

Fraternally United in the Love of Humanity

Mary Jo Kokochak ©

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The past Grand Master of the International Order of Co-Freemasonry Le Droit Humain, Njordur Njardvik, spoke at the Cornerstone Conference in Manchester on November 11, 2006, and he has asked me to give you his warm and fraternal greetings.

Le Droit Humain is different from the United Grand Lodge of England and other Masonic obediences in three ways: first, it admits men and women equally; second, it has initiatory continuity from the first to the thirty-third degrees without any separation between the Craft and higher degrees; and third, it is international.

The international aspect of Le Droit Humain is reflected in its organizational structure in that it is not divided into grand lodges of particular countries, regions, or states. Instead, the lodges of each country are united into a federation, and each federation has a representative who is a member of an international body called the Supreme Council. This body meets three times a year in Paris and brings sisters and brothers from around the world together. The structure links different countries with each other and helps to unite them, and it is unique in the Masonic world.

Ten days ago, I attended the International Convention of Le Droit Humain in Paris. Members from forty-eight countries were present and meetings were translated into the three official languages of the Order, Spanish, French, and English. We were different in culture, race, religious background, and economic level, but we shared a vision of a united humanity in which all people must be included in the building of the holy temple. It was this vision that inspired many of us to knock on the door. This is expressed in the General Declaration of the International Constitution that says members "declare themselves fraternally united in the love of Humanity."

This is true of Freemasonry as a whole and it is certainly not unique to Le Droit Humain. The development of brotherhood is essential in Freemasonry, and it means both with our brethren, and also with humanity. I think we all agree that what is most undeveloped in human beings is love and compassion, and without this brotherhood is impossible. The present state of human consciousness sees outer differences; it separates, divides, and classifies people by superficial characteristics. This state of mind is and has been the cause of all conflict in the world. Differences are vital to add beauty and wisdom to the human family, and they should not divide it.

There are many organizations that promote brotherhood, but as a hope for the future, something to aspire to, an ideal. Freemasonry and the spiritual traditions of both the East and West tell us that true brotherhood is much more profound. Einstein put it this way "A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

Mystics and seers tell us that there is an underlying unity within everything in the universe, and the same life flows through every human being. Brotherhood understood in this way is a fundamental law in nature, and an actual fact. As Freemasons we have freely submitted ourselves to a process of change that will open the door to a new life and the experience of brotherhood. Freely, because the process demands an inner vision, and the will to change, and these cannot be imposed from outside. This is one reason no one is ever invited to join the Craft. The candidate must come properly prepared which means that a certain amount of work must already have been done on the rough ashlar.

Transformation is possible because life itself is evolving; it has a creative power that brings continual change and growth to everything in nature. What is disconnected is brought together, and into harmony; and this gives us the potential to overcome the sense of separateness. We can call this the Great Architect., Truth, love, compassion, or brotherhood. In essence, it is a creative principle in the universe and has nothing to do with sentiment, or even affection.

As with nature, our growth is gradual and each degree symbolizes a stage in the process. The initiation ceremony lays the foundation by introducing us to the altruistic life. The almoner's words to the candidate vary according to the ritual but their meaning is the same. In one ritual, the candidate is asked to "give to the sacred cause of charity." This is a first step in turning our attention away from ourselves and outward to the needs of others. We are not to be passive, something is expected of us, and we have a duty to actively give.

A recent newspaper article told about scientists who are using brain imaging and psychological experiments to study altruism and whether the brain has a built in moral compass. Neuroscientists at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland scanned the brains of volunteers as they were asked to think about a scenario involving either donating a sum of money to charity or keeping it for themselves. The results showed that when the volunteers placed the interests of others before their own, the generosity activated a primitive part of the brain that usually lights up in response to food or sex. Other studies have shown that animals also can sacrifice their own interests. The scientists concluded that altruism was not a superior moral faculty that suppresses basic selfish urges but was basic to the brain, hardwired and pleasurable. What this new research is showing is that morality has biological roots, like the reward center in the brain that lit up, and that they have been around for a long time.

The more researchers learn, the more it appears that the foundation of morality is empathy. Being able to recognize, even experience vicariously, what another creature is going through was an important leap in the evolution of social behavior. And, it is only a short step from this awareness to many human notions of right and wrong, one neuroscientist said. Some philosophers and theologians worry that reducing morality and immorality to brain chemistry, rather than free will, might diminish the importance of personal responsibility. And, some wonder whether the very idea of morality is degraded if it turns out to be just another evolutionary tool that nature uses to help species survive and propagate.

