NOBLE

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My Brothers,

When we first learn about the Masonic Working Tools, we hear the phrase, "But as speculative Masons, we are taught to use them for the more noble and glorious purpose of ...". What is a "more noble and glorious purpose"; what do the words mean? We say them with an almost casual indifference and jumble them together, ‘more noble and glorious purpose of'. We hear them with a similar indifference; they are gone too fast to think about. We just about form a fuzzy picture that they mean something good or special and then they are gone, wiped away by other words and other things to think about. We lose so much when we get only fuzzy pictures of what's being said.

That happens a lot in today's society. Today's spoken English uses about 4,000 words in everyday speech, and common written English uses about 10,000. There are some 100,000 words defined in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, and several hundred thousand words are defined in the unabridged dictionaries. There are that many words because there are that many ideas and flavors of ideas. Society's dependence on a few thousand words to get its ideas across means that most of the richness possible in communication is lost, and some of the fullness of living is never realized because we don't have the words to fit the ideas in our minds. When we are stuck in the same small set of words, it's like ordering from a fast food menu over and over again; you can't have steak if you only know how to ask for a hamburger.

The sad thing is that both today's education system and social pressures 'dumb down' the language. Vocabulary isn't emphasized in school; what there is of it targets familiarity, not common use. High school graduates are expected to grasp the ideas in common written English, but as we've seen, that's a small percentage of the words and ideas that can be expressed. And social pressures also reduce the use of language; we are conditioned to avoid using 'big words' and we are taught from an early age by our peer groups to speak in simple terms or face being ridiculed and forced out of the group.

Masonry introduces us to a richer table of words, offering many different flavors and cuisines. It spices things up by presenting us with uncommon words that sometimes have unusual or archaic meanings. These words and ideas belong to every Mason and because they are ours, we should explore their meanings. So, let's look at 'noble' and ‘glorious'.

Noble comes from the Latin 'nobilis' meaning knowable, or well-known. From Latin it went to Old French, to Middle English in the 12-15th centuries, and then to us. Noble means: possessing outstanding qualities or properties; of high birth or exalted rank; famous or notable; grand or impressive in appearance; or, having superiority of mind, character, ideals, or morals. Its first synonym is illustrious.

Glorious comes from the Latin 'gloriousus' and means having glory. It, too, comes to us via Old French and Middle English. Its root word, glory, means: praise, honor, or distinction; the height of prosperity or achievement. So, Glorious means: possessing or deserving glory; entitling one to glory; or, marked by great beauty or splendor, as in magnificent. Its first synonym is also illustrious.

So, let's clear up our fuzzy picture. Our "more noble and glorious purpose" means: possessing superior ideals and morals, and entitled to honor by the magnificence of its beauty and splendor. That is a lot of good stuff to say about our working tools and the moral science of Masonry behind that symbolism. We must mean it, so, we should say it like we mean it. We should be chewing on these words and savoring their flavor, not bolting them down in huge chunks. Masonry is not a fast food joint, it is a five star restaurant and we must learn to read and order from its menu.

There's one last thing to look at while we're here. Illustrious is the first synonym for both 'noble' and 'glorious'. In the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite Masonry, individuals of the 32nd and 33rd degrees are entitled, "Illustrious". From the Latin 'illustris', this word means: notably or brilliantly outstanding. There is another meaning from the 15th century for illustrious, but it is considered archaic and not actively used in the present. That meaning for illustrious is: shining brightly with light. Masons know this meaning; I guess Mr. Webster of the dictionary was not Br. Webster!

So, we can see that gaining an understanding of the words commonly used in Masonry can be interesting and can result in some ancient surprises. Peel the covers off some of its words and there's that 'light' stuff again, shining brightly at us, and on us.

So, what will you have, steak?, or hamburger again?

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