MIRRORS

March 7, 2005

My Brothers,

I had the occasion to walk into a store some time ago. I figured I'd just go in and browse and enjoy myself because, once in a while, I like to explore. I was in a relatively good mood that day; feeling cheerful and pretty good about things in general. But, it might have been better if I had skipped this particular store. Coming out, I was somber and withdrawn and feeling that I had not amounted to much, and that there was so much more to do, and so little time, and that I was probably inadequate to the task, anyway. A humorist would tell you, here, that the store must have been Victoria's Secret; all its lace and fineries could make any man feel inadequate to the task. But it was much worse than that. It was a store that specialized in mirrors.

There were mirrors of every size, shape, and description. They were beveled, frosted, leaded, etched, engraved, octagonal, square, circular, rectangular, and even triangular. They were un-bordered, or framed in everything imaginable, from plain oak to mother of pearl and gold filigree. There were three-sided vanity mirrors that made the same reflected image recede into infinity. There were full length mirrors and miniatures. There were concave and convex mirrors and magnifying mirrors and even a mirrored chandelier.

It sounds like a fascinating store, doesn't it? Its walls were an old crème color lifting to a high ceiling finished in raised copper sheeting. Skylights filled the room with a natural light that brought a sparkle and clarity to everything. The polished floors were old and darkened wood, joined by wooden pegs and laid down in long strips that invited you to walk their length, and they creaked when you walked on them. It was quiet inside, still and cool despite the summer's heat outside, and there was no one there; I was alone.

There is something beautiful about a fine mirror that begs you to look into it, that draws you by its shape and ornament and clarity to look within. The really good ones, the ones made by master craftsmen, are without blemish or ripple and are crystal clear. They seem to hold color and shape so perfectly that you know you could just reach in and touch, or even walk in and breathe the air on the other side, like Alice through the looking glass. It was in front of one of these fine mirrors that I found myself standing, lost in the workmanship that drew me to it, drawn in by the lines and depth within. As I looked, my eyes caught the reflection of my own eyes and, for a moment, I looked at a stranger. It was as if I had never seen this person before me. In French, deja vu is the familiar feeling you get in a new situation that you have encountered this 'something' before. Its opposite feeling is called jamais vu; a feeling of total otherness where nothing is familiar, all is unrecognizable and unknown, and even your sense of self is lost.

This is a powerful experience; for one timeless moment the world is unknown and new, objects have form but no names; there is no association of what's before you with any memories; there are no memories at all! And so it was with this stranger in the mirror. It was as though I was seeing myself with all illusion stripped away, wearing none of the self talk and innermost thoughts we wrap around ourselves like borrowed clothing to change our appearance to ourselves. It was the ultimate first impression of the self. And in that moment, suspended in jamais vu, I saw the things I was and lacked; I saw the failures and the hopes written on that stranger's face. And then, in a blink, I was back and that was my reflection again. I was rattled by what I had seen and not seen in that image of my self, and the mirrors watched me leave the store in a hurry.

I don't know if it was some magic built in by that master craftsman that gave me that unique experience. I can tell you that there is no way I could ever go back and buy that particular mirror; it is not easy to look into a mirror and find out that you are not the fairest of them all, or even close to it.

But, fairy tales aside, the point of sharing this story has been to remind us that the practice of Masonry is not magic; the inner work of Masonry is much like looking into a fine mirror, one made by a master craftsman. When we look, really look, within ourselves through Masonry's designs, we may sometimes see ourselves as we really are, and we may also see who we might become, if only we are honest with ourselves. Masonry tells us to go into that store within and walk the creaking floorboards, to peer deeply into the mirrors of the self, and to be ready for what looks back at us. Masonry tells us to cast off those borrowed clothes and applied self beliefs; it is the internal and not the external qualifications which recommend a man to be made a Mason.

So, my Brothers, at your next encounter with a mirror, take a moment. Close your eyes, clear your mind, and then look into the eyes of the man looking into the mirror.

Look hard for Truth, but look in with Brotherly Love. You might be surprised by what you see.

Br. Stephen C. Harrington