



Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

(OED) 1440 A.D. from Latin *praeceptor*

one who instructs, a teacher, a tutor, a mentor

When time with us shall be no more.....



'...She finally instructs you how to die'

How many Worshipful Masters have uttered the above line? How many of their Brethren have understood what is really meant? Most of us reckon that when we totter into old age, dying happens perfectly naturally and we really require no additional guidance on the matter, thank you very much! As ever in Freemasonry there is just a little more to it.

One thing is quite clear. Our operative forebears would neither have welcomed nor needed such pearls of wisdom. Theirs was a hazardous, intermittent and meagrely rewarded occupation. Support for the injured, for the unemployed, for the widowed family was a constant pre-occupation and their lodge charity chest was not so much an altruistic aim as essential for mutual survival.

With the emergence of Speculative Freemasonry in the late 17th and 18th century and with its membership drawn from amongst the professional, the better educated and the wealthy, requirement for mutual financial support had long faded. In an astonishing and far-ranging Address given in Paris on 21st March 1737, perhaps under some pressure from the French nobility, the Chevalier Charles Ramsay sowed the seeds of a Freemasonry founded not on craft skills and mutual survival but on a widespread global chivalry. He reputedly proposed a series of six degrees leading to that of the Knights Templar - known collectively as 'the Ramsay Rite'. [*All six survive today, some under new names.*] Honour, obligation and duty as well as brotherly love became their principal themes. As an exemplar of Masonic honour the Traditional History of Hiram Abiff was introduced into the Third Degree

Charity, Brotherly love, truth and worship were therefore no longer instruments of trade preservation confined to the workplace but were now being presented as principles by which a Freemason should be guided *throughout* his life.

To our classically trained Founders, Brotherly love was expressed in Greek by '*Agape*' and in Latin by '*Caritas*' which became anglicised as 'Charity'. True Masonic charity therefore is identical to Brotherly love. Both should therefore only flow from a compassionate heart, not a calculating head.

How do we express this Masonic charity today? Perhaps by giving up a Sunday afternoon's reading of the papers to visit a lonely old chap in a retirement home; perhaps by driving a colleague to Bath or Southampton Hospital for his daily radiotherapy; perhaps by giving up a Saturday morning to mow an elderly widow's lawn or tidy up the village byways – these might all be seen as contemporary examples of true Masonic charity and Brotherly love in action.

It was for these and comparable reasons that, in those heady days pre-1945 the status of 'Masonic Affairs' ensured it was placed next to 'The Court Circular' in *The Times* or *Telegraph*; Freemasons became widely admired and respected by the public not for their wealth but for the personal care, the compassion, the kindness shown by Masons towards their fellow men and women. Indeed, the large attendances at Masonic funerals bear testimony to just how much that Mason's departure was widely regretted.

May we return to the title: '*...She finally instructs you how to die...?*' Its full meaning now emerges as '*she finally instructs you how to die regretted, having lived respected*'. [A similar phrase occurs in a later ritual.] Freemasonry reminds us how to fashion our lives with that love, compassion and courage that enables us to be true both to our principles and as importantly to ourselves, often disregarding personal cost. With such guidance we are enabled to achieve the ultimate ambition of the ancient philosophers for Mankind – to live our lives with self-respect and to die without self-regret.

How very privileged we are to be Freemasons.

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