

Civilization in Our Minds

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One can imagine a “Lone Ranger,” but a “Lone Freemason” seems a contradiction. Freemasons are a band; a working team of men. Not only are we a team, we are one of the busiest groups one can find. One often hears from Masons that they have been so busy that they met themselves either coming or going.

In all this doing, it is wise to stop for a moment and to reflect on our lives as Freemasons. Be forewarned, when one allows one’s mind the quiet for remembering, the memories of masonic experiences may come rushing in like the water which threatens to overflow the transom when a motorboat comes to a stop.

As I write, I remember, as a young mason, going with my lodge to visit a dying brother. As we were leaving, he insisted on standing by the door and shaking every brother’s hand. He passed away soon after that night. All these busy days, we have been witnessing a bravery, a civility, a caring of first-class magnitude.

My first experience as master at a grave-side, masonic service is still vivid in my mind. In the late fall, we stood in a graveyard. It snowed huge, solemn flakes floating down on our bare heads and the top of our brother’s casket. What we have been doing as Masons has sometimes been difficult. We have learned, at least in part, the lesson of the Third Degree and striven to build a character that commands us to do not necessarily what is grand and glorious but, rather, what is right.

I also remembered the night I became an Entered Apprentice. Hoodwinked, the lodge room we entered seemed to have grown huge and the knocks that sounded seemed suspended in time. I remembered thinking I am totally in the hands of others. Then came the moment when I was addressed as Brother. It was one of those moments that has made for me, as it has for you, so much difference.

We say that we are builders and that the image of building lives as the very center of Masonry. What have we been building? Probably many things. For one, we have been building a brotherhood of belonging. That is a wonderful accomplishment! Yet I think that we have been building something of even greater import. As Masons, we have been involved in building a *civilization in our minds*.

Throughout man’s long, red history of growl and batter, a finer way has found voice. It speaks a new language that calls for individual dignity, for justice, for freedom, for responsibility and the lifting up of the unfortunate. This voice also champions the opening of new horizons through science and new vantage points through the arts.

This rational and caring voice also speaks in Freemasonry. One could make a useful list of behaviors one should or should not practice as stipulated in Masonic lessons and lectures, but as useful as such admonitions are, Masonry is primarily about enlarging the methods and practices of judgment, rationality and reliability built within our minds. The Roman poet Horace wrote to a friend these words concerning this civilization within: “Remember when life’s path is steep to keep an even mind.”

Freemasonry is about having an even mind, a mind prepared to deal rationally and with compassion in all eventualities.

Every time we have employed the plumb to test our up-rightness, or used the square of just practices, or applied the level to our egos, we have been building that civilization within. Whenever we talk, think about or use some portion of the Arts and Sciences, however small, we are developing an understanding and new capacity which becomes a part of what we are. Through all this Masonic experience, we have been assembling a crucial awareness of our human situation as well as a mosaic of critical concerns or categories which become the hallmarks of our response and the dimensions of a civilization in our minds.

Perhaps the best way to emphasize the importance of what we are calling an *internal civilization of the mind* is to indicate the social and moral catastrophe which comes with its absence. Some years ago, Lance Morrow, Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Policy Center, wrote an essay in Time Magazine on a horrendous murder which was then in the news. A mother who was on drugs had murdered her children. Morrow used in his essay an image of terror, the invasion of barbaric hordes which once savaged and destroyed so much of European civilization. He wrote: "The drug broke into her brain like a Visigoth and destroyed the civilization there."

The Renaissance Duke of Urbino was asked what was necessary to govern well. He answered *essere umano*, to be human. One of my students made a large sign bearing that motto, and we hung it at the head of the classroom in which we met. It stayed there for several years which was unusual as each summer the custodial crew cleared the classrooms of everything left behind or hung on the walls. A janitor told me he had left that sign where it was because he knew it must be important. To be truly human is to possess a working civilization in one's being and to labor upon its goodly expression in the deeds of one's hands and the compassion of one's heart. When such a state of consciousness fails or is not present for whatever reason, all hell breaks loose and the edifice we might have completed comes tumbling down.

I have come to believe that this building of a civilization in the mind is a prime aim of Freemasonry, for without such inward scope, balance, and practiced art what will be the cost and the ruin?

In our vexed times, we should remember that old challenge: *What came you here to do?* In answer we should become aware of civilization's growing voice announcing throughout human history the intention to build a habitation of knowledge and understanding shining in the light of caring and inspiration. Having internalized this intention, we must pick up our tools and go to work.