

The Misunderstanding of Purpose and Efficacy of Tradition Marks the Decline of Our Craft

On March 10, 2004 I awoke to alarming reports that William James, a 47-year old New York Freemason had been shot in the face by a fellow brother during an induction into a lodge-sponsored social club. I watched with a mix of horror and disbelief as I saw the misunderstandings and misconceptions of our peculiar system raked through the mud not only by small, ill-informed publications, but also by the larger AP affiliated sources. Later in the day, reports surfaced that a bomb exploded in the restaurant of a Masonic lodge in Istanbul, Turkey—killing two and wounding several.

Needless to say, my sleepy morning cheer subsided when I began to think of the general state of Freemasonry in regards to the New York shooting incident and the alarming terrorist attack on a lodge in Turkey. Our institution's decline is a source of interest for me and I have spent some time ruminating on the possible reasons for the phenomena. I do not have quick and easy answers, but I have found some glaring reasons. Ironically, I found the attack in Turkey as somewhat understandable. Given the situation in Central Asia and the rise of opposition to institutions largely seen as a "Westernizing influence" in all things relating to society and religion, there is much ignorance concerning our institution within this context, just as it is in this country but minus the anti-Occidental sentiment.

However, ignorance of intent and misguided purposes are the operative reasons behind the misinterpretations of our Craft. In regards the shooting in New York, we can only blame the way in which we, as Freemasons, interact and objectify the Craft in our culture. This accidental killing, in what is essentially a stupid hazing ritual having nothing to do with Freemasonry, is senseless for many reasons. Primarily it is ridiculous beyond comprehension because that despite hundreds of years of tradition, the event served as a damaging example that illustrates how many of our modern brethren have either forgotten or never have sought to know the inner work that the framework Freemasonry provides. In short, they effectively settle for the easiest and most common denominator and the institution of Freemasonry and its philosophies, once considered respectable and sublime, becomes farcical—something about which one can joke and take lightly.

Grand Jurisdictions and lodges tout our benefits to the public as "fun for the whole family", "great", "enjoyable", "fraternal", "wholesome" and for some, "patriotic". While these descriptions may have some base merit, it really misses the point and does so in the face of a general public opinion that either does not know, care or is grossly uninformed of our rites and ceremonies. When our own Masonic population cannot elucidate or even

practice its own teachings, we fall into discord. When we miss the mark, we fill in the void by inventing activities within the Craft, which in effect, have little place in the fraternity.

As a result, when the irresponsibility of our own ignorance gets the best of us (as it almost always does), something occurs to lay a swift and heavy blow in order to teach us a lesson--just as it did this week in New York and Istanbul. As a result of the shooting, the uncaring public so saturated by lurid details, immediately wants our heads (fascinatingly enough, there was nary a hue and cry in this country over the bombing and flagrant disregard for life in Istanbul). Our rituals become twisted in the public's minds and are barely recognizable in the press and public forums. Nothing we do now can change the long-standing impressions that to some we are irrelevant and to others, conspiratorial. We can now finally accept that in the public's mind we are considered base, silly, and as irresponsible as a drunken college fraternity.

Why do Freemasons have detractors and enemies? More appropriately, the question should ask: *why should we have enemies?* The answer could be for the simple reason that our philosophy is one that is proved by time, is ever humble and self-reflecting. We teach personal responsibility through self-development, self-knowledge and improvement of society through enlightened individuals' creative involvement—all under the banner of a concept of a unified Creator with an equally bound fraternity and unfettered by sectarianism. If this is truly the Craft's purpose, then we will always under attack by those born ignorant with wounded souls and minds, or by individuals who would spread their own lies and misinterpretations over the Earth to sow discord.

Are we to treat our traditions and philosophies, carved out by many brave men under penalty of death or persecution, as some fun little club we go to escape and where we can reduce our rites to mere hazing ceremonies--all because we have lost the ability to understand and follow these traditions?

The issue of education and its emphasis, as in all of life, should be revered and upheld. By education I don't mean just the elucidation of our symbology and ritual, but by consciously connecting it to our own lives—not just brethren, but to all of humanity.

A brother from France with whom I am in communication said it succinctly, ***“...learning a ‘path of life’ is learning to think and think twice before behaving; learning to think thrice before speaking; learning that fellowship should follow ‘knowing ourselves’ as well as each other. It is not because we belong to the same Order that it makes us better fellows.”***

Our Craft is changing and, I believe, seeking to migrate back to its primary philosophy and tradition. Populations of men now joining our ranks want to know more about our traditions beyond casual information and how they can contribute in order to maintain it for the next society. These men, masons first in their hearts, are not afraid of greatness and perfection in their lives which is the wonderful result of the hard work in uncovering the knowledge of Spirit. I feel that there is a great fear of the qualities of greatness and

proress amongst the rank-and-file in our society because of a misunderstanding to be these things, then one is above the common man and therefore an aristocratic fop. The finer points of why this attitude is untrue and degenerate to humanity are many, but it rests on a simple and natural result: that the impulse resistance to greatness through learning and wisdom is to deny the self of the ability to adapt and evolve. Furthermore, it is a denial of love of the self and of humanity.

While our brethren are attacked overseas by fanatics who view us as enemies in the context of ideological and spiritual warfare, we do not want our domestic fanatics and the ignorant to be given strength locally by innocent stupidity. We should be strong and exemplify our Masonic heritage for the good of all Freemasons whithersoever dispersed.

I would be without hope if I did not realize that I am beginning to see recognition of our problems within Grand Jurisdictions and I also see individual lodges striving to transform themselves as viable centers of learning. Nevertheless, I would caution that our own demons might still overtake our noble spirits unless we reawaken the progressive soul of the Enlightenment Period that engendered our great Craft.

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