

Charity as a Core of Our Craft (The Relevancy of Charity in the Masonic World II)

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My Brothers, I have had the great privilege and pleasure for more than 2 decades, to visit many Grand Lodges, in North America as well as in much of the rest of the world, and to see how Freemasonry operates over the better part of the globe. As you might expect, one of the most striking characteristics of it, is the similarity of its principals and precepts. It is quite evident that its basic philosophical reasons for existence are universal. This feature is the glue that holds it together, and has done so for centuries. The universality of Freemasonry on a world scale is totally dependent upon maintaining these principals and precepts. That is not to say that there has not been differences between, or variances within individual Grand Lodges, but Regular Freemasonry has not deviated from its basic philosophy.

One unexpected observation that I did find however was that the operational philosophies of Freemasonry did vary; dependent upon the part of the world in which it existed. The tenants of Freemasonry were ever present, but the forces driving it, made it relevant to the environment in which it existed. Jasper Ridley, in his recent book, *The Freemasons*, made the same observations, historically. His observations, however, tended more to define individual Grand Lodges, or limited geographical regions. The observations I made covered continents.

I found in Europe for example, that Freemasonry has retained much more of the philosophical qualities that characterized it in its early life. This is not too difficult to understand since its origin was in Europe, and there was a greater degree of stability existing due to the age of the countries, and therefore with a lesser stimulus to diverge. Hence, European Freemasonry displays a more philosophical form of Freemasonry than is found in the rest of the world.

In contrast to this philosophical style, Central America, and South America have a form of Freemasonry more driven by the sociological demands of its environment. It retains the basic tenants of Freemasonry, while its operational practices tend to take on a more idealistic and progressive approach in establishing the goals of the Craft, to meet the needs of the society in which it exists. Its idealism causes it to seek more

lofty goals than is generally found elsewhere in the Masonic world. Hence we find a more sociological form of Freemasonry.

While Mexico mirrors much of the sociological style, it does not seem to fit comfortably into it. Freemasonry there has a tendency to become more involved in the political factions of the country, and therefore is more political in style.

In North America we have lost much of the philosophical qualities by which the Craft is known, probably due to an acquired complacency coupled with a lack of a force driving it. Certainly it has been true in recent years. Perhaps this complacency is a result of an absence of the same social needs as those in the countries to our south. What we have evolved into however, is an organization that places much emphasis and effort on raising money and funding charities. The resultant recognizable image of Freemasonry in North America is one of being a charitable organization. Although charity is a core value of the Craft, it is not the core value. We have other core values that have crafted an organization the likes of which the world had never seen before, nor has it been matched since.

We as a North American Craft seem to have developed a driving need to raise money for charity, and as a result, I find myself out of step with much of North American leadership in this regard. I feel strongly that this mantle of charity with which we cloak North American Freemasonry, does a great disservice to the philosophical intent of the Craft, and has led to a general dilution of our influence in society.

There are many organizations designed for the specific purpose of promoting charitable objectives, but I know no other, whose professed purpose is to take good men and make them better. Doctor E. Scott Ryan in his book, *The Theology of Crime and the Paradox of Freedom*, observed, "the wonderful work of Masonic charities is by no means synonymous with the wonderment of Masonic spirituality--and that's a shame, when one considers how many fine charities there are and how few fine spiritualities there are". My brothers, think of how unique we were, how unique we are. Think of how much and for how long, we have altered the direction taken in that ongoing quest for civility in a civil society. Even most of the organizations modeled after us have long ago ceased to exist. There can be little doubt, my brothers that our success and survival rests upon the uniqueness that characterizes Freemasonry.

Before I go further, let me emphasize that I have absolutely no objection to Freemasonry's commitment to helping others. Indeed, it would be difficult to comprehend how we could involve good men, and avoid helping others. This is not, however, the reason for our existence,

and we depend too much upon this single feature to generate our image to society. We, therefore limit ourselves to niches that many other organizations have inhabited longer, and were designed to do better. And yet, long before we adopted this approach, we created more of an impact on the evolution of civil society and this world than any organization ever conceived by the mind of man. This has truly been the glowing accomplishment of Freemasonry, and is what historians are finally acknowledging about us today.

