

HO COMPANIONS!

by
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In some of our Masonic bodies the members hail each other as Brothers, a custom that is common in the symbolic lodge and in the several lodges of the Scottish Rite. In the Royal Arch we are Companions; in the Commandery, we are Fraters; and in the Shrine, Nobles. I suppose this reflects, as much as anything else, sincere and purposeful attempts to meaningfully distinguish and give character to the several households making up our fraternal family.

So far as I can determine, the title "Companion" first comes to our attention in the second section of the Master Mason's degree, when a weary brother, in attempting to arise and follow two colleagues who have gone on, shouts "Ho, Companions." The trio, as we know, were on a very important mission, in pursuit of ruffians who committed a heinous act.

In reviewing those events which took place up to the point at which the weary Fellowcraft made a discovery and hailed his companions, it appears that the analytical work which should have preceded the chase was conspicuous by its absence. It also seems that all involved, certainly the three Fellowcrafts and perhaps even King Solomon himself, were so obsessed with the chase that little, if any, thought was given to the possibility that those they sought could be close at hand. Circumstances pressed heavily upon all concerned, of course, and in the stressful circumstances in which they found themselves, rational and deliberate consideration of their concerns was difficult. At any rate they seemed certain that the object of their quest lay down the road, somewhere, and they appeared convinced that if they only moved fast enough and far enough in and in concert, they would undoubtedly overcome their prey. Never mind that they did not have a real game plan, their assignment was simply to seek, to search, and to find.

If the Fellowcrafts had any inclination to really examine the terrain over which they passed, we are uninformed of it. In fact, fatigue was apparently the only reason they stopped when they did, and their finding of the acacia, with the ramifications that took place immediately thereafter, seems to have been accidental at best. It was hardly a good piece of detective work, and if remorse had not overtaken the ruffians, and had they been able to muffle their woes, the chances of their discovery would have been considerably lessened.

I should not like to be unduly critical, however, for in the end, in their floundering way, the Fellowcrafts did accomplish their object. Without doubt, their hearts were in the right place, and they worked well together. More importantly they knew who they were searching for and they appreciated why they were involved in the effort. Furthermore, the approach they made was not at all unusual; in some ways, in fact, it may have been considered quite normal — not only for that period but for the present time as well. Thus the legend serves to exemplify an eternal truth — that man's limitations are universal and timeless.

That brings us to today, and I, like the weary brother who was slower than his colleagues to arise, greet you, one and all, with the same arresting call, "Ho, Companions." In using those words, am I implying that we have ruffians among us? No, not really. I doubt that anyone in a leadership post in the fraternity is likely to be subjected to the test suffered by Hiram Abiff. But there are some things deserving of attention — some threats to the Craft, if you will, and these threats, if uncontained for long, could impair our institution no less effectively than any ruffian. Let's take a look.

The first of the threats with which I am concerned is one that is the product of a thought

process whose end proclaims the virtues presumed to be found in a concept we call centralization. "Centralization of what?", you may ask, and the answer is of everything. Proponents of this concept would have you believe that nothing is simple, and that nothing that is worthwhile can be properly affected locally. If anything is worth doing, adherents of this view proclaim, it is worth direction, and in the process of developing direction, layer upon layer of authority, needed or not, is established.

In a practical sense the trend toward centralization, in which Grand Bodies grow in authoritative stature, is at the expense of those who surrender the burden. And that is a tragedy. Few are the subordinate bodies today that have the capacity, or the will, to do that which in an earlier day would have been expected of them.

Our Masonic charity comes to mind. And in case you might be inclined to interpret my words too freely, let me assure you that I am a loyal proponent of our organized charities. But in their development, something has happened to charity at the local level. We simply don't do enough in our own neighborhoods for the widowed, the aged, the orphaned, and for those who are otherwise in need.

An incident that occurred a year or so ago is illustrative of the point I wish to make. A brother had fallen on hard times and illness and the Supreme Architect saw fit to call him home. At the time of his death his family was virtually penniless; there was little food in the home, and certainly there were no resources available to provide a minimally acceptable burial. An appeal was made to his lodge, but the members there felt they could not handle the burden alone. Hence, they turned to the District to meet what was essentially their own obligation. A collection was taken, and the crisis was overcome. But in the process, caring and sharing, which is the heart and soul of brotherhood, was institutionalized. And that is a great pity.

So too are many other aspects of our fraternal life. I refer specifically to programs involving our Masonic youth, including our scholarship efforts, and as well as all of our programs in Masonic education. Without disparaging any of the efforts that are generated at the top, and there are many, I would nevertheless maintain that their achievements, if any, have been at the expense of programs that could be and should be developed and exploited more fully at the local level. Ho, Companions, what say you about over centralization? Is it a threat? Can we contain it?

A second concern to me is one that I shall term legalization. It is a direct descendant of centralization. The mentality responsible for its generation evolves out of a presumed need and a well-developed demand for the centralization of authority in the Craft. And this malady, it seems, is catching. At any rate, if recent years are in any way indicative, it would seem that there are amongst us those who would like to have a rule, numbered and included in our digests, to cover every situation that the mind of man may contrive. But, it simply can't be done!

I personally find this tendency to over-legalize the management and government of the Craft through the multiplication of legislation to be a bit offensive, if for no other reason than the fact that already existing law appears to be neither fully understood nor universally accepted. Here is a real weakness with which almost every occupant of the Grand East has to grapple at one time or another. Always there are those who will opt for the selective application of the Code, for such parts thereof as they may deem necessary for a particular occasion or circumstance. To such individuals, the finding of a loophole that will permit the imaginative application of existing law is an eternal challenge. A fitting last word on this matter concerns the legislative burden placed on our Grand Bodies. It is so large that it can no longer be handled efficiently or expeditiously. Furthermore, experience suggests that in the judgment of the delegates, most of the proposals advanced are for the most part unnecessary. If this be so, and voting records indicate that it is,

isn't it time that we make some effort to curb what would appear to be a procedure whose overhaul is long overdue? Ho, Companions, what say you about our tendency to over-legislate? Isn't it a threat? How can we contain it?

