

Chapter 10

Not By Bread Alone

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Go all out for materialism. Raise money; spend it. Build temples, institutions. Subsidize, endow. Whatever can be had by writing a check, get it.

AN OLD LEGEND tells of an imaginary conversation in which Satan was taunting the angels with claims of superiority. The angels announced proudly that a way had been found to put evil to flight. "We shall plant lofty ideals and challenging principles in the hearts of men," they told him. But Satan only laughed the louder. "You never can defeat me that way," he said. "First I shall get men to create organizations to propagate your ideals; then they shall establish institutions to express them, and victory shall be mine!"

It has been quite a long while since I heard my friend, M.W. Dr. Thomas S. Roy, Past Grand Master of Massachusetts, relate that legend. I have seen nothing in the intervening years to lessen its impact.

"The achievements of yesterday were the results of seeing and using Freemasonry as a force, and not just serving it as a form," Dr. Roy went on to declare. "A force is that which can be used; a form is that which must be served. The danger in an organization such as ours is that while it starts with ideals and principles, the organization may become the greatest enemy of those ideals and principles . . . What happens is that the idea creates the organization and the organization chokes the idea. We can become so concerned about keeping an organization going that we forget the ideas and ideals that gave it birth. We begin by letting a great ideal force our thinking and acting into new channels, and we end by serving an organization."

JUST WHEN I BEGAN to be aware of a materialistic trend in Freemasonry I do not recall, but I remember very well how it happened. It was soon after I became Grand Secretary. Every summer several Lodges would celebrate their centennials. It was my privilege to be a guest at most of those observances. On each occasion a history of the Lodge would be read or distributed. After awhile I began to notice a striking similarity in those historical sketches—they contained little or nothing except a recital of all the tiresome details connected with the building of a temple.

Even then I was unable to diagnose the illness to my own satisfaction. One day I said to a friend of mine, "Why is it that nine Lodge histories out of every ten, with a thrilling story to relate, tell almost nothing except to describe the building of the temple?"

"Because," replied my friend, "most human beings are materialistic in their thinking, and Masons are pretty much like other men. They cannot comprehend anything that cannot be seen and felt."

Rather sad, I said to myself, because such a philosophy is the very antithesis of

everything Freemasonry has tried to teach them!

And then one day I discovered the Worshipful Master of at least one Lodge was thinking on the same subject. First he swore me to secrecy; then he told me his story. He had arranged a great homecoming occasion in his Lodge. It was to begin with a banquet and conclude with a ball. The ladies were invited. A high-ranking Masonic leader was engaged to deliver the address. "The occasion was perfect for a great inspirational feast," the Worshipful Master told me, "but what did our speaker talk about? He went into great detail describing a construction program that could have been of interest only to a gathering of building contractors, and ended by pleading for money to finance the job."

NOW, OF COURSE, I must pause at this point to explain as patiently as I can that I am not opposed to temples and institutions. (The radical statements some of my Brethren read into my articles never ceases to amaze me!) No one enjoys and admires a beautiful temple more than I—provided it is a temple and not a mausoleum, and provided it houses a Lodge which is doing the work of Freemasonry and not acting as a caretaker whose only function is to maintain its Status Symbol.

Yes, and I never fail to be thrilled to see the great heart of Freemasonry attempting to express its benevolent concerns through an institution, and I yield to no man in loyalty to the institutions maintained by our Craft—provided the work of Freemasonry is not confined to the maintenance of an institution.

The point I am trying to make is the same point I have emphasized repeatedly in recent months: I have no patience with the fenced-in concept of Freemasonry which seizes upon one facet of our Craft and magnifies it out of proportion to its importance. The beauty in a mosaic is in the whole—not in a single, tiny, irregular piece of colored glass. That is the picture we should be always seeking to convey to our candidates and our Brethren. When our single-track minds are able to see in Freemasonry no more than a temple or institution, or a service club whose members wear aprons, or a vehicle for raising funds for someone's pet hobby, or cozy "togetherness" with the ladies, or cheap publicity-seeking wing-dings, or a political pressure group, then we are failing in our job.

