CABLE TOW

December 6, 2004

My Brothers,

I’m going to start off this education session with a question right away, "Do you find the length of your cable tow to be shorter than you’d like?" That’s a tough question. It reaches right down inside of us and pokes a pointed measuring stick into some really tender spots. Those tender spots are where our desires to live up to the ideals of Masonry conflict with what we see as the realities of living.

Much of the work of Masonry seems to call for contributions of our time or money, and charting our personal course through those demands is not easy. It’s like using one of those old maps of the world from before Columbus. We can see that the land masses, the oceans, the trade routes and the safe passages, are well marked. These are the places of comfort, the places we’ve been to and can safely visit again. But at the edge of the map there are dragons that symbolize the end of the known world. We go there at great risk. It is the unknown. Here be dragons. The comfortable zones are within the length of our cable tow; the dragons of conflict lie beyond.

Masonry tells us to be prudent, to do our work within the length of our cable tow. The inference is that we are not expected to go beyond its length, that each of us determines that length, and that we are not to be judgmental about another’s cable tow length. Inside this inference, the symbolism of the cable tow is a duality, a beautiful thing and at the same time, a trying thing. On one end, it symbolizes the deep ties that bind us to the Fraternity of Masonry, to our active Brotherhood and all its good work. On the other end, it symbolizes our individual ties of responsibility outside of Masonry, and accountability to other needs.

The two ends of the cable tow are symbolic of competing responsibilities; its self-determined length, the distance between the two ends, is symbolic of the conflict that each Mason must come to reconcile within himself.

In the course of our Masonic work, we often find ourselves in positions where we must measure one end of the cable tow against the other. And, for many of us, that measuring stirs up some troubling conflicts. Do we volunteer, or not? Contribute, or not? Offer help, or not? Visit that sick Brother, or not? Speak up or stay silent? Should we, can we, donate a bike? Do we work on that committee, or not? Hang on to our pizza money or give for charity? And, into that awful silence of personal indecision and inner conflict comes the discord of emotions like guilt and shame; guilt that we can’t do it, or guilt that we can do it but won’t, and private shame that we don’t either way. This is the cable tow dilemma; this duality tests our conscience.

What can we say about this duality? It is found deep in the heart of every man. Just where it is found is different within each man and each circumstance. Each of us knows its presence and can feel where the boundaries of internal conflict begin. Each of us knows how far into those boundaries we are willing and able to go. We know where the serious pain resides; Masonry does not expect us to go that far. We are to act, but not to the point of doing serious injury to ourselves or our families. But Masonry does expect each man to challenge his internal boundaries and, in so doing, extend the length of his cable tow.

Part of Masonry’s challenge to become better men is in this stretching of ourselves even to the point of discomfort. This ideal of being good men learning to become better men is compelling in its beauty. But, in our practice of Masonry, that beauty in action comes with a challenge to our comfort zones. The conflict that we encounter inside when we feel the guilt and shame of inaction cannot be allowed to freeze us, to make us stay in the safety of a lesser comfort zone. That is not growth or exploration, that is stagnation, that is sailing the Masonic sea by hugging the shoreline. To grow as men, we must challenge the depths and learn to reconcile the conflicts that too often hold us back, when we should be moving forward. And, ultimately, we must be willing to undergo a little discomfort if we are to become more comfortable within ourselves as Masons, and as men.

That’s the cable tow's dual symbolism in our work as Masons. The distance from one end to the other is entirely of our making. The tug and pull of competing responsibilities, and our internal response to that, is the cable tow dilemma. It asks us, “Do we risk growth, or do we settle for comfort?” So, again, “Do you find the length of your cable tow to be shorter than you’d like?”

Here be our dragons.

Br. Stephen C. Harrington