

FROM THE ORGAN LOFT

BROTHERLY LOVE

"Brotherly love" is of prime importance in Masonic practice and life. But what is it really, and how do we realize such an elusive value in our lives? How do we make it one of our most cherished personal traits?

The term, "Brother," obviously implies a foundational familial relationship. The word "Fraternity" is based on the Latin "frater," or "brother." Webster defines fraternity as: "*A group of people associated or formally organized for a common purpose, interest, or pleasure; as a fraternal order.*" Masonry has always been a fraternity, or brotherhood, and thus Masons are a real secondary family. There are a couple of Franklin-like "wise sayings" that help illuminate this idea.

First, "*Friends are the family we choose for ourselves.*"

For reasons as varied as each and every individual Mason around the globe, we all decided of our own free will and accord to reach out to a Lodge to begin and complete the process of initiation. For many different, hopefully well-intentioned reasons we choose to expand our family circle by joining the larger Masonic fraternity. In a deeper sense, instead of accepting the initial birth/baptism of our human infancy as the only way to a deeper understanding of the Universe and our part in it, we become rebirthed/rebaptized as an adult into a larger family, of our choice, through the Masonic rituals and obligations we experience and take freely. Truly, our family grows exponentially as does the gradual growth of our character through the repeated Masonic focus on seeking light and knowledge.

Second, there is an ancient Chinese proverb, "*No family can hang out a sign saying, 'All is well here.'*"

Enough said, except that human nature has been and remains essentially the same throughout history. Can any of us (save the fictional "Stepford" community - itself grossly dysfunctional) say that our own personal family is without any, even small dysfunction, in some generation?

So, Masons are a chosen family, and, honestly viewed, sometimes dysfunctional...just like everyone else's family! But that leads to a fascinating peek into the possible meaning of Brotherly Love, why we are here on this planet in the first place, and how the Masonic ideal of "Making good men better" is better understood.

Stepping out on an ontological (the nature of being) limb, at this point in my life I feel a greater freedom to explore new and different beliefs than the ones I parroted as a younger person. Star-Trek-like, I am now choosing to - boldly go where I haven't had the nerve to go before. Here are a few Hermetic ideas I am exploring:

- Earth is at least one school in the Universe, perhaps the most difficult - an upper-level Graduate University as it were. It is said that only the bravest souls choose to come here, of our own free will and accord, to progress through several lives from "grade" to "grade" for the purpose of learning the most important lessons in the Universe.
- In the Yin-Yang way of equilibrium, our earthly experience(s) present balances and imbalances of good and bad for the deeper purpose of our characters gaining the truest and highest psychological, emotional, and spiritual growth.

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- We "graduate" when we learn to truly love, returning to God because God is Love. God=Love=Empathetic Growth=more Love=God.
- As we study Masonry and its foundations in the Ancient Mystery traditions of initiation, we are encouraged to consider that, instead of God being an old man with a white beard sitting somewhere in the clouds, God is ever in and around us. What/who-ever God is to us individually, a spark of God's divine nature is what each of our souls really is. Every single living soul is a direct burning spark of and from the Ultimate Divine power of creation. That divine spark is our very person-hood housed in a shell: the bodies we are given by our parents. For God to continue to be and grow in Love, our unique spark intentionally breaks away ("the fall"?), finally learns its lessons, graduates as an even more loving soul, and returns to the place whence it came. We again become invested with that of which our soul had been divested, yet ever richer and more beautiful for the experience. If we do not learn our lessons this time around, we return to relearn them, again voluntarily.

But, what of the people we encounter who are not loving; the ones who intentionally cut us off in traffic or in the grocery line; cheat us; demean, devalue, invalidate, or hurt us? How can they possibly possess the same divine spark? What is their role in the Divine purpose? Therein lies a prime spiritual secret.

But first, consider the nature of school and growth. How would we ever grow if $2+2=4$ was the only equation we were ever taught, or if "Dick and Jane" was the only book we ever read? That level is age-appropriate for toddlers and early school, but there is no growth if we are not continually challenged throughout our educational process. Our mind and heart grow in stages only if we are given new and appropriately more difficult information to process at each stage. We may resist new information, feeling it is too hard for us, but at some point we must face our homework and apply our God-given ability to learn if we are ever to graduate. Perhaps this is a key to a much deeper understanding of life here, why we experience both good and bad, and how that produces growth and love.

One profoundly important spiritual teacher in history, Yeshua of Nazareth, taught his disciples to - "*Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.*" Why did he make this extremely difficult value to attain so central to living a healthy emotional and spiritual life? Because he knew the secret of life. Loving only your friends or only the people that are good to you is like only learning $2+2=4$ all your life. We would never grow if love were that easy. Like any good structure, our living metal must be tested to strengthen and build on. That is why we *must* learn to love our enemies; they provide the opportunity for our ultimate goal - to graduate and return to the source of our being; to regain paradise lost, to rejoin "Eden." What irony! Our enemies provide our greatest chance to grow, to get back,...IF we learn how to love them! This is where fortitude, temperance, prudence, justice, and mercy come into the most important play.

Even more ironic, our greatest enemies are sometimes - our very own family (something that same spiritual teacher said would be true)! Face it, our families know how to push our buttons - because they put them there! As good as many of our families were to us in many ways, we can all probably recall the pain and frustrations of our childhood. We know how our adult life can be filled with the internal struggle to get past those deeply seeded hurts, if we ever actually do, in

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this life. The family therapist/author, John Bradshaw, has written many excellent books on healing the dysfunctional family "systems" we grew up in. Recall the ancient Chinese proverb.

This brings us back to our chosen Masonic family. Masons are a human family, therefore inherently dysfunctional to some degree. At times it is hard to extend the "brotherly love" we profess and commit to in our obligations. But that is the genius of it! We make the conscious choice to obligate ourselves to other brothers who may frustrate the H.E. double toothpicks out of us. Why, on Earth, would we do that? Why struggle with our Masonic relationships; with people who say and do the wrong things at times, perhaps too many times? They aren't being "Masonic," so why not simply leave the fraternity, or at least express our own anger towards those who anger us? Because we would be giving up our own opportunity to grow in Grace as well as helping *them* grow as they experience our love! Along with our wives and personal family, our chosen fraternal "brothers" may just be the people we *must* learn the most important lessons of life and love from! These very people can have a profound effect on our deepest growth if we let them and if we see them (everyone) as sparks of the divine, no matter what their behavior. We must love and accept them for what and where *they* are; being at some perhaps younger stage of their own journey in this Universal College called Earth!

Does a brother madden you? Love him - he may have problems much harder than yours that he cannot express. Does a brother make you feel inadequate, even unintentionally? Love him - he may not yet have the emotional ability to comprehend his words or actions. Has a brother let you down? Love him - he may be somewhat weaker than his stronger exterior personality leads you to believe he is. Has a brother deeply offended you or someone you know? Find some way, *any* way to love him, all the while realizing that the difficult test that brother presents means - you are ready to take it, and pass!

Consistently practicing true, forgiving, grace-filled, empathetic, God-centered Love is probably the hardest test we take in this life, especially in the face of a wrong said or done. We must resist our natural immature tendencies to be impatient or to retaliate negatively, and that takes enormous emotional skill, patience, and empathy. But those healthy qualities are the very things our soul, our rough Masonic "Ashlar," is here to perfect in preparation for rejoining the most beautiful Universal temple in the "Kingdom of Heaven." The thing to remember when tested is this: The harder the test, the closer to graduation you may be!

In that spirit, bring the tests on, and here's to the daily practice of true "Brotherly Love."

FRATERNALLY,

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