

Whither Are We Traveling?

Chapter Seven – Sounding Brass and Tinkling Cymbal?

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Sounding Brass and Tinkling Cymbal?

Question 6: Has the American passion for bigness and efficiency dulled the spirit of Masonic charity?

Ask the average Hoosier Mason what has happened to Masonic charity and he will expostulate all over the place while rattling off an impressive list of organized, institutional projects of a benevolent nature. He will tell you that there is a Masonic Home at Franklin, hospitals for crippled children, research programs for mental illnesses, prevention of blindness, muscular dystrophy. If he is well informed he will tell you about a visitation program in Veterans' Hospitals.

Pin him down and ask him what his Lodge does in the way of benevolence. If he knows where and when his Lodge meets, he may tell you that a portion of each member's dues goes to help operate the Masonic Home; that sometimes a goodly sum is collected in voluntary contributions for the Home; ... and besides, the dues of a hard-pressed Brother were remitted several years ago.

Press him still further and ask him what *he* is doing, as a Mason, to carry out his individual obligation. He will show you his collection of cards and enumerate the checks written to a dozen projects, and the income tax deductions claimed during the past year.

Then nail him to the mast and ask him, "Is that all? How long has it been since you went on foot and out of your way to aid and succor a needy Brother?" Chances are his look will be first one of astonishment; then of pity; then he will mark you down as well meaning, perhaps, but slightly off your rocker.

What *has* happened to Masonic charity? Time was when it was one of the sweetest by-products of the teachings of our gentle Craft. I recall reading in the minutes of my Mother Lodge how the Brethren got together and built a modest house for the widow of a member, and on another occasion donated a cord of wood to the widow of a man who was not a Mason. Such acts were common. They were not accompanied by any fanfare of trumpets, but the community knew about them all the same, and the prestige of Freemasonry reflected that knowledge.

Only occasionally do we hear of an example of genuine Masonic charity at its best, but when we do, the impact upon the individual and community is tremendous. Why, then, do we neglect that phase of our Masonic life that can have the most gratifying results? What has happened? Two things, I should say:

One: We are Americans, you know, and we don't want our benevolence on an individual basis, quiet and modest, from one heart to another, even if that is the most effective manner. We want the right hand and everyone else to know what the left hand is doing. We want our charity to be well organized with campaigns, slogans, quotas and great hullabaloo. We want super-duper institutions with bronze plaques on the walls to say, like Little Jack Horner, "What a great boy am I!"

Two: When Freemasonry is operating properly, it does things the hard way. We want none of that. We want efficiency. We don't want to be bothered by anything that will require more time and effort than the writing of a check.

Now let no man throw up a smoke screen with a charge that the Grand Secretary is attacking organized Masonic charities. I am doing no such thing. What I am attacking is the laziness, the complacency, the lack of vision with which we pour great sums of money into organized benevolences, and then, with self-righteous congratulations to ourselves, let it go at that.

I

Wherein do we fall short? Let's look in the mirror:

1. **Is it worth mentioning?** -- How often do we hear the Master call for reports of sickness at a meeting of the Lodge? In how many Masonic halls is the Box of Fraternal Assistance passed? In how many halls could such a box be found?
2. **Do we remember?** -- How often are the members of a Lodge called upon to assist in person, in some act of true Masonic charity? Are they ever asked to visit the sick, or is that assignment turned over to a retired Brother who has nothing else to do? How many years can go by without a Master Mason giving of himself in an act of benevolence, or charity, or brotherhood?
3. **Are we interested?** – In far too many Lodges the payment of the annual per capita tax to the Grand Lodge is looked upon as the full discharge of all obligations pertaining to charity – an act which relieves every individual member of further concern for the year ending December 31. When I say that, unfortunately, I am not merely engaging in rhetoric; I am speaking of an actual fact.
4. **First things last?** – In far too many Lodges even the easy expedient of soliciting voluntary contributions for the Masonic Home is pushed aside as something of minor importance if there is a new Temple to build or pay for. Self-indulgence comes at the head of the list.
5. **Crumbs from the table?** – Each Lodge in Indiana is required to have a relief fund. But how much? I am ashamed to have the minimum figure seen in print. It is such a paltry sum that it could hardly do more than buy an occasional cup of coffee for a street beggar. The minimum should be twenty times its present amount.

II

But there is another side to the coin. Let's look at that side for a moment:

1. **Given the challenge to practice Masonic charity in its intimate and personal form, almost any Lodge and almost any individual Mason will respond with enthusiasm.** More important, Freemasonry will then come to have a new meaning for them. A few years ago the Grand Master of Missouri, distressed by the perfunctory manner in which the charity obligation is discharged, set out on a campaign to encourage Lodges to perform their own acts of charity – voluntary acts, impulsive acts, without organization, without advance planning and ballyhoo. He asked each Lodge to send him a written report of what it had done. I read many of those reports, but not without a lump in my throat.

And not only in Missouri can it happen. Right here in Indiana I have seen glorious examples of Masonic charity. For example, the story of one small Lodge which came face to face with a staggering obligation, and of how the Brethren responded to their everlasting credit.

2. **Any Lodge, large or small, which experiences the joy of giving of itself in a truly personal act of charity discovers that it literally has been born again.** Once I heard the Senior Warden of a large Lodge describe the distress in the home of the widow of a deceased Brother who was making a brave struggle to hold her family together. “It is not often we have calls for relief,” he said. “Now this is *our opportunity*.” Significantly, that Lodge is not losing in membership and has no attendance problems.

A Past Master of a small Lodge which levied an assessment to meet a relief emergency sat in my office and declared, “That incident was the best thing that has happened to our Lodge in the 40 years I have been a Mason, for, until then, most of us had no clear idea of the true meaning of Masonry.”

III

What does it all add up to?

Well, for me, it adds up to this: We are missing a golden opportunity for a great Masonic renaissance when we continue to let our American passion for bigness and efficiency dull the spirit of true Masonic charity. There simply is no substitute for the personal touch on the local level where it counts.

Don't tell me how many hundreds of thousands of dollars Freemasons contribute annually to organized benevolent projects. That is not the question at stake. And don't give me the old excuse that Lodges are prohibited from using their funds for purposes not Masonic. That, too, is avoiding the issue. Freemasonry, if it operates as such, is a relationship with individuals, and I insist on talking about the personal efforts of Lodges and individual Master Masons. I want to know what *individual* Masons are doing to relieve distress – in their own communities, by their own effort.

Whenever Lodge is opened and whenever it is closed, the Senior Warden tells the Master why he was induced to become a Master Mason. One of the reasons he offers is that he might “contribute to the relief of poor distressed Master Masons, their widows and orphans.”

Lip service? Sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal?

Not unless we make it so. The Brethren are here; they are as generous and kindly and thoughtful as they ever were. It is up to us to give them occasion to do what they have obligated themselves to do. Given that opportunity, Master Masons will respond in such a manner that the revival of Freemasonry will no longer be a fond hope – it will be here and now.