

## The Length of Your Cable Tow



The Cable-Tow, we are told, is purely Masonic in its meaning and use. We go back to the Gothic period to find the definition. A piece of yarn, spun fiber, string, or wool was then called a 'tau'. If you took several pieces of 'tau' and twisted or wove them into a rope, the process was called cabling, and the resulting rope was a cabled-tau, easily transliterated to 'cable-tow'. It is defined in the dictionary, but not always accurately, which shows that we shouldn't depend on the ordinary dictionary for the real truth about Masonic terms. You know Masonry has its own vocabulary, and our words can't always be fully explained to the satisfaction of those who are not members of the Craft.

As Masons, we all know what the cable tow means, and the personal significance it carries for each Brother. Here's a question for you..."Do you find the length of *your* cable tow to be somewhat shorter than you'd like?" It's a really tough question. It reaches right down inside and pokes a pointed measuring stick into some really tender spots. Those tender spots are where our desires to live up to the ideals of Masonry conflict with what we see as the realities of living in 20-08!

Much of the work of Masonry seems to call for contributions of mostly our time and occasionally our money, and charting our personal course through those demands is not always easy. It's like using one of those old maps of the world from Columbus' time. We can see that the landmasses, the oceans, the trade routes and the safe passages are all well marked. These are the places of comfort, the places we've already been and can safely visit again. But if you've ever looked closely at one of those old maps, you'll notice that at the edge of the map there are images of 'dragons' that symbolize the end of the known world. We go there at great risk. It's the unknown. Our comfort zones are within the length of our cable tow; the dragons of conflict lie beyond.

Masonry tells us to be prudent, to do our work within the length of our cable tow. The inference is that we aren't expected to go beyond its length, that each of us determines that length, and you best not be judgmental about another Brother's cable tow length. Inside this inference, the symbolism of the cable tow has a double edge.....it is a beautiful thing and at the same time, a trying one. On one side, it symbolizes the deep ties that bind us to the Brotherhood of Masonry and all its good work. On the other side, it symbolizes our individual ties of responsibility outside of Masonry, and accountability to those other needs. The two ends of the cable tow are symbolic of competing responsibilities; its self-determined length, the distance between the two ends, is symbolic of the conflict that each Mason must come to reconcile within himself.

In the course of our Masonic work, we often find ourselves in positions where we must measure one end of the cable tow against the other. And, for many of us, that measuring stirs up some troubling conflicts. Do we volunteer, or not? Contribute; or not? Visit that sick Brother; or not? Speak up or stay silent? Should we, can we, donate a needed item, or some of our hard earned money? Hang on to our pizza money or give it to charity?

And, into that awful silence of personal indecision and inner conflict comes the myriad of emotions like guilt and shame....guilt that we can't do it, or guilt that we can do it but won't, and a bit of shame that we don't decide either way. This is the cable tow dilemma; this duality really tries our conscience.

What can we say about this duality? It is found deep in the heart of every Brother. Just where it's found is different within each man and each circumstance. Each of us knows its presence and can feel where the boundaries of internal conflict begin. Each of us knows how far into those boundaries we are willing and able to go. We know where the serious pain resides; Masonry does not expect us to go that far. We are to act, but remember, not to the point of doing serious injury to our families or ourselves. But I believe Masonry does expect each man to challenge his internal boundaries and, in so doing, extend the length of his cable tow.

Part of Masonry's challenge 'to become better men' is in this stretching of oneself to the point of discomfort. This ideal of being good men learning to become better men, I find rather compelling in its beauty. But, in our practice of Masonry, that beauty in action comes with a challenge to our comfort zones. To grow as men, we must challenge the depths and learn to reconcile the conflicts that too often hold us back, when we should be moving forward. And, ultimately, we must be willing to undergo a little discomfort if we are to become more comfortable within ourselves as Masons, and as men.

That's the cable tow's dual symbolism in our work as Masons. The distance from one end to the other is entirely of our making. The tug and pull of competing responsibilities, and our internal response to that, is the cable tow dilemma. It asks us, "Do we risk growth, or do we settle for comfort?" In closing, I again ask the pointed question, "Do you find the length of *your* cable tow to be shorter than you'd like?" Food for some serious thought.

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