

Themes of Freemasonry Why it Works

by Sir Knight Kerry A. Shirts

Joseph Fort Newton noted many years ago that Masonic history is not only about learning the past but continuing to search because things get overlooked. Back in his day, he brought it up to date with this comment:

"But we must also make research into the present meaning, power, and application of Freemasonry the better to know what our great order of builders ought to do and can do for the making of a greater and better America. The philanthropies of the Craft are munificent and its opportunities are magnificent!"¹

He focused on America, which is what the majority of Freemasons in America do naturally, but it applies to a world setting as well. How this works is interestingly pointed out in The Short Talk Bulletin for May 1925.

"Freemasonry is not a thing; it is not an organization, a system of men and officers, of lodges and Grand Lodges. The organization, the system, the men, the officers, and the Grand Lodges are but the vehicle through which Freemasonry expresses itself. A man might be the sole inhabitant of a lonely land where there was no brother, no Lodge, no Grand Lodge, no dues, and no Masonic work to do and yet carry Freemasonry in his heart. If there were two in that lonely land, Freemasonry could find a way to express itself, for Freemasonry is coin of the heart and therefore can only be paid to the heart. What you can do for Freemasonry then is largely what you can do for your own and for your brother's heart."²

I was asked recently why on earth I had joined Freemasonry. "What on earth were you thinking Shirts?" I responded to the question by saying that we have two choices in life. You can choose to hang out with the bad gangs, or you can choose to hang out with the good ones. I chose the good ones, because I really do enjoy being happy; working to help others; making lives better, more meaningful, and more fulfilled; and sharing happiness, light, and knowledge. It's that simple. Freemasonry is not an office, a prestige to wear lightly, being given honors to flaunt to the world, but it is a work. It is an internal work and attitude to determine to make oneself better and to share that betterment with others in a loving, kind, peaceful, and good way. It does not exist so that one can receive compensation and glory, but so that one can be good for goodness sake and be helpful, kind, and loving, because that is one's nature.

"Freemasonry is not magic; it is moral science. In the Lodge we are taught that we must learn the way and will of God, not in order to use Him for our ends but the better to be used by Him for His ends. The difference may seem slight at first, but it is really the difference between a true and false faith, between religion and superstition. Much of the religion of today is sheer superstition in which magic takes the place of morals. In Masonry, morality has first place, and no religion is valid without it. As might be expected, a Rite so old, so universal, so profoundly simple, has had many meanings read

into it. The more the better. A great teacher said of the Bible, 'the more meanings we find in it the richer we are.' Some find in this old and simple Rite a parable of the history of Masonry itself which had its origin in the East and journeyed to the West, bringing the oldest wisdom of the world to bless and guide the newest lands."³

The mixing of ideas from all over the world, it seems to me, has benefitted the world. Our communications capabilities today have given the world vast opportunities to learn what they never could have learned a mere seventy years ago. Rather than feeling threatened by the ideas, if one adjusts one's thinking to gaining a broader context, a more sure word of life as it were, one can benefit greatly from this sharing of technology, knowledge, and cultures. This is one of, if not the greatest, power of Freemasonry. All come together alike as brothers no matter what religion, race, or creed. As Illustrious Brother Frederick H. Stevens noted, "Those who have dreams or visions without a definite plan are often failures; those whose minds change like the wind will never receive plaudits as successful men." To make our dreams reality requires hard work. Otherwise we will never reach the goal we are striving for, the better life. The better life or the supreme good is and should be the continuous life's work of our Masonry. Brother Albert Pike's *Morals and Dogma* gives us many splendid ideas, and to sum them all up, the lessons taught are always to elevate the basic goodness of man.⁴

We have been taught over and over again that for the good life, the better life, "the key is education."⁵ Again, "I want to impress upon your minds that Freemasonry is nothing if it is not concerned with spiritual values, the moral and spiritual growth of individuals, and thereby the spiritual impact it makes, or should make, on the community in which it exists. In Masonry that guiding principle is a spiritual one: "to make good men better in the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God. Express it as you will."⁶

Many great figures of the past have endeavored to bring light to mankind. One such example was Goethe who was "a devout member of our gentle craft."⁷ The story is related in *The Short Talk Bulletin* that while Goethe lay dying, and everyone was trying to make him more comfortable, he made a request. "Open the window and let in more light!" The last request of a great poet-Mason is the first request of every Mason. If one were asked to sum up the meaning of Masonry in one word, the only word equal to the task is 'Light!' From its first lesson to its last lecture, in every degree and every symbol, the mission of Masonry is to bring the light of God into the life of man. It has no other aim, knowing that when the light shines, the truth will be revealed."⁸

"The whole meaning of initiation of course, is an analogy of the birth, awakening, and growth of the soul, its discovery of the purpose of life, and the nature of the world in which it is to be lived. The lodge is the world as it was thought to be in the olden time with its square surface and canopy of sky, its dark North, and its radiant East, its center an altar of obligation and prayer. The initiation, by the same token, is our advent from the darkness of prenatal gloom into the light of moral truth and spiritual faith, out of lonely isolation into a network of fellowships and relationships, out of a merely physical into a human and moral order."⁹

This is the foundation of the "good gang" I have joined. The mission, theme, and work of it all lead to greater light, more knowledge, goodness, and peace among men. That kind of vision that we dream is something worth living for, participating in, and enjoying - good brotherhood, fellowship, and working together.

End notes

1 Joseph Fort Newton, "For the Good of the Order," Short Talk Bulletin, December, 1923: 10.

2 The Short Talk Bulletin, "What---?", May, 1925: 2-3

3 The Short Talk Bulletin, February, 1927: 3-4

4 Ill. Frederic H. Stevens, 33° "The Better Life," The Short Talk Bulletin, October, 1976: 3

5 Ill. Brother Aemil Pouler, 33° "Freemasonry and the Future," The Short Talk Bulletin, September, 1975: 6

6 Conrad Hahn, "Planning for Spiritual Growth," The Short Talk Bulletin, October, 1974: 3

7 The Short Talk Bulletin, October, 1927: 3

8 The Short Talk Bulletin, October, 1927: 3. Cf. The Short Talk Bulletin, "The Challenge of Freemasonry," (August, 1974: 3) - "Man has an instinctive awareness of higher things, and aspires to attain them. If life is to have any depth of meaning or richness, it must operate not only on this horizontal plane, but also in a vertical plane." See also The Short Talk Bulletin, "The Altar," (February, 1924: 4), "In all religions of Antiquity, and especially among the peoples who worshipped the Light, it was the usage of both priests and people to pass around the Altar, following the course of the sun - from the East, by way of the South, to the West - singing hymns of praise as part of their worship. Their ritual was thus an allegorical picture of the truth which underlies all religion - that man must live on earth in harmony with the rhythm and movement of heaven."

9 The Short Talk Bulletin, November, 1923: 2.

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Knight Templar Magazine Index - ARCHIVE of ARTICLES

HOME	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------

[Top](#)