GETTYSBURG REMEMBERED

June 5, 2006

My Brothers,

When I was a kid my grandfather took me to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania for the centennial observation of that great battle of the Civil War. Early July in Pennsylvania farm country means unrelenting heat, humidity, and dust, the almost deafening sounds of cicadas and their high-pitched buzzing, and biting flies that act as though they haven't had a meal since the war. To a twelve year old kid, the centennial was both exciting and dull. I knew enough about the Civil War to have glamorized the battle, the mad rush of Pickett's Charge and the Blue hurling back the Gray. I did not understand the pain and the fear of combat; it would be later that I would come to know the awful stink of mortality left behind when man has done his best to destroy his fellow man. But to my young eyes of that time, there was monument after monument of carved stone lifting up and celebrating the soldiers and their commanders, rising up from empty fields of cut grass, raised at old split-rail fences, and marking tired fieldstone walls.

And, it was boring. There was no sudden sound of cannon, or blaring bugle, or echo of the spine-chilling cry of the Rebel Yell, only the buzzing of cicadas and flies and distant car horns and the voices of other tourists. In search of - something -, I scrambled all over the rocks of Devil's Den, climbed up Little Round Top, and walked from the Sunken Road up the slope to the apex of Pickett's Charge, where the wave of Gray had just lapped over into the Blue before being repulsed. It was still marked by the tall oak that Gen. Lee pointed to as the object of the charge. It was hot. The flies were driving me crazy. At the time, I said, "Ok, Grandpa. Can we go now?", and slapped at another fly. And my Grandfather, a gentle man, a Mason, whose own grandfathers had fought the Civil War and lived to tell him about it, took me by the hand and said only, "Someday, you will remember what this means."

I have thought of that day a few times since then and I think it was a curious thing for him to say. Not, someday you will understand, or, someday you will remember this visit, but, someday you will remember what this means. How could I ever 'remember' what it means? I wasn't there for the battle; I was only a kid one hundred years after. I didn't see any great message in the statues or cannons. The boulders of Devil's Den were silent rocks. Little Round Top was just a hill and the hallowed ground of Pickett's Charge was nothing more than a walk through the flies and the heat. I wanted to hear the sounds of the battle and shouts of the men who fought there. I wanted to see Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, standing tall and resolute in the Union center, accepting the charge of the Army of Virginia just as calmly as he accepted its surrender nearly two years later. But, I didn't hear or see any of these things; the silent statues and fields shimmering in the heat were just - statues and empty fields.

Soon enough, that long summer vacation with my Grandparents came to an end, and, for whatever reasons, didn't happen again. As I said, my Grandfather was a Mason, but I did not get to know him as an adult, myself. He entered the Celestial Lodge shortly after I returned from the Vietnam War. I came to Masonry about 30 years too late to sit in Lodge with him.

But, my Brothers, here is the message for us tonight. In accepting Masonry in our hearts, Masonry opens us to a different way of seeing things. The first lecture says, "That our hearts might conceive before our eyes beheld the beauties of Masonry." There is a spirit in Masonry which we cannot see, but which we can sometimes sense and almost form the words to describe. It is here behind our symbols. It is here inside the Lectures. It is here inside our collective hearts. The more we study and think and explore in Masonry, the more our hearts begin to conceive what our eyes have not yet beheld.

It took my becoming a Mason to understand what my Grandfather was saying to me. There was a beautiful spirit there at Gettysburg that shimmered behind the statues and drifted over the fields and rested on the branches of that tall oak. It was not there for the eyes to see, but for the heart to conceive. Forty years later, I am beginning to see it, just as I am beginning to see my Grandfather again. He is here in Lodge tonight, not as a ghost, but as a continuity of that fraternal spirit in Freemasonry which crosses the wide divides among men and spans the valleys of mortality with gentle care.

The great gift of Masonry is that, as we follow Masonry's designs in our hearts, we learn to see a path towards that which was lost; a path found in the heart and spirit which has always been there waiting to be remembered, waiting to be seen once more in just the right light. This pathway leads to where the light of all memory resides: the past memories, the future memories - all memories.

And, someday, as Masonry promises us, we will be taken by the hand once more and remember what it means.

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