

"Among Whom No Contention Should Ever Exist..."

by **Sir Knight Tom Lewis, Jr.**

"Those who find themselves in a position of power reveal their true nature in the way they treat those who are under their power. People who abuse you and yours when you are powerless to defend yourself will do so again whenever it becomes possible. Expect this of them, for it is the revelation of their true nature which will no more change than a leopard's spots."

It's important to recognize that the actions, decisions, and edicts of individual Grand Masters, both in the United States and elsewhere, do not necessarily reflect the feelings, attitudes, and opinions of the majority of individual brothers in the jurisdictions over which they preside. In much the same way, the actions of our elected local and national officials do not necessarily conform to the wishes and attitudes of a majority of the voters who elected them. This often results in repercussions and unforeseen consequences for the hapless constituents. Some would advance the argument that both bodies are out of touch with their constituents and feel empowered to act as they wish. Hopefully, no one would expect any man in any situation to act contrary to his personal conscience and beliefs, but neither do we expect our elected officials to range so far afield from the wishes and values of the majority whom they profess to serve as some have in the past and others continue to do. Unfortunately, when those we elect do go off on an extreme tangent to the field of what we consider proper, however much their constituents may wish they could be quickly removed from office for their misdeeds, we generally have to tolerate their self-importance while awaiting the next election cycle.

We seem to be experiencing a rash lately of Masonic heads letting the fact that they are the ultimate Masonic authority in their particular jurisdiction overpower their judgment to the extent that their personal opinions and prejudices become Masonic law in their own minds, whether or not actual Masonic law supports their positions. In a perfect world, Masonic Grand Masters would be near paragons of Masonic principles and virtues, steeped in knowledge of Masonic law and immune to the temptations of power. Many are, but in the increasingly imperfect world in which we live, we are sometimes forced to work with the materials at hand, which often prove themselves to be somewhat less than we would wish. Recently the actions of the (now former) Grand Master of the Grande Loge Nationale Francaise brought about the collapse of the GLNF and brought down Masonic punishment on thousands of innocent French brothers, the results of which will now take years to repair. We have seen power struggles between Masonic Grand Masters and Shrine Imperial Potentates cause grief for thousands of the brothers that trusted them to lead their respective bodies, resulting in rifts that may never heal. We have seen a Grand Master expel the Past Grand Master who was his predecessor who then filed

suit against the Grand Lodge in civil court. We have seen certain minority forms of religion which are generally accepted by Masonic jurisdictions across the globe banned from Masonic membership in one jurisdiction in the United States. The newly disenfranchised brothers affected are deeply hurt and have nowhere to turn from which to seek redress. There is an ongoing national debate over recognition of the regularity of Prince Hall Masonry and a movement by jurisdictions on both sides to coerce the others by threatening withdrawal of recognition, even though the regularity of the subject jurisdictions is not and never has been in doubt.

It's an easy thing, when you find yourself in a position where you have power over others and no one to oppose you to flex your muscles, but doing that is forgetting that with power comes responsibility and the more power, the more responsibility. We have all seen, both nationally and locally, leaders whose leadership style bears more resemblance to that of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini than that of Washington, Jefferson, and Lafayette. We are all painfully aware from national politics as well as more local experiences how power can be abused. I would like to share a story I heard a few years ago about the proper use of power.

Charles had been in the military a long time, and when he got out, he decided to pursue two goals, to become a registered nurse and to become a Mason. He petitioned a Lodge, took his Entered Apprentice degree in California, and started his nursing training which brought him to Johnson City, Tennessee. He had already applied and gotten permission for the Lodge in Johnson City to confer his Fellowcraft and Master Mason degrees as "courtesy work." Then life threw Charles a ninety mile per hour curve ball. It was discovered that Charles had prostate cancer that had already metastasized into his bone marrow. His chances of survival were nil. Charles was out of options and out of time. His greatest wish was to die a Master Mason and to have a Masonic funeral, but his condition precluded the normal process. He simply didn't have twenty-eight days to wait between the remaining degrees. Added to that, the pain medication just didn't leave Charles the clarity of mind necessary to retain the memory work. That's when the Tennessee Grand Lodge entered the story.

The Grand Master of Tennessee got with the Grand Master of California to get Charles a demit from the Lodge in California. The timing was right, and the Lodge in California voted that night at their business meeting to grant the demit and faxed the necessary paperwork to Tennessee. The Lodge in Johnson City voted two nights later to accept Charles by affiliation into their Lodge. Then Most Worshipful Grand Master Jerry Hanson traveled nearly five hundred miles, from Memphis in the southwest corner of Tennessee to Johnson City near the northeast corner, to make Charles a "Mason at Sight" - one of the ageless prerogatives reserved for Grand Masters. A conference room at the Veteran Administration Hospital in Johnson City was secured, and while Masons and other well-wishers in wheelchairs waited outside the room, the Grand Master conferred the Fellowcraft and Master Mason degrees on Charles. There wasn't a dry eye in the room. Brother Charles was presented with his white lambskin apron as well as a Masonic ring, both of which Charles requested to be buried wearing. Charles also requested that the Master of

the Johnson City Lodge perform his Masonic funeral. Charles told the Grand Master: "You've given me a vacation from my destiny." Thirteen days later, Brother Charles's feet too soon reached the end of life's toilsome journey, and from his nerveless grasp dropped forever the working tools of life. Thanks to his brothers and a Grand Master going the extra mile (or five hundred miles) he had his dying wish fulfilled to stand before the throne of God as a Mason. This is what Masons do for each other. This is how a Masonic Grand Master should exert the power he is given.

Brethren, whether a Worshipful Master of a Lodge or Most Worshipful Grand Master of a Grand Lodge, a leader is only a leader if people follow him, and a good leader must always ask himself if he is being followed because he is respected or because he is feared, whether his followers believe in his vision or are just seeking his favors. We are taught from the time we enter the Lodge that the highest rank in Masonry is Master Mason. We are also taught that we are a sacred band of friends and brothers among whom no contention should ever exist. Every Mason, from the youngest Entered Apprentice who stands in the northeast corner to the Grand Master who presides in the Grand East, represents that point within a circle and must use the symbolic compasses to define the boundaries beyond which his own desires and passions cannot be allowed to drive him. When you come to a position of power and then allow your personal opinions to supplant the rule of law, you become in effect a dictator. Dictatorial abuse of power and authority is not and should not ever be the hallmark of a Masonic leader at any level. Masonic leaders should strive to be living examples of Masonic principles, and certainly Grand Masters should strive to be paragons of Masonry. It has become apparent that even our beloved fraternity is unfortunately not immune to the axiom that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The issue is not with Masonry but with certain individual Masons. We must each expect our leaders to emulate Most Worshipful Brother Jerry Hanson and those like him and reject those who are not.

Despots do not foster brotherly love. Of necessity, they have always suppressed it.

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