



LODGE VEGAS # 32

The Intolerance of "Intolerance"

If brotherly love, relief, and truth are the foundation stones of Freemasonry, Tolerance is the cement that unites them. Yet, in a world that has recorded and/or witnessed increasing tolerance, we as Freemasons are intolerant of much. In many ways, the unacceptable level of intolerance within our lodges makes sense when we observe the efforts to maintain the current status quo.

As a fraternity, we have long spoken of tolerance, universalism, and Freemasons meeting upon the level. This is fantastic ideal and is it true? Do Freemasons really practice tolerance and equanimity toward all, and have they in the past? Does Freemasonry treat African Americans the same as Caucasians, Moslems, Jews, Hindus, Mormons, and other monotheistic faiths the same as Christians; women the same as men? Can we within and those without truly observe that there is no bigotry in Freemasonry? Have you heard racial or anti-Semitic jokes, racial or anti-Semitic slurs, and pejoratives, stereotypes of men, women, religions, races, and ethnic groups from another Freemason? Personal observations and experiences have exposed this writer to all of these intolerant comments-not just from the profane world, these were heard directly from the mouths of men who call themselves Freemasons.

What about tolerance between brethren? Is a Worshipful Master tolerant of the youngest Entered Apprentice when he may offer a different idea? Is a Grand Master tolerant of the constructive criticisms offered to benefit the Craft as a whole? Or, when a brother confronts a Grand Master and holds him accountable for his verbal commitments? Is the Grand Master tolerant of this brotherly accountability that has been requested? Perhaps a brother disagrees with the view of a Grand Master, is he tolerant of that view and willing to labor with him toward a successful outcome? How about the brothers who adhere to different political philosophies, have brothers been tolerant of their different perspectives and remained brothers in truth? Again, this writer has observed much intolerance in the circumstances described above.

Do Freemasons honestly support the right of each brother to be different from a majority? In the 1900s Freemasonry envisioned itself as builder of society, while supporting freedom and democracy. Freemasons who wrote and spoke during this period identified the fraternity as an institution working toward the betterment of society, welcoming men of all races, religions, ethnicities, cultures, socio-economic levels, and all backgrounds together and promoting a world of peace. H. L. Haywood

said we should improve the human condition through education and use Freemasonry to help the human family live happily together.

While the United States has evolved incrementally in its overall views on tolerance, many of its citizens are stuck in an age and continue to promote an attitude of intolerance. The Women's Suffrage movement provided for the national tolerance of the feminine vote and eventual participation as elected officials. Yet, this was a small embrace of toleration since women have been fighting for equality and slowly gaining pieces of that which they seek over a lengthy period. More than 30 years has passed since the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was defeated and women are still seeking equal status with their male counterparts in American society.

African Americans were released from the bonds of slavery in the course of the U.S. Civil War of the 1860s. Yet, these citizens still were not tolerated by mainstream society outside of their socially constructed place for almost another 100 years. The 1960s exposed the horrific lack of tolerance for not only African Americans; it also exposed the religious prejudices held against a candidate for the U.S. Presidency. The Civil Rights Act addressed the intolerance of the populace through the rule of law and while it looked good on paper and the media and elected officials applauded it, there was little in the form of enforcement. More sadly, Freemasons failed to accept African American males as equals and continued to consider their Prince Hall Affiliation (PHA) counterparts as "clandestine" and thus unworthy of their fellowship and recognition until well into the 1980s. Embarrassingly, there are still 13 southern Grand Lodges that continue the charade and lack of tolerance by failing to recognize the PHA Grand Lodges within their states.

Jews are still the brunt of bigotry, religious intolerance, and anti-Semitic jokes and stereotypes. They are the victims of hate crimes and are blamed by fanatics and conspiracy theorists for the ills of the world. Homosexuals are also the victims of great intolerance, religious and societal hate speech, and untrue stereotypes attributing HIV/AIDS to be the result of their sexual orientation.

Yet, our society of friends and brothers speaks of our diversity as an enriching aspect of our fraternity. It is a brotherhood that joins men of all walks of life together. James Anderson said in the 1700s, Freemasonry brings men together who would otherwise remain at a perpetual distance. Freemasons of the 1900s and the brethren of his generation said Freemasonry could promote world peace through human understanding.

Intolerance, racial, ethnic, religious, social, and political injustice has plagued the United States and throughout the world. The experiences of intolerance by humans, including Freemasons, throughout the world reveals that humanity must learn to deal to with equanimity interacting with differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicities, culture, language, nationality, lifestyle, religions, and political differences if we are to survive and continue evolving as a species.

