Grand Oration - J. Kenneth Allsen

Grand Master Soderberg, Members of the Grand Lodge, Ladies and Gentlemen: A bit more than one year ago, Phil Soderberg and I met for breakfast at a restaurant here in Rochester. He picked up the check which told me I was in some kind of trouble. After being offered the job of Grand Orator, I of course asked what my duties would be. The primary one was to prepare and deliver this Oration, secondarily to appear and speak at cornerstone ceremonies and elsewhere as requested by the Grand Master. After agreeing to serve, I then went home to explain to my wife just what a Grand Orator was. As usual, she cut right to the chase, expressed her support, then informed me that she always knew that I was a big talker!

I then turned my thoughts as to what I might say in an Oration ... Oration ... the word conjures up images of 19th century speakers such as William Jennings Bryan, beguiling audiences with a tour-de-force of words, gestures and the power of their voices. Wow.

Well, folks, this is not that kind of a speech nor am I that kind of an orator. I am just going to take a little time to share with you a couple of lessons that occur in our teachings, though they are certainly not exclusively ours ... a couple of simple adages that are anything but simple to implement. One is "Judge not lest ye be judged." the other is "What ye give, give freely, for the Lord loveth a cheerful giver." Now there is a reason why these two mean so much to me given all the other lessons we learn as we move through life. If I had given this talk a formal title, it would have been "What do my Grandmother and Masonry have in Common?" Catchy, right? And probably sort of obvious to some of you who I am sure have had someone in you own life who influenced you in your chosen path.

My Grandmother's story begins 120 years ago in Denmark. She grew up, married and bore two children one of whom was my father. Then at age 26, her world fell apart when my Grandfather died suddenly and she was left alone in the world with two small children. She made her way to America as so many hopeful people did in those days, bringing one son and leaving the other with family members. In Rockford, Illinois she met and married another recent immigrant, from Sweden instead of Denmark, and was finally able to bring over her other child from Denmark and re-weld her family into one unit. By the time I entered the picture, she was already in her sixties, a strong tall woman still erect and full of unconditional love for my brothers and me, but with sternness about her that meant to guide our feet toward the right path. Even though her English was not of the best that did not stop her from reading, not just her beloved and dog-eared bible but also newspapers in Danish, Swedish and English. She was well informed on current events and a believer in the New Deal. I remember as a small child the two framed pictures of the Roosevelt’s that occupied an honored position over her favorite chair. Leaving no doubt as to her own role model, the picture of Eleanor was about half again larger than FDR's.

In her own way, she practiced the social reform of her day. A life-long soldier in the Swedish Salvation Army, she shared whatever she had with anyone who needed it. Her own personal dogma dictated that she be unquestioningly generous with others, and miserly in regard to her own needs. This sharing extended beyond material things in her view and also pertained to the sharing of her spirit. No one could err that she could not forgive, even when the error was repeated. And that the target of that forgiveness ranged from the crustiest bum who stumbled into the Salvation Army Citadel to a clumsy but well-intentioned grandson.

This somewhat prepossessing woman was an early riser as was I, and our best encounters always were in a predawn kitchen rich with the aromas of fresh-baked pastries and strong coffee. I stuffed myself with the baked goods and washed them down with illicit coffee liberally laced with lots of milk and sugar. From my earliest memory I can still smell the cinnamon, the coffee and hear her words as she worked.
And two of her most recurrent themes to me were those two adages about judging and giving, couched in various ways that a little boy might absorb together with lots of coffee cake. In retrospect, though it was not apparent to me at the time, it was important to her that I understand the importance of these two lessons. She knew enough of the world however, to understand that my implementation of them would have to be left to my own choice as I went through life. Equally important was the fact that she practiced these lessons herself and that they were more than just words, but rather an established fact in her own life.

Over the years, my brothers and I have often reminisced about our Grandmother and compared the impact she has had on us all. It appears in retrospect that she emphasized different things to each of us. For one, it was the virtues of hard work, for another respect for family, and so on. What she saw in me that caused her to stress the particular lessons of judging and of charity, I don’t know. Perhaps she saw potential problems for me in those areas.

Well, life moved on as it always does. Other influences entered and affected my life: friends, school and sports. Fortunately, most of these influences were positive, but just enough negative ones were there to make life interesting for my parents and to ensure that I would never be a candidate for sainthood. But one of the strongest positive influences in those growing-up years was Masonry. My parents became active due to somewhat dramatic circumstances. Before I was born, my older brother was struck by a car and the doctors were ready to remove his shattered right leg. But he was transported instead to the nearby Shriners Hospital in San Francisco. After eight years of treatment, with numerous hospital stays for surgery and therapy, my brother finally discarded his crutches at age fifteen. Two years later, he entered the military where he served for a full thirty years ... on two legs, thanks to the Shriners!

