

Harmony in Ego: The Mortar That Binds the Lodge

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Worshipful Master, and Brethren,

Our Immediate Past Grand Master returned, again and again throughout his year, to a single conviction — that where there is no harmony in the Lodge, there is no good Freemasonry. Not poorer Freemasonry. *No* Freemasonry. It is a hard saying, and the longer I sit with it, the more exact I find it to be. We can have the ritual letter-perfect, the books in order, and the chairs full, and still have nothing of worth, if the men in those chairs are not at peace with one another.

Today I hope to explore with you a subject that sounds, at first, like a contradiction in terms — **harmony in ego, and how it helps to build a Lodge**. We are accustomed to thinking of ego as the thing harmony must overcome, the rough corner that has to be knocked off before two stones will sit together. So to speak of harmony *in* ego, rather than harmony *despite* it, may seem an odd place to begin.

And yet that we gather here at all — brethren of many lodges, meeting as one in a Lodge of Education and Research — is itself a small proof of the thing I hope to say: that the Craft goes furthest when men bring their differences into one room and tune them to a common purpose.

But I want to suggest to you today that the two are not enemies. A Lodge is not built by men who have no self. It is built by men who have brought the self into tune.

What we mean by harmony

We are told, in language every brother in this room knows, that harmony is the strength and support of all well-governed institutions, and more especially of our own. We hear it so often that the words can pass over us like the sound of a clock striking the hour — familiar, expected, and therefore unheard.

So let me ask the question plainly. Why harmony? Why not zeal, or knowledge, or numbers, or money? A Lodge could be rich in all of those and still fall apart in a single ill-tempered evening. But a Lodge that is poor in everything except harmony will endure. The strength of this Craft has never been in its possessions. It has been in the quality of the agreement between the men who kneel at its altar.

And here is the thing about harmony that we too easily forget. **Harmony is not the same as unison.** When a choir sings in harmony, the men are not all singing the same note. If they were, we might call it monotony, not music. Harmony is the sound of *different* voices — high and low, bold and quiet — each holding its own line, and yet sounding together as one. The bass does not try to sing the tenor's part. The tenor does not resent the bass. Each keeps his place, and from that order comes something none of them could make alone.

That, Brethren, is a Lodge. Not a room of identical men. A room of very different men, each holding his note.

What we mean by ego

Now, the ego. The word has been badly used in our day. We treat it as a synonym for arrogance, for vanity, for the man who must always be right. But the ego, properly understood, is simply the self — the “I” that walks

through this world, that wants to be seen, that wants to matter, that wants its work to count for something.

There is nothing shameful in that. The desire to be of worth is what brought most of us to this door in the first place. The brother who labours to learn his work, who wants to do it well, who hopes one day to sit in the East — he is not free of ego. He is *moved* by it. And thank God for it, because a Lodge of men with no ambition and no pride in their work would be a cold and lifeless place.

So the problem was never the ego itself. The problem is the **untuned** ego — the self that has not yet been brought into harmony with the men around it. And here our own working tools tell us exactly what to do.

The rough ashlar and the common gavel

Consider the rough ashlar. It is stone — good stone, sound stone, full of potential. But in its rough state it cannot be built with. Its corners are jagged. Set it against another stone and it will not sit; it rocks, it leaves gaps, it weakens the very wall it was meant to strengthen. The rough ashlar is not a *bad* stone. It is an *unworked* one.

That is the untuned ego. Full of worth, full of potential — and full of corners that keep it from fitting against its brother.

And what are we given to do about it? The common gavel, that by it we may divest our hearts and consciences of the vices and superfluities of life. The gavel does not destroy the stone. It does not grind it to powder. It knocks off only what is superfluous — only the rough corners that prevent it from taking its true place in the building.

Brethren, that is the whole of it. We are not asked to destroy the self. We are asked to knock off the corners — the need to be right, the need to be

first, the resentment when another is praised, the pride that turns a discussion into a contest. Knock those off, and what remains is not a smaller man. What remains is a man who *fits*. The perfect ashlar is not less stone than the rough one. It is the same stone, made true.

The corners we cannot see

But here I must be honest with you, Brethren, because there is a difficulty hidden in everything I have just said. I have spoken as though each man can simply take up his gavel and knock the rough corners off his own stone. And he can. But there is one thing the gavel cannot do on its own: *it cannot find the corners a man cannot see*.

