

Our Most Valuable Asset: Friendship

By Alphonse Cerza

Grand Historian, Grand Lodge A.F & A.M. of Illinois

Freemasonry has many facets which have attracted men of good will of every race, religion, political view, and social position into its ranks throughout the world for many years. Every member has his own individual reason for joining the Craft, but generally its chief appeal is the charitable work it does, the philosophy of life taught by the Craft with its visible exhibition by Freemasons in their exemplary conduct in the everyday world. All these items are important, but to the non-member who has given this matter any thought whatsoever it soon becomes apparent that the greatest asset in Freemasonry is the spirit of friendship that exists between Freemasons in their relationship with one another and their attitude of thoughtfulness for the welfare of others. For example, many years ago the words "Mason" and "friendship" were often used synonymously.

Our historical background supports this view. Dr. James Anderson in his Constitutions of the Free Masons, published in 1723, reflected the traditional fundamental principles of the Craft when he stated in the first Charge that "Masonry becomes the Center of Union and the Means of conciliating true friendship among persons that must have remain'd at a perpetual Distance." And in the 1738 edition of the same book, the wording was changed slightly but the meaning was the same when he stated "Thus Masonry is the Center of their Union and the happy Means of conciliating Persons that otherwise must have remain'd at a perpetual Distance." This idea was not new with Anderson since the idea of friendship prevailed in the Ancient Manuscripts which required the members to address themselves as "brothers," attend to their religious duties, respect other members of the Craft, and that all lodge members be considerate of each other both inside and outside the Craft. There were also provisions that members help each other in finding employment or giving work to members seeking employment or to give them money to enable them to travel to the next place where employment might be available. Furthermore, when the Grand Lodge was formed in 1717, in London, the leaders adopted a non-sectarian rule and also prohibited the discussion of political matters in the lodge. These new rules were intended to eliminate friction and disharmony among the members and further promoted the idea of friendship. Requiring a belief in God, teaching that all men are brothers, and that we should always be kind and charitable towards others has created an atmosphere of harmony

among the members and has promoted the development of warm and enduring friendships between the members of the Craft. It has also encouraged our members to be good neighbors, good citizens, and to be loyal to established government.

There are many definitions of the word "friend." It means one who is in a warm personal relationship with another person. It means a person who is ready to assist you in your plans. Many years ago an English periodical had a contest and offered a prize to the person submitting the best definition of the word "friend." Here are a few of the definitions which were sent to the publication:

"One who multiplies joys, divides grief, and whose honesty is inviolable."

"One who understands our silence."

"A watch which beats true and for all time and never runs down."

And here is the definition that won first prize: "A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out."

Many years ago, my father stated to me that the most valuable thing anyone can have is to have a friend. But then he added that in order to have a friend, you must be a friend. On other occasions he would say that a friend is worth more than a thousand ducats. You will note that the idea is in the nature of a two-way street. Freemasonry with its emphasis on the obligations we owe to others exemplifies this idea of the value of friendship in the strongest way possible.

What great persons have said about the subject of "friends" is of interest because the statements reveal a deep need for friends and their importance in the lives of persons to make them happy. Aristotle, in his Nichomachean Ethics, said: "The perfect friendship is that between good men, alike in their virtues." Keats, the great English poet, compared friends to "a beacon light guiding a ship into port on a dark misty night." Brother George Washington, in one of his letters, said: "Actions, not words, are the true criterion of attachment of friends." Thomas Jefferson said: "One gives meaningful expression to friendship only when he does something thoughtful, unselfish or pleasantly surprising for the person he esteems." In a poetic mood, Oliver Wendell Holmes described friendship as "the breathing rose with sweets in every fold." Seneca, the Roman savant, once said: "Friendship sweetens all our cares and dispels our sorrows." Coleridge, the English poet, said: "Friendship is a sheltering tree." Sir Francis Bacon wrote that "friendship redoubleth joys, and cutteth griefs in half." And let us not forget the lesson exemplified in the fifteenth Scottish Rite degree of the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction: "Life Without Friends is Worthless."