A third danger of significance to the ordered well being of the Craft, at least from my point of view, is one that I have designated idolization. While it takes a number of shapes and forms, I think you all to what I refer — that is to the glorification of the individual, through title, honor, or position. Let me be perfectly clear on this: I am not opposed to the recognition of service. But I am opposed to the relative position that recognition, per se, now occupies in the workings of the fraternity.

I recognize that my opinions on this matter may not be widely accepted. But that does not make them any less valid. In fact, from what I hear from the rank and file, most Masons would be happy to see a bit more attention paid to file and a little less attention paid to rank at our affairs. After all, most of our Brethren and our Companions come to enjoy an evening, to share some inspiring thoughts, and to partake of some wholesome refreshment before retiring to their homes. They could care less about the distinctions that separate brother from brother.

Still, the tradition persists, and there are many among us who take delight in the promotion of personal esteem. All too many have not heeded the lesson taught in the Royal Arch Chapter, wherein the newly exalted is informed that "Men in all ages have sought to perpetuate their own greatness, but as yet in vain. They have daubed with untempered mortar and admitted to their structures the base and discordant materials of pride and ambition." They have also failed to appreciate that in consequence of the faulty placement of values, the edifices of the unwise "have toppled from their foundations or been torn asunder by internal violence."

These are words of wisdom, I believe, and they are also words of warning that we might well heed. For the time is coming, and it may not be

far off, when the working Craft will tire of those whose vanity drives them to seek self gratification. Our need is for men to build temples to God, not monuments to themselves or to their own special interests. Ho, Companions, what say you about this? How dangerous is the threat? Are we willing, in the interest of the Craft, to try to contain our preoccupation with self?

In contrast to the danger that idolization presents to the Craft is another threat that is of equal significance. It pertains to the depersonalization of the membership as a whole. This, my brethren, may be the most serious threat of all. And it may have its origin, at least in part, in the overemphasis of the few to the detriment of the many. But for whatever reason that may be advanced, the truth of the matter is that the vast majority of our Masons are totally inactive and generally unresponsive to Masonry's works and programs.

Can it be that this is an outgrowth of our inattention to obligation? It may well be, and I speak from the perspective of one who served several years as the secretary of a lodge of some 300 members. While I had correspondence with each of those members over the years, usually in connection with the collection of dues, I must confess that I did not know, nor would I have been able to recognize the vast majority of them. Why? Simply because our paths never crossed. We had not had the opportunity to meet, face to face, to break bread together, nor to share in life's joys and sorrows as Masons should. And both they and I were to a degree both responsible. Ho, Companions, what say you to depersonalization? Isn't it an ideological ruffian? But can we cope with it? And can we contain it?

Thus far in this discourse I have identified four threats that are lurking about the fraternity, and it is likely that are others of no less significance. But the important thing is not so much the number or the extent of the threats we face, but rather the response that we make to them. We must therefore ask ourselves if we are according our problems the attention they are due, or are

we, like the Fellowcrafts of legend, simply forging ahead blindly, in the notion that somewhere and sometime, solutions will surface? Can we afford to procrastinate indefinitely, hopeful that sooner or later we will find another sprig of acacia, or a substitute therefore, that will miraculously enable us to overcome adversity? I would venture that we shouldn't. Furthermore, we are under no obligation to do so.

The best defense against the dangers inherent in the centralization, legalization, idolization, and depersonalization of the Craft, of course, is the time-tested antidote of fraternalization, offered without restriction or reservation. It is a powerful force, one with the capability to create and sustain unity and harmony, even in the face of stress and strain. It performs best in a favorable environment, preferably one that is characterized by the fulfillment of purpose and the achievement of promise.

It ought to be evident that no organization, especially one such as ours, can long endure in the absence of a general understanding of its fundamental purposes, particularly by those who presume to lead or serve it. Thus it is imperative that we be agreed on what we want to do. Frankly this is a matter that has for too long been neglected, and as a consequence, our conceptions of what is to be done and who should do it are primarily the products of subjective reasoning, an evaluative process in which the concept of service is subordinated to self interest. If fraternalization is to thrive, this trend must be arrested.

It ought to be equally evident that the acceptance of fraternal purpose is absolutely essential to the achievement of fraternal promise, an objective whose attractiveness is often tarnished by the passage of time. Think if you will of the promise which attracted you to Freemasonry in the first place. I wonder if in your mind's eye you can recall the night you were initiated? If your experience on that occasion was anything like mine, you probably went home filled with altruistic resolve. I am persuaded that you probably felt, and with

considerable passion, a need to participate in an effort to establish a true brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God. Now let me ask you some bottom line questions.

After your many years in the fraternity, what progress has been made in the fulfillment of the promise that you then envisioned? Are you and we closing in on it? Or does that promise remain in the distance, beyond reach, an illusive goal that seemingly defies approach?

If your answers to these queries are as I suspect they must be, I would think that we ought to look seriously at ourselves, examine our purposes, cultivate our interests in the mainsprings of life's worthwhiles, and get about the work of fulfilling the promise that we made so long ago — to ourselves and to mankind as a whole. Look about you pray. There is much work to be done, right here, and there is only you and me to do it. Won't you lend a helping hand, by purposefully resolving to let your work become your mark? The fortunes of the Craft await your response!