Hence, I can rejoice when a new temple becomes a *means* to an end, but I have only pity when a new temple becomes the *end* itself—the sole reason for the existence of a Lodge. And believe me, there are far too many of the latter kind.

THINK WITH ME on these points:

1. The worship of *Things* can serve as a death sentence to a Lodge. Perhaps my great interest in Indiana's Masonic history has caused me to be more aware of trends than I might be otherwise. Over the years I have read hundreds of pages of quaint Lodge minutes. The history of one Lodge in particular haunts me. Year after year the Brethren persevered under conditions that would cause a present day Lodge to give up almost overnight. During years in which membership averaged about 45, their expenditures for local Masonic relief ranged from \$10 to \$25 per month—and that, in those days, was a sizable sum. *But they did the work of Freemasonry in the community.* Then the fat years

came. They erected a large temple, and, like Rip Van Winkle, settled down to decades of sleep. Nothing worth mentioning has happened since.

Now do not try to tell me the neighborhood deteriorated, because it has not. And do not try to argue that if the Brethren just had a parking lot, and air conditioning, and no steps to climb, all would be well. It isn't that simple. The unpleasant fact is that the real Lodge *died* three-quarters of a century ago—only the dry shell remains. It died because the Brethren were interested only in material *Things*, and when they achieved that which they coveted, there was nothing further to do.

2. For however pleasant and attractive a new building may be, it guarantees nothing. I have seen temple building projects which served as an open door to renewed interest, activity and zeal, and which gave the Brethren a new conception of the work of Freemasonry. And then I have seen the Brethren nestle down in their comfortable new quarters in self-centered seclusion and do nothing except pay the insurance premiums, watch for roof leaks and see that the walls were repointed. Saddest sight of all, I believe, is the magnificent temple erected 30 or 40 years ago with great joy and exultation, and which now has become cold as a refrigerator and quiet as a sepulchre.

The theory that a new temple out at the edge of town somewhere will give a Lodge the resurgence it needs is getting the cart before the horse. The resurgence had better come first, or the heart's desire, once acquired, will be no more than a lavish museum to house relics of past glory.

3. Things alone do not solve problems; they only create new ones. If I have been reading history correctly, there must have been a time when the work of Freemasonry was regarded as a *necessity*; comfortable quarters and monumental institutions were a luxury to be enjoyed after the Brethren had discharged their primary obligations, if any money remained. Today, all too often the situation is reversed. The comfortable temple and the monumental institution are regarded as necessities; the primary obligations of Freemasonry are something to be cared for when nothing else remains to be done, if any money is left.

WE LIKE TO BOAST about the Good Old Days in American Freemasonry when every man who was anyone in the community was a Mason, and the Lodge met in *rented quarters* (ghastly thought!) above the hardware store, with no air conditioning and no paved parking lot. But does it ever occur to us that those modest physical facilities may have had a direct relationship to the prestige and effectiveness enjoyed by the Craft to an extent that never has been equalled? Perhaps the Lodge was doing the work of Freemasonry in those days and not pouring all its energies and substance into the maintenance of a costly plant.

Take old Brotherly Love Lodge, for example. By all standards of the present day, Brotherly Love a century ago was a failure. It had only a few members—20 to 25, perhaps, and by the time the membership reached 40 the Brethren felt it was time to organize a new Lodge. They met in that horrid upstairs room—long flight of steps to climb; terribly warm up there in summer, too.

Well, now that Brotherly Love has moved out on its five-acre tract as far from human beings as possible, and has erected its glorified country club complete with everything except a bar, *has it regained the prestige and respect, the interest and loyalty and devotion it once enjoyed?*

Now that it has the best that can be had in brick and stone, stainless steel and glass, aluminum and vinyl tile—all the *Things* that can be seen and touched—*has it arrived at the summit of success?*

Now that it has a huge, cold gymnasium-like Lodge hall where five per cent of its members can sit and stare at each other across a broad expanse of costly carpet, I ask you, *has it solved its problems, or has it merely housed them in more elegant surroundings?*

Now that it is comfortably air-conditioned and there are no steps to climb, and now that three of its five acres are paved with blacktop so the five per cent can park their cars, *is the Lodge stronger and healthier thereby?*

IN THE LUSH surroundings of their big Status Symbol are the Brethren more keenly aware of the opportunities for benevolence in their own community, and do they seize such opportunities, or is that something that is pushed aside year after year with the excuse that the debt must be paid first, and then more comforts installed, and then something else?

