FROZEN WORDS

April 5, 2004

My Brothers,

In the Civil War, there was a battle fought one morning. Who fought it, or where, is not as important as something that occurred during it. It was early summer morning and the troops around headquarters were just finishing up their breakfast. The daylight was soft and smoke from the cooking fires drifted toward the thick woods nearby. The General was reviewing his plans for the day when a messenger galloped up to his tent calling for orders and reinforcements. To his astonishment, the General learned that his forces were engaged in a fierce battle, less than a quarter of a mile away! Thousands of men with canons and rifles were fighting to the death on the other side of the woods, and no one at headquarters had heard a sound.

Sound has done other strange things. Visualize that you are walking on the traces of old snow, breathing in the smell of the earth beginning to thaw after a hard winter. Suddenly, you hear the clashing of metal and screams of agony just over the next hill. You race up the hill to see what’s going on and see nothing except another valley. Throughout history there are tales of the sounds of winter battle being heard after a thaw. Imagine that!; sounds, frozen in time by bitter cold.

Frozen sound isn’t a recent invention. Antiphon, an ancient Greek, used the idea of ‘frozen words’ to describe a slowness to accept wisdom. He said, “As the cold of certain cities is so intense that it freezes the very words we utter, which remain congealed until the heat of summer thaws them, so the mind of youth is so thoughtless that the wisdom of Plato lies there frozen, as it were, until it is thawed by the ripened judgment of mature age.”

And I thought about words of wisdom lying frozen, awaiting mature reflection to thaw them out, and that brought to mind Masonry’s analogy of degrees corresponding to youth, maturity, and old age and how each degree’s Masonic lesson bestows a progression of more and more ‘light’.

In the Lecture of the Entered Apprentice Degree, we receive volumes of Masonic knowledge and wisdom. This ‘first light’ is the core of values in our Masonic development, just as moral guidelines and social rules are impressed upon us in our youth. This Masonic ‘light’ outlines Masonic behavior, and becomes the measuring stick for our Masonic development. And what are these foundational lessons, these wise words? They are the lessons of Faith, Hope, and Charity. They are the virtues of Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice. They are the principles of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth.

And, it struck me that in our haste to progress, in our headlong rush to advance in the degrees of Masonry, we are like Antiphon’s youth. In our nearsighted focus on achieving proficiency in the degrees and moving on to the next, we pass by the lessons and moral values in the degrees; we learn the test, not the subject matter. The lessons and moral values become separated from us and our pursuits, much like the General, separated from the sounds of his duty by a small wood.

But, the measuring stick of our progression in Masonry is not marked by our advancement through the degrees, alone. Our true progression in Masonry is marked by how well we understand and live the richness of Masonry’s ‘light’. And that is dependent upon the effort we spend in reflection, in allowing ourselves, as Antiphon said, to ripen with it into mature age. Such reflection allows us to rediscover and truly hear the wise words left behind us in our rush to get from west to east.

For many Brothers, having raced through the degrees and now too busy for reflection, Masonry's lessons and moral values are the sounds not heard through the woods; they are the frozen words, waiting for a spring thaw that may not come.

Let us take it then, as our obligation to Masonry and to ourselves, to travel again through what we have passed by, to retrace our steps from west to east and from east to west again, for this is what is meant when asked have we ever traveled, and if so, whence and whither. We travel not only toward the east in search of light, but back to the west again, with the light. And, as we travel, as we grow in our Masonry, as our judgment ripens with it in mature age, we are to reflect on that spring of Masonic ‘first light’: Faith, Hope, Charity, Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, Justice, Brotherly Love, Relief, Truth.

Not frozen words. Warm words, living words.

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