We have, in North America evolved into the world's greatest charitable organization, but my brothers, Freemasonry is not a Charity. It did not originate as a Charity, it did not function and survive as a Charity, it is not recognized by government agencies as a charity, and it certainly did not change the world as a Charity. Its avowed purpose is making good men better. By making good men better, we improve the quality of the man and therefore the quality of the world. But of what value will be our charitable nature if we fail to survive to support any Charity.

We readily admit that we are declining, not only in numbers, but also as a visual image in modern-day society. Even as our numbers are decreasing, even as our buildings are crumbling, even as the quality of our membership is waning, we continue to dedicate much of our effort to raising money for Charity. We cannot continue to concentrate most of our efforts on raising money to give away. We cannot buy admiration and respect, and my brothers; this is exactly what we are attempting to do. To be charitable is an admirable quality, but our charitable character must never cloud our singular most important purpose, to make good men better.

There is another consideration that it would behoove us to pause and deliberate upon. Dr. Ryan also made a very succinct observation when he stated, "if we become a Charity, which we are certainly tending toward, and the government assumes that role which it is tending toward, then our purpose for existence will no longer exist."

My brothers, history is littered with the remains of organizations, many patterned after Freemasonry, that were forced out of existence for the very reason that the government assumed the role for which these organizations existed. Take time my brothers, to look back in North America and its fraternalism. I was nothing short of astounded when I began to comprehend how many hundreds of fraternal organizations were created, existed, and died, many as a result of policy changes instituted by our government.

Freemasonry has not been exempt to these changes. This is one of the reasons why we may be less attractive to current generations than we were to those of the past. The need for brotherly love and dependence upon one another is not nearly as great today as it was in our not too distant past, simply because today the public is taxed to do what we did for free for generations. The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania for many years operated the Patton School for orphan boys. We prided ourselves in the quality of the young men we were graduating, some becoming significant leaders in society. Notwithstanding we were forced to close the school when the government took over the responsibility by providing foster homes at taxpayer's expense. The fact that we did it better, and at no cost to the taxpayer was not relevant.

David T. Beito notes in his book, from mutual Aid to the Welfare State, that "fraternities have declined in influence since the depression, especially as providers of mutual aid and philanthropy" and that "We have yet to find a successful modern analog to the lodge". He also observed that "we were moving from the character of Fraternalism to that of Paternalism", and "In order to attract members the leadership was willing to de-emphasize their commitments and abandoned the qualities that had made them distinctive". Please note that last comment, my Brothers, for he may be quite probably hitting upon a major cause of the decline of the Craft, both quantitatively as well as qualitatively. He definitely reinforced, with that observation, the contention that the leadership lost sight of the qualities that made Freemasonry, Freemasonry.

Those charitable organizations that have survived, have survived with intent toward a specific charitable objective. Freemasonry and its affiliated organizations, however, have taken on the support of so many different charities, that most of our members are not even aware of them. Do you know, for example, that in addition to our Masonic homes for children and elderly, we support in some form, research or assistance programs involving the diseases of cancer, arteriosclerosis, heart disease, muscular dystrophy, muscular atrophy, retinal disease, tuberculosis, arthritis, lung disease, cerebral palsy, leukemia, diabetes, aphasia, dyslexia, schizophrenia, kidney disease, and that certainly does not cover all. We also have research hospitals, we provide dental care for the handicapped, we deliver food to the poor, we provide hearing dogs for the deaf and we support major scholarship programs. I am confident that if it were known, there are probably many other charitable projects undertaken by our subordinate lodges and affiliated bodies.