Freemasonry could be and could have been in the past, that in all times and in every way, the single promoter of tolerance and meeting upon the level. As Freemasons, we could be the leaders in seeking racial and cultural harmony, egalitarian relationships, and vocational parity between men and women, and create space for respectful relationships between people of differing political philosophies.

One might wonder when Freemasonry exhibited the principle of tolerance philosophically as well as practicably. No greater exhibition of tolerance has been observed than the exhibitions expressed during the U.S. Civil War. This writer is confident that these exhibitions occurred as a matter of course in daily life and yet seems to have become a rare practice following the U.S. Civil War. No greater test of tolerance exists than that which occurs in the midst of armed conflict resulting from differing political philosophies and ideologies. The following excerpt is but one example of the practical applications of tolerance that occurred during the most intolerant days of U.S history.

Masonic Burial by the Enemy

On June 11, 1863, the Federal gunboat Albatross, with Lieut. Commander J. E. Hart of St. George's Lodge #6 in New York in command, was anchored on the Mississippi River opposite the town of Bayou Sara (some accounts say St. Francisville) which is 15 miles above the Rebel fortification Port Hudson. The gunboat was part of the ships laying siege to Port Hudson, Louisiana. Commander Hart had been in a delirium for many days and was confined to quarters. A shot rang out and the Ship's executive officer Theodore E. Dubois and the doctor found the commander dead.

The officers of the ship not wanting to bury their commander in the river sent a flag of truce ashore to discover if there was a local Masonic Lodge. William W. Leake, the acting Master of Bayou Sara lodge was approached by Captain Samuel White, who lived near the river, to hold a Masonic Funeral for Commander Hart.

Brother Leake replied, "As a soldier of the Confederate Army, I think it is my duty. As a Mason, I know it is my duty." On June 13th, a few members of the local lodge in Masonic regalia gathered and met the procession of 50 men from the Albatross under a flag of truce at the top of a hill. Brothers Benjamin F. and Samuel F. White of Bayou Sara, the surgeon and the two officers of the gunboat who were Masons were in the procession along with a squad of marines at "trail arms."

Leake and the local Brothers marched in front of the corpse to Grace Episcopal Church Cemetery and buried Brother Hart in the Masonic Section with military and Masonic honors with the service of the Episcopal Church read over him. Brother Leake led the Masonic part of the services. The US Surgeon and officers asked the Brothers to join them on the Albatross for dinner but they declined. The surgeon then offered Brother Leake to supply him with medicines for his family. Brother Leake declined but later the surgeon sent a few medicines to Leake through Brother Samuel White.

Hart's grave was marked with a wooden head plate for many years, and eventually a permanent marker covering the whole grave was dedicated. This marker states: "This monument is dedicated in loving tribute to the universality of Freemasonry." [Author's note: the phrase "and tolerance" could and likely should be added after the term "universality" in this monument dedication]

This single event is the epitome of tolerance ingrained within the teachings of Freemasonry. If brothers on opposite sides who have engaged in lethal battle in the cause of furthering their political and ideological philosophies are tolerant of their brothers and respect that tolerance enough to stop a war to conduct a joint funeral memorial for a fallen brother, then we as 21st century Freemasons should be no less tolerant of others that enrich our fraternity with their unique diversities.

Tolerance is a unique principle and expected behavior associated with Freemasonry, more so than any other institution in history. Because of this unique principle, Freemasonry could be the cutting edge organization promoting and supporting tolerance for all, everywhere, in all circumstances. Yet, in all honesty, if Freemasonry is to be the greatest, unique, and cutting edge leader toward tolerance, we must eliminate intolerance from within our brotherhood. Intolerance must be eliminated immediately and without waiting for others to change, or die. It must be adopted and made clear within our respective jurisdictional codes! It must be demonstrated and expected in our actions within all of our lodges; balloting, recognition, and friendships with all humans regardless of race, religion, color, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, politics, lifestyle, or anything else outside the makeup of a their character.

It is vital that the Masonic tradition and ideal of tolerance be incorporated within our brotherhood immediately and without delay. Paradoxically, there must be zero tolerance of intolerance related to anything beyond the makeup of another human's character. Through this action, Freemasonry can and will be the greatest institution on the face of the earth in its uniqueness toward promoting and supporting tolerance and equanimity for all humans. This action will be our strongest contribution and legacy on behalf of our Masonic ancestors, of us, our future brethren, and to the world. If we refuse to embrace the Masonic principle of tolerance, then we dishonor our ancestral brethren and ourselves and in this writer's opinion, have no right to claim association with the ancestral brethren who "met upon the level, acted on the plumb, and parted upon the square."

- Source: Knights of the North Masonic Dictionary

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