

Brotherhood: Do We Really Mean It?

(Implications of the Obligations)

Jim Tresner

Sometimes the strangest things trigger memories. I was having my hair cut. I have to go to a beauty shop which also cuts men's hair, because it's about the only place in town where you can make an appointment and my schedule usually makes that necessary. Many men get their hair cut there, so that part doesn't feel strange, but there is always a smell of ammonia and the arcane potions used in permanent waves. The sound of hair dryers lulled in the background, and I probably dozed a bit. But when I opened my eyes and looked up into the mirror, for just a second, I saw not the young lady who was cutting my hair, but Brother Claude Fox. And I blessed his memory, and wished I could go back.

Fox's Barber Shop in Enid was a real barber shop, something few of our younger Brethren have ever experienced. You took half a flight of stairs down from the sidewalk, and opened the door, where a little, spring-mounted bell rang, and it was another world. The wooden floor had long since lost its varnish, but it was polished to a patina by the leather soles of shoes and the constant sweeping of hair.

The barber's chairs were things of wonder, made of white porcelain and steel and red leather, and you knew you were a man on the day when Claude no longer had to put a board across the arms of the chair for you to sit on. There were the smells, strange, mysterious smells from tobacco and leather and bay rum and rose water and the dozens of bottles, all made of clear glass with long necks and black stoppers with little holes through which the barber could shake the mysterious liquids into his palm before rubbing them into your hair. They contained liquids which glittered like jewels, like rubies or emeralds or amethysts or topaz. And there was the smell of lather, and the particular smell of a leather razor strop. The lather was whipped up in a mug with a brush. Claude bought a small black lather machine one day (you had to keep up with the times) but all his customers were glad when he went back to the mug and brush. In those days, even when you were a kid, the barber shaved the space between the top of your ears and the hairline.

And kids came in with their fathers, but you were expected to be a man while you were in the barber shop. For this was a man's country. Women simply didn't enter. It would have surprised me less to see an elephant walking down Independence Street than to see a woman walk into Fox's Barber Shop.

And I looked up, and saw myself in a mirror in the beauty shop, fifty years later, and my heart cried out for Brother Claude.

Because, and this is the point, there was brotherhood in that barber shop. It was as much a part of the background as the smells and the squeaking of the black cast iron ceiling fan, or the gurgle of the water fountain or the soft clatter of the black tin



wire-handled dustpan into which the barbers swept the clippings after each haircut. Claude Fox had two other barbers working in the shop with him, and all of them were Masons. And so were many of the customers. Sometimes my Father and Grandfather and I would all go in for haircuts together. Grandad and Claude were both on the Garfield County Scottish Rite Rose Croix funeral team, and they would “run language” while Grandad got his hair cut. Conversation was almost always about the Lodge, and what it was doing or planning. And I learned early how to tell when a Reunion was coming up, because one or two days before, almost all the men I knew were in Claude’s shop, getting trimmed to be ready. Two of the Degrees were staged by teams from Enid, and several men were on other teams as well. I took the Scottish Rite Degrees long and long before I took them in the Temple.

There was peace in that barber shop, and companionship, and perfect Brotherhood. These men trusted each other completely. It was many, many years afterward when I began to learn how much they had relied on each other, helped each other out, attended weddings together, celebrated births together, and bore the pall together. But I knew, even then, that it was special and real, and when these men called each other “Brother Jack,” or “Brother Claude,” or “Brother J.T.,” in a half-teasing, half-sacred tone, I knew, somehow, that they meant it.

There are few places of Brotherhood today; few worlds which are reserved for men alone. I’m told that some athletic clubs are like that: for those of us who get our exercise bearing the pall for our friends who are health freaks, they might as well be on the moon.

But Masonry is such a refuge.

I don’t mean that women aren’t allowed in the Temple. Many ladies attend the Reunion at Guthrie. We’re glad to see them and we have special programs to encourage them. But they are not and cannot be part of the Brotherhood, any more than we can be part of the sisterhood of P.E.O.

We teach Brotherhood. But I sometimes wonder if we teach it to our younger members in such a way that they understand we really mean it. And, in some cases, I wonder *if* we really mean it.

I heard a Mason, the other day, dismiss the plight of another Mason by saying, “I didn’t take him to raise.” Oh yes, you did! We all did. We all took each other to raise. And if we lose that, we have lost everything. We must find a way to communicate to the new Mason, and to remind ourselves, that we must and will be there, no matter what. No matter how stupid a situation may be, no matter how childish we may think some reaction may be, no matter how angry we may become, no matter how tired of trying to help we may become, no matter how frustrated, or involved in our own affairs, or just simply weary we may be, we have promised to God and our Brethren that we will be there. If we lose sight of the reality that our job is to help each other, then all the promises of Brotherhood are simply a sham. If we are Brothers only when it is convenient, we are not Brothers. If we are willing to be Brothers when our Brother has some neat and clean problem, but ready to shun him if he should develop a problem with drugs or alcohol or the law, we have no claim

to fraternalism. Any strangers from the street could do that.

But when it is real, Brotherhood is one of the most powerful, creative, healing and redemptive forces in the universe. It's up to us to make it real.

It's up to us to mean it.

{A version of this article appeared in *The Scottish Rite Journal*}