HAMMERS

January 7, 2007

My Brothers,

I was reading a novel the other day and the author spun a bit of philosophy at me. He said, through one of his characters, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail." Let's think about that some.

I guess this is true if we're on an assembly line and our job is to whack something with a hammer every few seconds. We'd become very proficient in swinging that hammer, very soon; there's nothing like repetition for mastering something. We'd learn to zero in on exactly where to apply the business end of that hammer. We'd learn the most efficient way to swing it and just how much force was needed to hit the nail, recover, and be ready for the next nail. We'd get so good at it that we wouldn't have to think about the nails. It would be automatic; swing, hit, recover, swing, hit, recover. Over and over again, perfect every time, masters of our hammer universe.

At the same time, I wonder what our lives would be like off the line. Would we refuse to use a hammer in our every day life because we use it all the time on the job? Or, might we use a hammer for almost everything we would do? Imagine trying to cook breakfast for someone with the hammer. It would take a delicate touch to crack open the eggs. Separating the bacon in the pan could become very interesting. Mixing the batter for pancakes could get real messy and flipping the cakes in the pan would be quite a chore. But, I suppose it could all be done. We might even get a spot on David Letterman - See the man who cooks a gourmet breakfast with just a hammer!

"If the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail." That's an interesting insight into the human condition. It says that we all seem to have a limited toolset that we're comfortable with using to bring to bear on problems, and the toolset itself dictates how we see the problems in the first place. That's a pragmatic way of looking at things; we do what we can do. What's the point of looking at a problem if we lack the tools for the solution? Here's what we know how to do and there are the problems that our know-how can resolve. Those are the ones we will deal with. That's pragmatic, that's only practical; you don’t make an omelet with a hammer.

The flaw in this line of thinking is that it is based on the idea that problems should only be addressed if the solution is at hand. That's natural enough. If the problem is lack of money and we have cash, then that's easy - we have a solution if we are willing to give up some of the cash. Heck, we're Masons. If we find a distressed worthy brother Mason we're going to help him out, aren't we? We learned a valuable lesson about this, this charity thing, and we took a solemn obligation to come to his aid. Need a few bucks to help him over the crisis? Sure, we can do that - cash is our hammer.

But, what if the problem isn't money? What if his distress is a troubled mind? How can we restore peace to his troubled mind with a hammer? (Well, O.K., sometimes a hammer might not be such a bad idea; if someone is really messed up in the head there can be an overwhelming urge to smack him upside the head to set him right, but you know, that's sort of frowned upon these days…) No, if the hammer of cash is our primary Masonic solution and the solution doesn't fit the problem, then we are probably not going to deal with the problem, are we? Troubled minds will not be in our problem area. Social ills that need more than a few bucks in the basket will not be in our problem area. Children at risk to drugs and gangs and dropping out won’t be and emotional support to widows and orphans of brother Masons won't be, either. Does this sound all too familiar? Are we as a Lodge and as individual Masons only bringing a hammer to the assembly line of life?

Masonry has given us a pretty extensive toolset for our use. That's only fair; life has given us a pretty extensive set of problems to deal with. Every problem is not a nail, nor should we be stuck in the habit of looking only for nails. There are other challenges, and other tools. Maybe, as a Lodge and as individual Masons, it's time to put down the hammer and learn how to master another working tool or two. Maybe we could look at the message in the trowel and what that might mean for us and others, if we learn how to use it, how to master it. We'd become very proficient in using that trowel very soon; there's nothing like repetition for mastering something.

It sure would make cooking breakfast for someone, easier, too.

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