My Father and Mother spent the rest of their lives as members of the Masonic family, striving to repay in some way the great debt they felt, and to share their good luck with others. My brothers and I were of course all active DeMolays. There we received even more lessons regarding patriotism and filial love. These were further strengthened by the example of two strong-willed but free-thinking parents. And so many of our family activities revolved around events at our Masonic Temple. My parents' best friends were all Masonic and involved in those activities, as were their children who in turn became some of my own best friends. So it was a "given" that on my 21st birthday, I petitioned the Blue Lodge. My initiation, passing and raising soon followed. And while the associations were new, and the mode of presentation fresh and interesting, the lessons taught in the Lodge were not new, but rather like old friends, met again.

And like two of the oldest and most familiar of these friends were those two that my Grandmother had thought to be of most importance to me: Those of reserving judgment and of giving freely. I have spent much time in my life cogitating on both of these principles, and trying to make them relate realistically to my own personal code.

The first of these is "Judge not, lest ye be judged." A straightforward bit of wisdom, right? ... Hardly! If one followed this rule slavishly, he could never make even the simplest of decisions since each requires the weighing of alternatives. And we are constantly presented with other equally valid teaching that stresses the benefits of "good judgment", "your own best judgment,"..., and the list goes on. So what does this old adage mean to me? I think it refers in tolerance more than judgment. I am lucky to have few regrets in this life, but some of the ones I do have regard those times when I have decided that someone else was acting unfairly or rashly toward me or others that I cared about, and effectively have written that individual off as though they did not exist. In some cases, even years later, I have learned that there were extenuating circumstances that caused that individual to behave as they did and that I had missed a valuable chance to help, aid or assist them by walking away.

There is a corollary to this "Judge not" adage, also. If you do make a judgment of your fellow man, and we all do at one time or another, then keep it to yourself. A judgment reserved in your
mind alone is easily reversed. But once shared with someone else, it spreads and can never be recaptured. A reputation which it has taken a man an entire lifetime to create and strengthen can be destroyed in just a few minutes by a combination of hasty judgment and an intemperate tongue.

The other old friend I met in the Blue Lodge was the lesson "What you give, give freely, for the Lord loveth a cheerful giver". In fact it is the lesson of the very first degree so it must be of primary importance. But what does it really mean? The cheerful distribution of one's material wealth is easy for a Rockefeller or a Ford who has plenty left over. The total unselfishness of a Mother Teresa who gave her entire life and being to the poor is incredible but not realistic for most of us who undertake to feed, clothe and educate a family. We can all support charities financially and do so, each to his own level of comfort or even voluntary discomfort, but I believe the giving alluded to in this adage is more than just that of money. Of equal importance and sometimes even more precious than money is our time. The time you give to any endeavor is part of a finite supply given to each of us. One can always get more money somehow, but you cannot get more time beyond your original allotment. So do spend your time, but spend it even more wisely than your money.

When it comes right down to it, though, the adage really admonishes us to share whatever bounty we have been fortunate enough to attain in our lives, with others who may be struggling or those who have erred along the way. And the most sublime class of sharing that one can achieve is when it is done completely anonymously. Seeing one's name in print or receiving applause and plaudits for a simple act of sharing dilutes that act. It is only in anonymity that we can be truly sure that we are in the words of the adage "a cheerful giver."

Well, back at the beginning of this little talk, I said I was going to tell you what my Grandmother and Masonry had in common. The fact that two important lessons in my life came from those two sources is not the answer to that question. The answer is this: You can always tell someone what to do, but you can't tell them what to think! Lessons such as those I have emphasized here can be presented repeatedly, but individual implementation cannot be dictated. We are sentient beings and must always mold and shape the lesson to fit what we know is right - no one else has the right, or the omnipotence to do that. What a pity that so many totalitarian societies and much of organized religion have never grasped such a simple fact!

So that is what my Grandmother and the institution of Freemasonry have in common. They both understood that lessons are not rules. They should be offered but never enforced, and it is to the student, not the teacher, that the responsibility must fall.
Worshipful Grand Master Phil, I hope I have finally earned that breakfast you bought me. The next one is mine.

Thank you all for your attention!

J. Kenneth Allsen, Grand Orator