

I Had It Good

(Implications of the Obligations)
Jim Tresner

No, I had it GREAT when I was growing up. My family was all anyone could ask. My Father was--and my Mother is--highly gifted and thoughtful. They had a wonderful ability to make anyone feel instantly comfortable and at home.

Evenings followed a predictable pattern. My Father would come home from the office about 5:15. He would mix a drink for Mother and himself, and fix soft drinks for us children, until we were old enough to handle alcohol. We'd all gather in the den and discuss the events of the day. Usually at least one of my parents' friends would stop by for a drink during that period, and they were always welcomed (family and friends all used the back door; if the front bell rang, you knew it was a stranger). If someone had a special problem they wanted to discuss for a few minutes, he and Dad would go into the living room. I used to notice how many people went into that room looking tired and worried and came out looking relaxed and hopeful.

Later in the evening, the family almost always had dinner together (Mother is a great cook) and the discussion continued. Sometimes it was about school, but usually it was about what I now know were ethics and philosophy and religion. And, as I grew older, Masonry. We learned the basics of all those things as we learned how to handle alcohol or human relationships--naturally and by example, without ever knowing we were learning anything at all.

Once, after I had left home for college, I realized that I had never, literally never, heard either of my parents' voices raised in anger--at us, at each other, at anyone. Thinking I must be mistaken, I asked Mother about it. "No," she said, "we decided when we got married that anger simply gave hurt and accomplished nothing, so we agreed that if either of us started to feel anger, we'd stop the conversation until later when we could pick it up calmly."

There was not a moment in my childhood when I did not feel loved and cared-for.

I have a good friend called Terry. Terry's home was a continual battlefield. There was alcohol in his home, too, but it was not used for comfortable relaxation in the evening. Both of his parents drank to the point of intoxication, almost every night. Verbal abuse was constant--physical abuse was frequent. He was getting his own breakfast by the time he was six, because his mother was usually too drunk to get out of bed. He has a bridge in his mouth, replacing the teeth his father knocked out when he was twelve. When he was fourteen, his Mother left with another man--Terry has no idea where she is. When he was fifteen, his father threw him out of the house. He's been on his own since then. There was not a moment in his childhood when he *did* feel loved and cared for.

He's done well. He has a good marriage with a charming and accomplished lady and a son and daughter, nearly grown. But it wasn't easy for Terry. He had to learn how to be a human and then how to be a father. Over the years, it's been a joy to watch him grow and develop.

Paul is a young DeMolay in a town not far from Guthrie. Paul is on his third stepfather. His mother changes husbands more often than most people replace automobiles. (There have been several "special friends" between the husbands.) He's a big, good-natured kid of 18, getting ready to go to college on a football scholarship. I was surprised one night after a Chapter meeting when I went back in the room to turn off the lights and found him sitting alone, crying with the most racking sobs I've ever heard from a human being. I went over and sat down by him, and he threw his arms around my neck and sobbed even harder. When he had calmed down a little, I asked him what the matter was. He said, "We had a degree tonight and it always gets me when they talk about filial love. They just don't know how much filial love can hurt!"

He'll reach the minimum age to petition the Lodge next year, and I've promised to get him a petition. I hope Masonry can teach him how to love, and that love doesn't have to hurt.

My friend Burt doesn't know his father's name. He knows his mother, but they don't communicate. The child welfare people took him away from his mother when he was a young child. He lived in a series of foster homes until he was eighteen. He's 30 now, with a good job. But he can't form permanent relationships. We've been friends about nine years, the longest friendship, he tells me, he's ever had. He's very smart, but he primarily uses that intelligence to manipulate others.

I'd give anything if I could somehow magically give Terry and Paul and Burt the sort of family I had--the sort of love and security and consideration and positive feelings I simply took for granted. I can't. All I can do is be the best friend I can possibly be, and try to help them over the rough places each has to face.

When we talk about family values, we have to take each family where it is and as it is, whether we like it or not. Often, we don't like it at all--often we want to go in and tear a family apart and put it back together and shake it up and shout "Look, stupid; you're doing nothing but hurting yourself and everyone else. Stop it!" But that doesn't work, either.

My Father told me many things which have been of great value to me, but one of the most valuable was this: "Remember, at any given moment, each person is doing the very best he can at that moment and under those circumstances. No one deliberately does less than their best. It's just that their best varies a great deal."

If we, as Masons, truly care about families and truly want to help preserve "family values," we have to accept families as they are. You don't restore a perfectly-preserved building; you don't tune a perfectly-running engine. We must assume that a family, no matter how troubled or tattered, is composed of people doing the best that their experience, their personality, their resources and their experience allows them to do. If we are to truly care about the family, we must be willing, personally

and corporately, to help improve those things, rather than to stand by in olympian approval or disdain.

If we believe that love within a family is important, we must be willing to teach love, by precept and example.

If we believe that mutual support is important, we must be willing to be supportive.

If we believe that trust is important, we must be willing to trust, have that trust violated, and trust again.

Masonry teaches that we make a difference in the world one person at a time, and that each action we take echoes to eternity. There surely is as much celestial condemnation for the man who passes a wounded family by on the other side as there was in the story of the Good Samaritan for those who passed the wounded traveler on the other side.

It's simply a matter of caring, and Masons have promised to care.

(A version of this article appeared in *The Scottish Rite Journal*)