The rough ashlar is not a flat thing — a drawing on a page with a single face. It is a stone, with sides. From where a man sits, he sees one or two of those faces, and over a lifetime he grows used to them. The edges that once felt rough begin to feel normal. He becomes accustomed to his own shape, until from his own angle his stone looks fairly smooth — finished, even. But a stone viewed from only one side can never truly be square.

This is where the brethren stop being merely the men we build *beside* and become the men we are built *by*. Set a stone in the middle of this room and ask ten brothers to describe it: one speaks of its weight, another of a crack along the far side, another of how the light catches a surface the rest never noticed. None of them is wrong. None is complete. Each is simply standing where I am not — and so each can see a face of me that I cannot see for myself.

That is the deepest reason harmony matters, and why no man can tune his ego alone: he does not have the angle. I need the brother who stands where I do not stand to tell me, gently — *there, that corner; you have stopped noticing it, but the rest of us have not*. He is not hunting my faults. He is

simply standing somewhere else. And when his insight reaches me wrapped in brotherly love rather than flung as an accusation, it is no injury — it is a gift. A chisel used carelessly will shatter the stone; the same chisel, guided by patience and brotherly love, shapes it.

There is a word for this from the Xhosa and Zulu peoples of southern Africa — *Ubuntu*. It is often translated very simply, but its meaning runs deep: *a person becomes a person through other persons*. Without you, there is no me. In this Craft I would put it only a little differently — a Mason is made true through other Masons. Surrounded by good men, men of different lives and struggles and angles of sight, without you there is no *better* me.

And so ours remains the only stone we are given to work; no man may take up the gavel and presume to dress his brother's stone for him. But neither can any man dress his own stone in the dark. The cutting is mine to do — and the seeing is ours to share. That is no threat to a man's dignity. It is the very reason the Lodge exists.

The Temple that rose in silence

There is an old detail in the building of King Solomon's Temple that holds this whole matter in a single image. We are told the stones were made ready — hewn, squared, and finished — in the quarry, far off; so that when they were brought up and set in their places, the great house rose without the sound of axe, or hammer, or any tool of iron heard upon it. The Temple was raised in silence.

Consider what that asks of a stone. All the violence of the work — the cutting, the chipping, the loud and stubborn labour of making a rough thing true — was done *elsewhere*, and done *beforehand*. By the time a

stone reached the building, its quarrel with the chisel was long over. It had nothing left to do but fit.

That, Brethren, is a discipline harder than it sounds. Once a brother has shown me a corner I could not see, the cutting of it is mine to do — and much of it is best done quietly, in the quarry of my own heart, before I come up to the assembly. The brother who arrives already squared adds his strength in silence. The brother who carries his rough corners unworked into the Lodge — his grievances, his need to win the room, his hunger to be seen — fills the building with the noise of iron, and no house was ever raised in such a din. We come to Lodge to *set* the stone, not to spend the evening hammering at it in front of everyone.

How the untuned ego pulls a Lodge apart

We have all seen what the rough corner does to a wall. Let me name it honestly, because we cannot smooth what we will not look at.

There is the brother who cannot let a decision go against him without making the Lodge pay for it. There is the brother who measures every evening by whether *he* was thanked, *he* was consulted, *he* was recognised. There is the brother who turns a simple matter of business into a question of his own honour, so that no one can disagree with the proposal without seeming to insult the man. And there is, sometimes, the brother who has given long and faithful service, and who cannot now bear to see a younger man do the work in a way that is not his way.

None of these are wicked men. Most of them are good men with one corner left unworked. But that single corner, set against the others, leaves a gap. And a wall is only ever as strong as the joints between its stones.

How the tuned ego builds it

Now turn it the other way. Picture the Lodge that holds together — and ask yourself *why* it holds.

It holds because brethren have learned to meet upon the level. The level is not a tool of false modesty; it does not ask the able man to pretend he is not able. It asks something harder. It asks the able man to remember that the man kneeling beside him is his equal in the only sense that matters here, whatever the world outside may say of either of them. To meet on the level is to bring your gifts *and* set down your rank at the same threshold.

It holds because brethren have learned to keep their passions within due bounds. We are taught to circumscribe our desires, to keep them within compass. The man who has done that work does not stop *feeling* — he feels as keenly as anyone — but he has set a boundary line his temper will not cross, even when he is in the right. *Especially* when he is in the right, for that is when temper is most tempting and most damaging.

