself in "the way of initiation", to make a good man better and consequently happier.

One of the first, and one of the most dramatic lessons taught to every initiate is the importance of helping others. To relieve the distress of the unhappy victims of misfortune is a duty expected of all men, but it is particularly incumbent on Masons because they believe that an unbreakable chain of sincere affection binds them close together. The lesson presented in the ritual of the first degree, however, makes clear that such relief is not to be restricted to Masons.

The initiate's moment of symbolic destitution is not intended to teach him merely how it feels to be poor. He is also made to feel embarrassed by his inability to contribute. The memory of that chagrin should help to make relief a working principle for every thoughtful Mason.

Destitution, however, may be a matter of the spirit as well as of the pocket. Every one is challenged much more frequently to give comfort, encouragement, hope, kindness, patience, praise, sympathy, and understanding than to contribute money to alleviate distress. No man who has trained himself to exemplify brotherly love need ever be embarrassed by his inability to soothe the unhappy, to compassionate their miseries, and to restore peace to their troubled minds. No other kind of relief is more needed in a troubled world. The poor in spirit suffer greater deprivation than the economically destitute. This is why the monitorial lecture about relief stresses the spiritual activities enumerated in the preceding paragraph. It makes no mention of money. It emphasizes the fact that relief is primarily a matter of sharing one's feelings of brotherly love, whereby we are taught to regard the whole human species as one family, as created by one Almighty Parent and inhabitants of the same planet, and designed to aid, support, and protect each other.

Once a Mason has really trained himself to regard every man as his brother, it becomes natural for him to feel the impulses which prompt him to relieve the distressed, whether they suffer physical wants, fears, sorrows, wrongs, or bitter grief. This is where the individual Brother plays his part in creating a favourable image of the Craft. Its importance must be emphasized in the instruction of initiates.

In many jurisdictions a new member's first experience with Masonic relief is in contributing to the Masonic Home and/or Hospital. Part of his initiation fee may have been assigned to that. As long as he continues his membership, he makes an annual contribution to the operating funds of the institution, in the form of a per capita tax levied by Grand Lodge. In other Grand Lodges the individual Mason gives to a general charity fund. Unfortunately, per capita taxes rarely arouse the generous feeling that one is flying to the relief of a distressed worthy Brother. They become a routine requirement to comply with, uninspiring to most, and resented by a few.

Brethren need instruction in the purposes and accomplishments of the Grand Lodge charity funds. Where a Home or Hospital is involved, every Brother, especially a new one, needs to be told how his money is being used for that purpose. Such an explanation should be part of his initiatory instruction. A descriptive brochure will do much to enlighten him; but the best antidote to lack of knowledge and indifference about the Home is a visit to the institution. Only such an experience will give the individual the pride he needs in a cooperative act of relief. Only such a visit will make relief a working doctrine for him.

It's important that the individual member acquire such an understanding. Modern life, increasing costs, and especially the tremendous growth and mobility of populations have made it necessary to organize larger and larger cooperative acts of relief, like Homes and Hospitals, Benevolent Foundations, and Masonic Camps. While they make possible greater assistance and more complete relief for distressed individuals, they have taken away from individual donors a sense of direct participation, and its resultant joy. One of the problems of our contemporary Fraternity is to restore to the individual his feeling of participation in making its tenets working doctrines.

Fundamentally, only the Worshipful Master can really solve this problem for the individuals who belong to his lodge. He can arrange to see that every new Mason is taken for a tour of the Masonic Home and Hospital. He has to be alert and eager to act whenever he hears of a local opportunity to give charitable assistance. He has to stimulate the membership to enjoy such service, whether it be husking a neighbour's corn while he is in the hospital, painting a house for a paralytic Brother, or supplying a basket of food for a family which is temporarily in need. It was such direct participation in the life of the community, without fanfare or publicity, which first earned for Freemasonry an image of men of good will.

The records of practically every lodge reveal praiseworthy efforts to furnish help, aid, and assistance to less fortunate brethren and neighbours in the local community. But how recent and how frequent are those examples? No one has seriously answered the questions of M.W. Brother Dwight L. Smith of Indiana when he wrote two years ago:

"In how many Masonic halls is the Box of Fraternal Assistance passed? In how many halls could such a box be found? . . . How often are the members of a lodge called upon to assist in person, in some act of true Masonic charity? Are they ever asked to visit the sick, or is that assignment turned over to a retired Brother who has nothing else to do? . . . In far too many lodges the payment of the annual per capita tax to the Grand Lodge is looked upon as the full discharge of all obligations pertaining to charity - an act which relieves every individual member of further concern for the year ending December 31."

