

“Be good, it’s good for you”

Remarks of the District Deputy Grand Master of Ottawa District 2

Right Worshipful Brother John Forster

on his Official Visit to Atomic Daylight Lodge No. 686

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(This paper can also be found on johnforster79@blogspot.com where you can add your comments.)

(Alternatively you can send them directly to forster.john@me.com)

In Masonry we learn to practice. I want to quote you a paragraph from the general charge to the brethren, part of the Ceremony of Installation.

“The object however of meeting in a lodge is of a twofold nature, namely moral instruction and social intercourse. Our meetings are intended to cultivate the mind, to induce the habit of virtue and to strengthen the fundamental principles of the order, Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. And, if these meetings are blended with social mirth, and a mutual interchange of fraternal feelings, then Freemasonry will be seen in its true light, as an institution which fosters and improves the best affections of our nature, and carries into active operation, the practice of the four cardinal virtues, Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice, combined with the theological virtues, Faith, Hope and Charity, thereby demonstrating to the world at large that, in Freemasonry is found the true import of the three great social treasures: Fraternity, Liberty and Equality. Therefore the utmost extension of fraternal feeling and affection which can exist between man and man is expected to be displayed among the brethren in a Freemasons lodge, and then will be attained the chief point in Freemasonry, namely to endeavour to be happy ourselves and to communicate that happiness to others.”

Take note: “induce the HABIT of virtue”; “ACTIVE operation”; “the PRACTICE of the four cardinal virtues.”

There is mounting evidence from science that good deeds are good medicine. When we perform what society and we regard as a good deed we are rewarded with a rush of endorphins from “the pleasure centre”. It’s the same feeling we get when we do something well. Running and singing are examples for me.

This rush can boost the immune system, speed up recovery from surgery and reduce insomnia.

In their book The Healing Power of Doing Good, Allan Luks and Peggy Payne defined helpers' high as exhilaration coupled with a burst of energy followed by a period of calm and serenity. Luks studied more than 3000 Americans involved in volunteering and found that subjects reported a buzz that lasted several weeks. After that, simply recalling the act of helping others brought back that sense of euphoria.

In my work as a palliative care physician, I encounter many care-givers. They are usually relatives of the patient, often the spouse but sometimes more distant relatives, sometimes friends or neighbours. The work they do is amazing, frequently involving long periods of broken or absent sleep, neglected nutrition bordering on starvation, constant worry and fear of the unknown events coming soon.

These people are not leading an unhealthy life. They are doing one of the healthiest things that a human being can do: acting as a care-giver for someone who is suffering and in need. ("Relieve his necessities and soothe his afflictions.")

It appears that generosity is not only good for the soul but also for the body. Luks study showed that 90% of volunteers reported reduced stress and chronic pain while lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels

In another study at Harvard University, researchers showed 132 students a film about Mother Teresa's work among the poor in Calcutta, then measured immunoglobulin A levels in their saliva. Simply witnessing kindness jacked up their levels.

On the wall in the main chapel of the Mission of Charity in Calcutta is a framed version of this prayer:

"Make us worthy, Lord, to serve our fellow men throughout the world, who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them, through our hands this day, their daily bread and, by our understanding love, give peace and joy.

Lord, make me a channel of thy Peace: that, where there is hatred, I may bring love: that, where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness: that, where there is discord, I may bring harmony: that, where there is error, I may bring truth: that, where there is doubt, I may bring faith: where there is despair, I may bring hope: where there are shadows, I may bring light: where there is sadness, I may bring joy.

Lord, grant that I may seek to comfort rather than to be comforted, to understand rather than to be understood, to love rather than to be loved, for it is by forgetting self that one finds oneself; it is by forgiving that one is forgiven; and it is by dying that one awakens to eternal life."

Toronto Playwright Michael Healey gave part of his liver to another playwright, Tom Walmsley, a man he barely knew. His play, Generous, ran to warm reviews in 2006.

Your acts of generosity and kindness are not different from other things you do; they are based on your own psychology and come from within you. By practicing masonry we practice feeling the thoughts and those thoughts lead to acts of kindness and generosity. Performing them adds to our health.

(Based on the book, A Year of Living Generously by Laurence Scanlan.)