And it holds because brethren have learned the quiet dignity of taking a humbler station. Not every man can sit in the East, and not every evening. There is great work to be done at the door, at the columns, in the kitchen, in the silent labour no one ever toasts. The harmonised ego does not ask, “Is this beneath me?” It asks, “Is this needed?” The man who can be a second violin without bitterness — who can hold a supporting line and let another carry the melody — that man is worth ten soloists to the strength of this Lodge.

It holds, too, because brethren have made temperance a habit and not merely an idea. Of the four cardinal virtues, temperance is the one set to guard the ego — the steady governor that keeps a strong man from becoming a loud one. Temperance is not weakness; it is strength under

command. It is the difference between a fire in the hearth and a fire in the curtains: the same heat, but one warms the room and the other burns the house down. The intemperate man is not more passionate than his brethren — he has simply never set a boundary his passions have agreed to respect.

And it holds because brethren remember the lesson of the four-and-twenty inch gauge, which bids us divide our hours and lay aside a portion of them for the service of a brother. The ego counts all its time as its own. The harmonised man knows that some of his hours belong to others — to the new Mason who needs an evening of patient coaching, to the older brother who needs a ride and a visit, to the quiet labour that fills no seat of honour and earns no toast. And here is the quiet miracle of it: a man cannot give his time freely to a brother and remain wholly full of himself. The very act sets his own importance a little to one side. In serving his brother, he tunes himself to the Lodge.

The practical work of harmony

I do not want to leave this in the clouds, Brethren, because harmony is not built in the clouds. It is built in the ordinary evenings — in how we conduct our business, how we disagree, and how we hand on what we have been given.

When we differ — and we *must* differ, for a Lodge of men who never disagreed would be a Lodge of men who never thought — let us differ on the level. Argue the matter; never wound the man. A motion may be defeated without a brother being defeated. We can be of one heart while being of two minds, if we will only guard our tongues with the same care we guard our other obligations.

And when the Worshipful Master has ruled, or the Lodge has voted, the matter is settled — and the brother who argued hardest against it is now as bound to support it as the brother who proposed it. To labour cheerfully for a decision we lost is among the harder things the ego is ever asked to do. But before the gavel falls we are free to speak our minds plainly, and we should; after it falls, we are one. The strength of the Master's gavel was never in the sound it makes — it is in our agreement to be governed by it.

And when the time comes to make room — and it comes for every one of us — let us make it gladly. The older brother who steps back and lets a younger one find his own way to the work is not surrendering his place. He is doing the highest thing a builder can do: he is making sure the building will stand after his hands have left it. The Lodge we sit in tonight was tuned for us by men we will never meet. The only honest thanks we can offer them is to tune it, in our turn, for men we will never meet either.

The cement of brotherly love

I have spoken all this while of smoothing the stone — of knocking off the corners so that one brother may sit true against the next. But let me say plainly what every operative mason knew: a wall of perfectly dressed stones, merely stacked, is not yet a building. Set them ever so closely, fit them ever so exactly, and a hard enough push will still bring them down. Something has to bind them. Something has to fill the joint and hold stone to stone through every storm the years will bring.

That something is the cement of brotherly love. It is the most ordinary substance in the whole of Masonry, and the most indispensable. We mix it in the small things — the hand offered to a brother in difficulty, the visit paid to the sick, the quarrel quietly let go, the welcome given to the stranger at the door. None of it is grand. All of it is binding.

And mark this: smoothing the stone and laying the cement are not two separate labours. They are the same labour. Every corner of ego we knock away makes a little more room for love to take hold; and every act of love makes the next corner easier to surrender. Harmony, in the end, is not merely the absence of friction between us. It is the active presence of charity among us.

Conclusion

Brethren, we did not come into this Craft to lose ourselves. We came to be made true. The gavel in our hands was never meant to break the stone — only to free it of what kept it from fitting. The harmony we are charged to preserve was never the silence of men with nothing to say. It is the deeper music of strong, distinct, self-possessed men who have learned to sound together. And if our Immediate Past Grand Master is right — that without harmony there is no good Freemasonry — then harmony is not the soft and pleasant edge of our work. It is the very heart of it, and the work on our own ego is how we keep that heart sound.

So let each of us go out from here today and lay the gavel to his own ashlar — not to another's, ours is the only stone we are given to work — and knock off one corner. The need to be right. The hunger to be thanked. The resentment we have been nursing since some evening we can barely remember. Knock off that one corner, and we will sit a little truer against the brother on either side of us. And a Lodge of men sitting true against one another is, in the end, the only Lodge that has ever been built, or ever will be.

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.

So mote it be.