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DDGM Talks

Talk Number 3

Topic: What is the Length of Our Cable-Tow?

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WHAT IS THE LENGTH OF OUR CABLE-TOW?

The word cable-tow, we are told is purely Masonic in meaning and use. It is so defined in the dictionary, but not always accurately, that shows that we ought not to depend upon the ordinary dictionary for the truth about Masonic terms. Masonry has its own vocabulary and uses it in its own way. Even in Masonic lore the word varies in form and use. In an early pamphlet by Pritchard, issued in 1730, and meant to be an exposure of Masonry, the cable-tow is called a “cable rope” and in another edition a “tow line”.

On the other hand, I don't believe there is a single person in this room who cannot describe a “cable-tow”—and the descriptions would be very, very similar. We also know where it was on our first night in Masonry, and why it was there—again each answer would be the same.

Although a simple gesture, or ritual, there are far deeper meanings or symbolism connected with the cable-tow and its use.

If a Lodge is a symbol of the world, and initiation is our birth into the world of Masonry, the cable-tow is not unlike the cord which unites a child to its mother at birth. Just as the typical cord, when cut, is replaced by a tie of love and obligation between mother and child, so in one of the most impressive moments of initiation, the cable-tow is removed, because the brother, by oath at the Altar is bound by a tie stronger than any physical cable. The cable-tow was not removed until, by the act of assuming the obligations and fellowships of the moral life, a new, unseen tie is spun and woven in the heart. This “tie” unites us, henceforth, by an invisible bond, to the service of our race in its mortal effort to build a world of fraternal good will. What before was an outward physical restraint has become an inward moral constraint—and that is the secret of security and the only basis of brotherhood.

Further, the cable-tow is a sign of the pledge of the life of a man. As in his oath to forfeit his life if his vow is violated, so, positively he pledges his life to the service of the Craft. He agrees to go to the aid of a Brother, using all the power on his behalf, “if within the length of his cable-tow”.

However, let us remember that a cable tow has two ends. If it binds a Mason to the Fraternity, by the same fact it binds the Fraternity to each man in it. The one obligation needs to be emphasized as much as the other.

Control, obedience and direction or guidance—these are the three meanings of the cable-tow, as it is interpreted by the best insight of the Craft.

Of course, by control it is not meant that Masonry commands us in the sense that it uses force. Not at all. Masonry, with its moral nobility and human touch, rules men as beauty rules an artist, as love rules a lover. It does not drive; it draws. By the same method it wins obedience and gives guidance and direction to our lives.

The old writers define the length of a cable-tow which they sometimes call a cable’s length, variously. Some say a cable-toe, or cable length, is one nautical mile, others say it is seven hundred and twenty feet, or twice the measurement of a circle. Still others say that the length of a cable-tow is three miles. But such figures are merely symbolical, since in one man it may be three miles and in another it may be as easily be three thousand miles—or to the end of the earth. Each of us will remember the phrase “if within the length of my cable-tow”. For each Mason the cable-tow reaches as far as his moral principles go and his material conditions will allow. Of that distance each must be his own judge, and indeed each does pass judgement upon himself accordingly,

by his own acts in aid of others. What is the length of our cable-tow?
Who knows how far it reaches?

There is an unseen cord that binds
The whole wide world together;
Through every human life it winds
This one mysterious tether.

There are no separate lives; the chain
Too subtle for our seeing.
Unites us all upon the plan
Of universal being.

That is the mission of, and the blessing of Masonry. That is the
cord, or cable-tow which unites us all as seekers after truth, as lovers of
right, as servants of God and Man.

**What is the length of our cable-tow? Who knows how far it
reaches?**