Now, if we don't know what we support, I wonder how many outside of the Craft know? They do know, however, about The Cancer Society, The Heart Disease Foundation, The Muscular Dystrophy

Foundation, and all the other charities that were designed for the specific purpose of collecting funds just for that disease. What we are doing, is contributing our efforts and funds to support charities that will get the credit for spending those funds.

How did Freemasonry in North America develop into the world's greatest Charity? There are several factors that probably influenced this evolution, but we must remember, that according to many scholars, our philanthropic character was taken on in the Middle Ages and prior to our becoming a Speculative Craft. During the construction of the great cathedrals, the stonemason's set-aside funds to care for their injured members and their families and widows. Even today, it is still "known" that, right or wrong, "masons take care of their own". Note, however, this was not a public charity; it was taking care of our own.

For many people on the earth the daily struggle to survive supersedes any consideration of what they might do for others. The very concept of Charity is nonexistent, but when Freemasonry came to America it found a new soul in Charity. Unfortunately over time it lost sight of the realization of our purpose, that of improving the world through the improvement of the man. Our long-range vision had become drastically shortened and significantly clouded. We are now not seeing the forest for the trees. We have shrouded ourselves in short-term and less significant functions and lost our understanding of those great potential achievements that the Craft is capable of, and that the World deserves. We are not only failing to recognize the impact of our past, but also the potential impact of our future.

I would suspect by now that most of you sitting here have developed the opinion that I'm opposed to Freemasonry's involvement with Charity. Nothing could be further from the truth. The charitable nature of Freemasonry has been an integral part of it, as I have noted, since prior to its conversion into its speculative form. Without its concern for its members as well as for society in general, it could not have become what it has. A Brotherhood of Men under the Fatherhood of God would be a lifeless shell indeed, if it lacked the essence of a charitable concern for our fellowman.

The concern I express is not what we do for Charity, but what we do not do to fulfill our purpose because of the concentration of effort we put on charity. We might argue that by supporting charities we are making men better, and this is not untrue, but if this is all we make of Freemasonry today we are failing our heritage. My brothers, Freemasonry made this world, and did so by providing much more than charitable gifts. It made men, better men than it took in one man at a time.

It is imperative that we place, and keep in proper perspective the relationship of charity to Freemasonry. If our charitable objectives, in any way distract us from the primary purpose of the Craft, it must not be tolerated.

Freemasonry in North America is at a critical crossroads in its life. We the leaders of today are being forced to determine what it is that we really want it to be and where we really want it to go. For over thirty years we have declined in numbers and reduced our image in society. We have not reduced the loss nor improved our image by increasing the amount of monies we give it charity, although lord knows we tried.

The time has come for us to look at ourselves, to become more introspective, to realize that if we fail to look out for ourselves, we may very well lose our ability to look out for others. Rest assured, there will be no one looking out for us when we need help. It did not happen in the past, it will not happen in the future. Regretfully, for all that we have meant to the world, for all that we have given, there have been considerably more of the citizenry of the world looking for us to fail than to succeed.

We must become more cognizant of just how important we have been in the development of civil society. There is perhaps no organization more ignorant of its past, than is North American Freemasonry. We cannot afford to allow ignorance to consume us while we concentrate our efforts on programs that do not fall within the purview of our reason for existence. We cannot continue to allow our buildings to become eyesores by which the public may judge us while we use our resources for other purposes. We cannot continue to emphasize the need of more members, instead of more quality members. And, we must generate an image so that those outside of us will see us as more than a source of funding for other organizations.

One of Freemasonry's greatest charitable accomplishments has been through the efforts of our members rather than through the contribution of our dollars, and those efforts were stimulated through the teaching of Masonic ideals and the encouragement for Freemasons to participate. Thus, we fulfill our charitable commitments while fulfilling our professed philosophical purpose. We take good men and make them better. If we can fill that purpose and continue to be the world's greatest Charity, then so be it. If a choice must be made, however, let us never fail to make good men better. That is more than our duty, that is our privilege, and it is our purpose.