The true value of friends cannot be underestimated. There is nothing worse than being alone or having the feeling that there is no one around that you can rely on for help or companionship. Nothing can be more depressing then the feeling that there is no one that cares about your welfare. On the positive side, the mere fact that one knows that he has friends is a comforting

feeling. So that the possession of friends is an absolute necessity in life in order to be happy. I remember an old friend who was a bachelor and had no close relatives. He lived in a rooming house where most of his fellow roomers were transients. Being a member of the Craft opened up many opportunities for him to spend his time profitably. Rather than going to his room each evening after work, he managed to go to his lodge on each meeting night. He also "adopted" a number of other lodges within a reasonable distance and visited them regularly. Many of the members of those lodges saw him so regularly that they never realized that he was only a visitor and not a regular member of that lodge. He always pitched in when there was a need for workers and he made himself useful. At these lodge meetings he paid special attention to the reports about members and he took notes. On nights that he was not attending lodge meetings, he visited sick members, offered to do things for them, and cheered them up with his presence. Thus he was being a real friend toward his fellow members and it gave him a genuine "lift" to feel that he was utilizing his time doing something worthwhile. This illustrates how Masonic friendship is a two-way street in that benefits result to everyone with these many contacts at meetings and with other relationships.

I am also reminded of the member who came from a family in which he was an only child. He missed the usual activity within a family unit where there are a number of brothers and sisters. When he joined the Craft, he acquired a large number of Brothers and he acquired the feeling that he was no longer alone. To him the word "Brother" meant a great deal more than it did to the average member. Joining the Craft was a deeply moving experience for him for he realized that he had acquired an unspecified number of friends to whom he was bound by an obligation stronger than any physical binding could be.

The member who becomes active in his Masonic lodge and engages in its work by necessity will be in contact constantly with other members who are also similarly engaged. Taking part in meaningful and worthwhile projects with other good men creates a camaraderie between them which blossoms forth into intangible and unexpressed respect by one person for another. Because of these projects, Freemasonry offers unlimited opportunity for the creation of warm and close friendships among its members. The Mason who does not regularly attend lodge meetings and also engages in some work for the lodge and its members misses one of the valuable assets which the lodge has to offer its members. The opportunity to make friends.

Another element which contributes to this development of close friendships within the Craft, is the philosophy that Masons are taught to be charitable and that this word is to be construed in its broadest sense. To the Mason it means more than just giving alms; it means more than writing a check for a worthy cause. It means that you will go that extra mile to help another person in need of help beyond any call of duty. It means that you will listen to a Brother's troubles as he seeks to unburden himself of his feeling or desire to talk things over with someone. It means to sympathize with a person who is in pain or in trouble and thereby help

him to lighten the burden. The lesson of the faithful breast and the listening ear are always before us.

Masons who join appendant bodies of the Craft often do so in order to expand their Masonic contacts and to extend their charitable work because these bodies always have such projects. When good men gather together to accomplish something that will benefit the Craft, its members, and the community these types of associations are by necessity ones that cover long periods of time and require many hours of working together with good men to accomplish worthy goals. Such increased association is bound to develop mutual respect among members working together which will develop into warm friendship.

When a Mason meets another Mason for the first time, he knows that the other person believes in God, that he therefore believes that all men are brothers, and that as a result he must be kind to other persons and help them in every possible way. Such knowledge is bound to bring the two persons closer together for they instinctively realize that they have many beliefs in common. You know without any express statement that a spiritual tie exists between Masons because you can expect honorable conduct from the new contact.

For one who travels extensively, Masonic friendship manifests itself time and again. Whether it is visiting a Masonic lodge or attending a meeting of an appendant body, or in the market place, when you meet another Mason you always feel a kinship with him. You always find the door open with a welcome sign. This can be valuable if you are in a strange place. It becomes doubly valuable if you are in need of suggestions, advice or help of some kind. You not only have a comfortable feeling because you know help is near, but there is also a feeling of trust and faith that is so valuable in all human relationships.

Non-Masons often have observed that there exists between Masons an elusive something that creates a spirit of friendly relations between Masons. It is to be noted that strangers who meet and discover that both are members of the Craft immediately feel a kinship with each other. Masons recognize this mutual feeling and describe it as the "tie that binds" but this general description mystifies and intrigues non-members. He notes the friendly feeling that exists between the members though they may have just met, but he does not realize that when Masons meet for the first time they instinctively feel a close relationship because of the unique teaching methods used in the conferring of the three degrees, whereby certain obligations are assumed which bind Masons to a high moral code which makes them better men on the spiritual and moral level.

This valuable asset of Freemasonry too often is so obscured that few of our members are aware of it. We should call this to their attention. Having a large number of friends will make a person happier, a better person, and happy persons help make this a better place in which to live. This elusive element of Freemasonry is the most valuable asset that each of us has as a member of the Craft and it is also one of the most valuable assets of Freemasonry as an organization.

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