

Surprised By Joy!

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This STB is filled with inspiration and pride for all Freemasons A wonderful story is told linking our ancient operative Masons to the Masons of today It will paint a picture of what our order is truly all about! – Editor

Freemasonry is about life. It is about living our lives with a special responsibility and with a certain joy.

Brother Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe wrote that:

The Mason's ways are
A type of Existence,
And his persistence
Is as the days are
Of men in this world

Freemasonry was for Goethe a grand, earnest, solemn business. It was about making a "choice" which he says is both "brief and yet endless," a choice which is made before "regarding eyes... in eternity's stillness." Goethe's words strike us where we live. It is difficult to be nonchalant about the living situation in which we find ourselves. We are bumped and shoved into an awareness that we have entered upon a perilous journey – both "we" individually and "we" as neighbors. We find ourselves dwelling upon upheavals and between crises. Brother Goethe was right. Life is a matter of making a choice which is brief yet endless – brief in terms of our little lives, endless in human significance. As all Freemasons must know, the choice of which Goethe speaks is between the Light and the Darkness.

Freemasonry is about life and about the all important choice of how a life shall be lived and spent. Freemasonry is serious business. It involves a special moral responsibility to the well being of the whole community, but there is more. As our ritual puts it, our Masonic responsibilities are to be both our duty and our happiness. Above and beyond the sobering concerns of our Masonic practice, we find ourselves (to use C.S. Lewis's wonderful phrase)

continually "surprised by joy !" Such experiences most often come not in exceptional, epiphanic events but rather amidst our daily and ordinary lives. In fact, it is in these moments when the commonplace and the usual are suddenly made extraordinary, when there is suddenly revealed new significance or new beauty, or when a new empathy between human beings smiles that we find ourselves surprised by joy.

Surprised by joy! Recently I had such an experience. Browsing in a book store, I came across David Macaulay's delightful book of sketches and commentary entitled: Cathedral, the Story of Its Construction. As I turned the pages, there came one of those moments when concepts long in the making suddenly coalesce and meanings converge into a new wholeness. I was filled with a renewed awe at the enormity of the Medieval masons' endeavor and thrilled with their accomplishment. How did they dare such an impertinence against gravity? Who had the courage to work on the lashed pole standing more than one hundred feet above the ground? What faith gave heartbeat to this stupendous engineering and endurance? Above all there came a new realization of the marvelous extent to which the older operative practices still enlighten our speculative endeavor.

Macaulay chronicles the construction of Chutreaux Cathedral, and his sketches give a vividness to the whole building operation. Here, for instance, built between the buttress piers and against the cathedral wall are depicted the lodges where the masons labored, planned, and looked after the needs of their brethren. In these lodges those freshly come to the labor were entered as apprentices, those who had learned their trade were made fellows of the craft, and the masters of the work drew details upon the trestle boards.

There must have been problems aplenty in those operative lodges – even grimness and despair. For eighty-six years these masons, generation on generation, labored through exciting moments and discouraging times. For five years there was no work at all until more money could be raised. The original master of the work grew too old to oversee the operations. The master who took his place died of a fall from the vaulting scaffolding before the cathedral was dedicated. This is a story of human vision, sacrifice, tragedy and persistence.

One fact is clear, for those who labored in these lodges built against the cathedral walls there could have been no doubt as to their mission nor the importance of their work. The building itself defined their worth in their own eyes and in the opinion of the community. To them there must have come moments of joy when what had been so carefully crafted was hoisted into place and became part of the growing fabric – when stone by stone the magnificent nave enclosed the space where a multitude of people would look up and feel themselves in the very presence of God. Surprised by joy! I was having one of those Masonic moments when one feels a sense of the builder's vision and of purpose shared. How closely the parallels run between ourselves and those builders of the cathedrals! From their lodges built against the cathedral walls, they came forth trained in the use of their working tools, united in a network of belonging and shared purpose, and directed by a vision made manifest in well laid plans. They would build a high

place of worship which let in the Light. In a harmony of parts, in soaring lines which lifted the spirit heavenward, and with a moral geometry they consummated their choice, their purpose and their reason for being. Nor was this their vision alone. It found reality in the need of the community – the felt need to create a glorious place of connection between the dimness of this world and God's resplendent kingdom.

As our operative brethren came forth from their lodges trained as builders, so we emerge from our speculative lodges inspired and fitted for our task. We come forth as heirs to a rich tapestry of allegory – that ancient understanding in which we have received our preparation. What an essential, inspired and ongoing training it is filled with the human adventure and a reverence for that which lies beyond our understanding and within the glory of God. Under a constellation of symbols, we have seen a vision and acquired an art. It was Thomas Carlyle who put the essential nature of such an education in these words: "It is through symbols that man unconsciously and consciously lives, works and has his being." Through such a language of symbols we have received our skills as builders, and it is through this vital medium that we continue to learn. How often here in our lodges of preparation we are surprised by joy when a new understanding, like a burst of creative light, emerges from the ritual.

Surprised by Joy! I was talking to a group of new masons about our working tools and endeavoring to explain how the square enlightens moral truths. In an effort to illustrate its operative use, I was applying the square, which I had in my hand, to the edges of the podium. In that instant, it was I who was illuminated. I saw anew how the square tests a right relationship between two different surfaces and how the moral square of virtue speaks to a right relationship between individuals. There in a moment's understanding was expressed that "I and Thou" relationship which is so desperately needed in our world. There was an expression of what we as Freemasons have a responsibility to build – and build not only between individuals but between every segment within our communities if there is to be a cohesion and an environment of "just relationships". Here from this ancient symbol of the Craft spoke the urgency of just correspondences – the relationships of the square, the right angle, between the level of equality and the plumb of rectitude. Thus does our Masonic education continually enlarge our understanding, give us our calling and in joy send us out to labor.

Today our Masonic lodges stand close by the human community in which we are to build. Moreover, as in the case of our ancient brethren, the urgency of our calling arises not only in our Masonic vision but in the needs of our communities. In this response to needs both challenging and sobering also lies our happiness.

In the installation charge to the master of a Masonic lodge there is the following perennial and wise admonition which needs to be kept fresh in our minds: Charge the brethren to practice outside of the lodge those virtues they have learned in it; so that when a man is said to be a member of it, the world may know that he is one to whom the burdened heart may pour out its

sorrows, to whom distress may prefer its suit, whose arm is strengthened by justice and whose heart is expanded by benevolence.

This is our calling; to be responders to the needs of our communities in the midst of darkening times, to be choosers of the Light, "restorers of peace to troubled minds," forgers of partnerships in purpose, practitioners of a moral geometry whose axioms are tried and unfailing principles, to be demanders of equality based upon the dignity of all human beings, to be voices with instructive tongues, seekers with attentive ears, searchers after wisdom, and believers in the possibility of a better world.

With such responsibilities and visions, we Freemasons come forth from our symbolic lodges. And in the morning of a new century, we shall find our strength and our prosperity – our reason for being. We shall find all these things in the consummation of our building. Goethe was right. Freemasonry is a grand, earnest, solemn business, but as he also knew, our happiness lies in our response to the serious duties of Freemasonry. For that eternal Light does run through all that we do and shall experience in the name of brotherly love, relief and truth, and over and over again and most often when we least expect it, we shall be surprised by joy!

STB - June 1995