Then recognizing the tremendous power of the individual Mason when he is properly instructed and spiritually motivated, Brother Smith asserted: *"Given the challenge to practice Masonic charity in its intimate and personal form, almost any lodge and almost any individual Mason will respond with enthusiasm. . . . I want to know what individual Masons are doing to relieve distress - in their own communities, by their own efforts."* When the individual Mason was first brought to light, he was taught by a symbolic act of destitution that he must respond to distress as an individual. It was not a committee or a foundation that he was asked to assist. It was an individual friend or Brother he was taught to help. Such neighbours are always at hand, especially if one remembers that all men need spiritual relief and assistance no matter what their economic circumstances may be. To soothe the unhappy is the first description of relief given in the lectures. With enough imagination, one can convince himself that he has helped to produce that result by his contribution to the Masonic Home, a Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children, or the Grand Lodge Charity Fund. To see a bewildered elderly widow settled comfortably in a pleasant room at the Home, her fears of want, her dread of illness, her loneliness soothed by the loving ministrations of the staff - all this can be imagined. But does such a mental image stir one's affection and joy to the same extent that direct relief to a neighbor can do?

That unhappy Brother whose "proposal for the good of the lodge" has been rejected by an overwhelming negative vote - has anyone realized the taste of ashes in his mouth and tried to lessen the hurt and embarrassment to his feelings? To soothe the unhappy is not only incumbent on Masons in charitable programs; it is a necessary chord in the harmony of the lodge. It is not enough to reject a Brother's well-meant but undesirable proposal. He must be helped to understand that his zeal for the lodge is truly appreciated, but that his suggestions are presently unwise or impossible of achievement. In this sense it can accurately be said, "Relief begins at home."

To sympathize with their misfortunes is the second example of relief enumerated in the lectures. Sympathy, if it would really provide relief, must be more than feeling with another person. It must be more than pity; it must be deep compassion, the ability to suffer with the victim of misfortune. Only by such a deep involvement can one feel the need to act, the urgent necessity to do something to help. Relief then becomes a working principle. It is easy to write a cheque to assist in the rehabilitation of a community wrecked by disaster, like hurricane, earthquake, flood, or volcanic eruption. Such catastrophes are exceedingly dramatic. They compel our attention because of the immediate need caused by overwhelming destruction. Men hasten to aid, support and protect each other when the forces of nature inflict such cataclysms upon the society of mankind.

In such cases, men respond to the needs of the unfortunate as if they were personally involved. Support for Red Cross disaster relief on a global scale has demonstrated this frequently. The generous help from all Masonic groups during World War II to establish Masonic Service Centers at military camps was a similar response. In times of peril and of cataclysm, men find it easy to sympathize with the misfortunes of others. In fact, their imaginations are stirred enough to display the third kind of relief described in the Masonic lectures, "to compassionate their miseries." Relief has become a working principle.

But there are other victims of misfortune whose "miseries" are less dramatic because they are prolonged or more commonplace. Yet they need and deserve sympathy and compassion, as well as practical, material relief. Does the lodge have a member with a weakness which creates difficulties for his family and the community? Even good men sometimes "go haywire" under intense pressures, like those of an unhappy marriage, too competitive a business situation, or frustrated ambition to serve the lodge. These problems develop gradually. Sometimes they are too patiently overlooked. By some they are ignored. "It's none of my business." But where is brotherly relief - i.e., sympathy and compassion, tactful but practical advice, understanding and encouragement - more directly needed and more properly given? What do the "points of fellowship" really mean? Relief must be a working principle within the lodge itself.

To visit the sick is one of the oldest traditions of Masonic relief. It needs re-emphasizing in the life of every "well-governed lodge". Each new Mason should be trained to serve on the sick committee; he needs to share in the joy of the simplest but most satisfying "program of relief". He needs to make this kind of relief an active working principle. The monitorial lecture concludes its description of this subject with a statement that makes relief more than a moral obligation incumbent upon Masons; it lifts the idea to the level

of a universal spiritual principle: *"To restore peace to troubled minds is the great aim we have in view."* That requires more than a piece of silver in the collection box and more than a cheque for a charitable institution. That requires an individual commitment to a way of thinking and feeling which will affect a man's personal relationships with every other human being, because every man has some need which requires love and understanding.

This is the same idea expressed by the Apostle Paul which has been rendered so poetically in the King James version of the New Testament: *"Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge: and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, . . . and though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity (i.e., love), it profiteth me nothing."*

Wayne Anderson, FCF, MPS
Tel: 613-634-3029 (H)
Cel: 613-453-7791
Alle Menschen werden Brueder
2B1 ASK1