

A PLEA FOR UNDERSTANDING

This Short Talk Bulletin has been adapted from a talk given to Walton Lodge No. 559, Walton, New York, by a Past Master of that Lodge who served as Director of Ceremonies (1974) in the Grand Lodge of New York, R. W. Brother Fordham D. Tabor. We thank R. W. Brother Tabor for his permission to use this material as a Short Talk Bulletin.

A young college student visited one of his former high school teachers asking that he participate in a survey that the college was conducting. His former teacher was flattered and readily agreed. The first question, "What do you consider the most serious problem facing our society today", started the wheels of the teacher's mind in motion. Just for a fleeting moment, he recalled the story of the young man who had asked a sage, "What can I do to make this a better world?" To which the sage replied, "Reform yourself, and there will then be one less scoundrel in the world." But, no, this young fellow doesn't deserve a flippant answer....

"The most serious problem"! There are a number of problems that readily come to mind. The fuel crisis, inflation, the abusive use of drugs, the racial struggle going on all over the land, the battle against pollution of our environment, the rebellion of so many of our people, both young and old, against established rules and morals, the trend toward violence in our streets, the hippie and yippie movements, the growing lack of respect for our flag and for the rights of others, the economic crisis; these were some which came immediately to mind. To choose the most serious was another matter entirely. As he thought about these and other problems, attempting to classify them by degree as to seriousness and importance, one element was the lack of mutual understanding of the problems of others. The problems are readily apparent to us, for we are confronted with them daily in the newspapers, on radio and television, in our own communities, perhaps in our own families. But how well do we understand the people involved, their backgrounds, their ideas, the thoughts that make them do as they do? This lack of mutual understanding between peoples with differing ideas seems to be the most serious problem facing our society today, not only in the United States, but all over the world.

The years-long and on-going struggle between Democracy and Communism is engendered by basic differences in political ideology. Even in times of apparent peace the struggle goes on under the surface, erupting periodically in "Koreas" and "Vietnams." The long-standing attempts of racial, ethnic and religious minority groups to attain full recognition of their ideals, to gain equality of treatment and to end discrimination against themselves, has reached full-blown proportions today. Tragically, the trend is toward all kinds of violence to attract attention to their causes and to force acceptance of their goals.

The dissatisfaction of young people with our society as they find it, and their search for some way to change it, for some way out of the commonplace, has caused increasing numbers to experiment with all kinds of drugs, often casually at first, then with increasing frequency until the user is completely dependent upon his daily doses. New York City, with over 100,000 drug addicts, is a startling illustration of the depth and the scope of the problem. Many other cities and

even rural communities, both in America and elsewhere in the world, present a similar picture, if not in numbers, at least in the percentage of the population using drugs, with an attendant rise in violence. In spite of the publicity about contamination and pollution of our environment and natural resources, we see people casually throwing all kinds of trash and garbage in the streets and on our highways, we see the chimneys of industrial plants spewing their noxious fumes into the air, and we see raw sewage and other wastes dumped into our streams.

Today all over the world there is a moral decay through the common acceptance of pornography, licentiousness and sexual freedom as a way of life, almost to the point that we are reminded of the moral decay which preceded the fall of the great Roman Empire. We can read daily in almost any newspaper in the world of the violation of someone's rights through murder, rape, robbery, mugging, or through discrimination in employment and housing, or through betrayal of trust, both in private industry and in the public domain.

As we examine those and other problems facing us, one common fact stands out -- people generally, are all for themselves first. What any man wants, he strives to attain by any means available, without regard for anyone else. There is little, if any, thought for the ideas, wants and needs of another. While we call this selfishness, it is really caused by a lack of understanding.

There are exceptions, of course, to this picture. Americans working under the banner of the Peace Corps in many countries trying to help people better their way of life. Members of the Salvation Army who are dedicated to lives of service in helping others. Nameless volunteers in many countries working for better communities. Outstanding individuals such as Dr. Billy Graham who is constantly seeking to awaken people to the need for understanding each other through preaching the lessons of tolerance and brotherly love. The list of these people is long, too long, for enumeration here. When we hear of these people we are reminded of a ray of brilliant sunshine peering through dark clouds, that there is hope for a way to solve our problems.

As Masons, we, too, have our part to play. Freemasonry teaches us many great and glorious lessons. We have all learned the precepts of brotherly love and of finding our way through life by the light we find in that Great Light we place on our Altars. As we participate in the several degrees of our Order, we experience great truths, we learn lessons in many areas. So many lessons, in fact, that many of us become confused by their very multitude. Yet, if we will only search our memories and experiences, we will recall one great thought appearing in every lesson, weaving through the entire Masonic ritual like a golden thread in a tapestry, shining forth like a blazing beacon over the stormy waters of the sea. That great thought is Brother-hood, with all that the name implies.

To be a brother to a man means, among other things, basically to understand him. We cannot accept a man as our brother unless we are willing to understand him. Oh, we can call him "Brother," but to be a brother in truth we must understand him, we must be willing to see and overlook his transgressions, to applaud his successes as our own, to enfold him in our arms and make him a part of ourselves. And we must want him to do the same to us, for Brotherhood is not a one-way street. No man is willing to give of himself forever without receiving something in return. And yet, if we will make the initial move, perhaps some little action, perhaps only a cheery word of greeting, which will show him that we do care about him, that we respect his

rights as an individual, and that we understand his needs, he will usually respond and we can both walk that greatest of roads, that highway of Brotherhood, which is paved with mutual understanding and respect.

As Masons, we recognize that with every right, whether it be human, civil or moral, there are also certain obligations and duties to which we are basically bound. Duties we owe to our country, to our families, to our fellowman and to the Supreme Architect of the Universe. In our pursuit of rights, we must circumscribe our desires within the bounds of propriety, good taste and a sincere understanding of the common good.

Masons alone cannot solve all the world's problems, nor can Christians, Jews, Hindus, Moslems, or Buddhists. Nor can Americans, Filipinos, Russians, nor can the people of any country do it all. Neither whites nor blacks, browns, reds or yellows can find all the answers. But each, as individuals, can do his part, and the efforts of countless individuals, each imbued with the desire for mutual understanding of each other, can amount to a relentless, driving force strong enough to overcome any problem. We, especially, as Masons, have the tools at hand in the teachings of our Order. We must learn these lessons and we must study them until they become second nature to us. Most of all, we must not leave them at the doors to our lodges, but carry them with us into the outside world, where we must practice them with precept and example in our daily lives, in business, at recreation, in our family relationships, in our every contact with others. Then, and only then, can we truly say we are doing our part in striving for understanding of others.

This, then, is how he answered the young man's question. The most serious problem facing our society today is the lack of mutual understanding between people of all races, religions, and social and ethnic backgrounds. In solving this problem we will have taken a major step toward solving all of the other tremendous problems which beset us. No one man or one group of men can do it all, but each can do his part and make his impact on the total problem. We must achieve understanding if our world is to survive.