And after the big Status Symbol is completed and dedicated, do the Brethren then come flocking back to their Lodge with renewed zeal? If they do, I haven't heard about it.

4. A materialistic Freemasonry is a Freemasonry with no message, no challenge, no power. One reason, I suppose, that our Masonic Brethren have become so obsessed in their devotion to *Things* is that almost everyone is doing it. Even religious organizations which used to preach that man shall not live by bread alone are taking a new line these days. It says, in effect, "Let's get our bread from the oven first, and then we'll talk about the Bread of Life." It did my heart good to read of a New York lawyer and lay theologian who arises boldly to challenge the worship of *Things*.¹ If the Gospel cannot be preached to the hungry until they are fed, as the mission romanticists claim, he says,

"then this is no Gospel with any saving power, this is no Word of God which has authority over the power of death. The gospel is a Word which is exactly addressed to men in this world in their destitution and hunger and sickness and travail. The church must trust the gospel enough to come among the poor with nothing to offer the poor except the power to apprehend and the courage to reveal the Word of God."

TO THAT I WOULD ADD a fervent amen. And by way of paraphrasing the courageous layman I would observe that if present-day Freemasonry has nothing to offer beyond the erection of temples and the establishment of more and more institutions, then it has nothing to offer that a hundred other organizations could not do as well. If we have grown so prosperous and fat and lazy that there is nothing further to do except revel in our Status Symbols and create more Status Symbols, then we have ceased to possess anything that is vital. If we can worship only *Things*, and if the only solution we have for

our problems is more *Things*, then we might as well set the date for the funeral rites, for we are dead even though we may be breathing still.

5. The worship of *Things* is a denial of the entire philosophy of Freemasonry. It is our

own fault that we have gone overboard for materialism. We proclaim a challenging philosophy in our rituals and we repudiate it in our business meetings. We tell our Brethren how Freemasonry's grand design is to erect a moral edifice within the heart of a man, and then we assure him that all he has to do is to write a check and that will discharge his personal and charitable obligations to the Craft in full for the year ending December 31.

"**LET'S UNSHACKLE** the spirit of Freemasonry!" cries M.W. Conrad Hahn, another good friend of mine, in a *Short Talk Bulletin* (July 1964) published by the Masonic Service Association. M.W. Brother Hahn goes to Emerson for a cogent text: "*Every spirit makes its house, but afterwards the house confines the spirit.*" Then he makes this thoughtful observation:

"The more we have organized Masonic groups and activities, the more we have institutionalized our benevolent projects and charity, and the more we have set up programs and criteria for evaluating them, the more concerned and disturbed we seem to become over the results of our fraternal activities. May it be that we have concentrated our energies so largely on things, on the means for achieving our goals, on techniques rather than ends, that we have bound up the true spirit of Freemasonry to the point of ineffectuality?"

We had better think it through. Our great concern for *Things* has provided us with some beautiful buildings that today would serve just as well, or better, as crypts in a cemetery. They have not solved our problems; they have only created new ones. The heart of every Mason almost misses a beat at the sight of large and spacious institutions maintained by our Craft—and yet, if we are realistic we know that these, too, have not solved our problems; they too are creating new ones. If we are truthful with ourselves we must admit that the greater the emphasis on centralized charity, the less the attention to charity on the local level where it really counts.

We had better be giving a little more thought to the true purpose and mission of Freemasonry or our days of effectiveness will be few. Either we should teach our candidates and our members that *Things* are not the measure of the work of Freemasonry or we should rewrite our rituals to eliminate all reference to temples within the hearts of men.

Man shall not live by bread alone. An old, time-worn, horse-and-buggy precept, perhaps, but just as true as it was when first uttered by the Teacher of Galilee. And when it ceases to be the dominant tenet in the philosophy of our Craft, then we shall have cut the heart out of Freemasonry.

¹ William Stringfellow, *My People Is the Enemy* (Holt, **Rinehart & Winston**)