Does this mean that we are simply mechanical beings, with a physical brain but without a mind or any higher faculties? On the other hand, does it mean that the Great Architect has wisely provided for us by giving us a built in reward for being compassionate and caring? Some mystics, as well as scientists, think that as we develop spiritually our physical bodies also evolve. Is free will really compromised? We must still make the effort to act, and whether we choose to act at all is entirely up to us.

As far as empathy being the basis of altruism, the initiation, passing and raising ceremonies frequently remind us of the needs of our brethren as well as those of humanity as a whole. The distinguishing feature of a Freemason's heart is said to be charity. The almoner's request to the candidate to give to the sacred cause is meant to awaken their feelings on behalf of brethren living in poverty and distress. The candidate is given a "warning to their own heart" to "cheerfully practice the virtue they profess to admire." The candidate is taught that they also have a duty to their neighbor to act on the s..., render every kind office that justice or mercy may require, relieve his necessities, soothe his afflictions, and do for him as in similar cases you would wish he would do for you. Later they are told "mutual service is to be the law of human life," and all possessions, spiritual, intellectual, moral, and physical, are for the common wealth, which they are to "joyfully administer for the common good."

Monetary giving is important, and social action is necessary, but the words mean more than this. We are to divest ourselves of what the Buddhists call self-cherishing--love of self, indifference to

the interest of others, pride of opinion, love of wealth and gain; all of the traits that perpetuate our sense of separateness. Does this long process of freeing ourselves from the prison of self-centeredness also bring us happiness? Francis of Assisi said "it is in giving that we receive". The poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "I slept and dreamt that life was joy, I awoke and saw that life was service, I acted and behold, service was joy!"

You may be familiar with the work of Annie Besant who founded the British Federation of Le Droit Humain in 1902. She also was responsible for bringing Co-Freemasonry to many other English-speaking countries. She was a social activist who helped reform working conditions for women and children in Britain, and also worked in India to improve life for the Indian people. She wrote: "Brotherhood means holding everything for all, so that others may share in what we have, and rise to where we are today. It means sharing all willingly, not by compulsion of law, but by the more imperious compulsion of the Spirit within, which knows the unity of all. Brotherhood realized means the lifting of the human race: it means the real becoming of the man into God. And when we realize that all are brethren, we shall be impatient of our enjoyments, of all that we have around us to make life fair, until we are working for the good of all. That is the last lesson that we learn, that nothing is so great for embodied Divinity as service taken freely to all who are in need."

The Masonic system has provided us with the ideal structure to develop empathy and altruism, the lodge. The lodge works on many levels; it symbolizes our human constitution, the cosmos, and, obviously, brotherhood begins in the lodge. French Masonry uses an interesting word for the lodge, atelier, which means workshop and this seems a good description. It is a group of individuals with a common purpose and method of working who come together from different backgrounds; and, the lodge becomes a workshop to develop understanding and mutual support. Over time, differences become superficial and disappear and a bond forms which is closer than the ties of family.

The lodge also has the capacity for deeper work and to accomplish this the atmosphere must be different from the profane world. If the members share a spiritual vision, and the work is done with conscious intention, a lodge meeting will become, as my Masonic sister says, more than just a meeting. The combined thought and aspiration of the members will create something greater than is possible for any of them alone. A brother said that one of his most memorable experiences in lodge was during a discussion with his sisters and brothers when he realized that something had been created which was much more profound than any of their individual thoughts. He said that he felt connected to them in a way he had never felt before.

In some spiritual traditions, earnest participants are formed into a school, group, or a community, and in many ways, the lodge is similar. In India, harmony between members is so important that they are to learn to function like the fingers on one hand. In Buddhism, the members of the sangha or community work to overcome anything that is divisive, and to develop harmlessness and brotherly love so they become a cohesive and harmonious whole. It is the same in the lodge, if we feel animosity toward another member, we do not enter until the problem is resolved because without harmony the lodge is seriously limited in its work.

The lodge also has the potential to have an affect beyond itself. Aspirations and spiritual insights are not contained within temple walls, and the lodge can act as a spiritual vehicle to help humanity. If the members can move beyond an intellectual understanding of the symbols, the lodge can rise to more subtle levels and touch the spirit of Masonry.

It is the spirit of Freemasonry that can help establish brotherhood and peace in a world which is bitterly divided and in conflict. Someone has poetically said, "Nature has linked everything in the universe together by what could be called subtle threads of magnetic sympathy and there is a mutual correlation between a star and a man." Freemasonry is a search to discover these threads, and as one ritual says, takes us to the uttermost depths and while exploring the earth, we will learn the outside of ourselves is in reality within."