OBJECTIVES

December 4, 2006

My Brothers,

After one education session, I was put on the spot by an annoyed Brother who wanted to know just what I was trying to accomplish with "all this moralizing and philosophy". He said that he was not learning enough about the basic things that Masons do and why they do it, about symbols and stuff; that's what he wanted to be educated about and that's what he thought I ought to talk about. To him, Masonry was about actions and symbols, about doing things in a Masonic way that, in the doing, was Masonry. - Oh.

In my Army days, my favorite manual was Drill & Ceremonies; over 200 pages of exacting detail about the science of soldiering. It covered where and how to stand, how to move, speak, and render courtesies to superiors as an individual and as part of a group. It was all about uniformity and precision. I learned that manual front to back and even taught it to soldiers in Basic Training. Later, I was fortunate to command a couple hundred men and women and used this knowledge for our unit to win competitions. We were good at it because we worked at it and because we enjoyed doing it. But Drill & Ceremonies was not the 'be all-end all'; there was much more to soldiering. Most of our time was focused on learning and practicing our jobs as soldiers; we were cooks, mechanics, riflemen, electronics operators, and clerks. With all those jobs there were hundreds of other manuals to learn and know; we knew there was much more to soldiering than just knowing how to march, but marching well seemed to encourage us to do the other things well. That was WB George Washington's objective when he brought in BR Baron Von Steuben to teach Drill & Ceremonies at Valley Forge.

I have wrestled with how to resolve the underlying issues in my Brother's complaint. The immediate issue is that there are things done and said in the Ritual that he doesn't understand. He senses that there is meaning behind the symbols and words in Lodge and he is disturbed because he does not know these things. He is sincere in believing that if he is told what these things mean he will understand Masonry; in essence, if he is told about trees he believes he will understand the forest. This says two things. One, that the basic education given in the degrees did not sink in, and two, that he has missed the larger point: Masonry's symbols and words are like finding the pulse in the wrist, but Masonry's heartbeat originates in its philosophical, spiritual, and moral content. Masonry is a philosophical eco-system, not just a few trees of understanding.

This Brother's frustration is the educator's dilemma: when the whole of a thing is larger than the sum of its parts, how do you approach it? This five minute session once a month can either explain a simple topic or try to open the door to deeper individual thinking about Masonry. Discussing a topic like the Due Guard and Sign meets the concerns in my Brother's complaint; this is what we do, this is why we do it; it is a pulse beat. Discussing a deeper moral topic like Brotherly Love is more open ended because there is no one clear definition of what this means; it is the heartbeat. Issues in Masonic morality, ethics, or spirituality are not simple to define or simple to understand; they are as complex as the individual human soul which is perceiving them. Much wiser Brothers have spent their entire adult lives exploring what this means to a Mason and have written volumes of thought about it. What other fraternal organization has a thousand page encyclopedia just to define its basic symbols and degrees and ideas? We'd have to wonder if Masonry would hold our interest or survive very long if the practice of Masonry could be reduced to a manual of simple instructions which, if followed, would define the universe of Masonry. But, we don't become Masons just for the ritual any more than soldiers enlist just to march.

Masonry is more than a manual of simple instructions; Masonry is a progressive moral science. We are told this in our Ritual, our manual of Masonic Drill & Ceremonies. It tells us where and how to stand, how to move and what to say, but it goes well beyond that. Its layered approach to degrees is a progression of basic information for Masons, and its lectures and charges are a foundation for discovering Masonry's broader moral science. But, these are only the rudiments, the basic working tools, the pulse in the wrist. There is more to this progressive moral science, this Masonic heartbeat, than just its tools. These sessions can only point the way toward the work to be done; the Mason must pick up his tools and go do the work.

By analogy, Masonry guides us on our walk through the forest eco-system of philosophy, morality, and spirituality. Where we choose to enter, and how far we walk in, is entirely up to us. So, to answer my Brother's complaint, the objective of these sessions is to point out walking paths past the trees and into the forest, but it is up to us to walk them. And once in a while, a session might point out an interesting tree or maybe fix a little 'hitch in our git-along', but it won't do the walking for us.

So, my Brothers, check your heartbeat, choose your path, and tell your feet to start walking! Forward, March!

Br. Stephen C. Harrington