

The Cable-Tow and Balance in Masonry

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Editor's Note: Imagine that during this presentation, a member of the audience is standing, holding a length of rope to represent the cable-tow, and tying knots as directed by the speaker.

What actually is a cable-tow? We know that a cable-tow is a strong rope made of cords twisted together, often around a center cord. Like a rope that a tug boat may use, remember this example. What we learn first in our obligation, simply is that, as the length of the Freemason's cable-tow, is the measure of his means and ability to aid and rescue, if within the reach of his means and ability. The cable-tow also may be considered a suitable symbol of obedience – that is of obedience to the requirements of the ceremonies of our Institution and the principles of morality and virtue. Obedience to the Lodge dictates of our Masonic duty, which must be performed even under the most adverse circumstances, and if need be without fee or reward, except that gratifying test of a good conscience. But most important, obedience to our own lives.

Let us remember that a cable-tow has two ends. If it binds a Mason to the Fraternity, by the same fact it binds the Fraternity to each man in it. The one obligation needs to be emphasized as much as the other. Happily, in our day we are beginning to see the other side of the obligation that the Fraternity is under vows to its members to guide, instruct, and train them for the effective service of the Craft and of their daily lives. Control, obedience, and direction or guidance – these are the three meanings of the cable-tow, as it is interpreted by the best insight of the Craft. Of course, by control we do not mean that Masonry commands us in the sense that it uses force. It does not drive; it draws. It

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controls us, shapes us, through its human touch and its moral nobility. By the same method, by the same power it wins obedience and gives guidance and direction to our lives. At the Altar we take vows to follow and obey its high principles and ideals; and Masonic vows are not empty obligations – they are vows in which a man pledges his life and his sacred honor.

To better understand the length of a cable-tow, we must understand the give and take a cable-tow experiences with the Fraternity and the Family. As you learned the cable-tow consists of two separate ends. One end of the cable-tow is representing the individual Mason while the other end is representing the Fraternity or Lodge. When examining the cable-tow it is impossible to tell where one end starts and the other end begins. How Masons fulfill their obligations differ based on their individual beliefs and interpretations. So how does the Mason balance his life with Masonry?

It is important to remember that the length of a Mason's cable-tow is ultimately set by the individual Mason and cannot be truly judged by any other individual. When three miles may be the proper length of a cable-tow for one Mason, another Mason's cable-tow may be hundreds or even thousands of miles in length. Each length is determined by the individual's particular circumstances. Hold the cable-tow out. One is the Fraternity (*please raise your hand*) the other is the Individual (*please raise your hand*). You can become a Mason now in Virginia at 18. So you could be raised and can't make Lodge meetings or functions because of school and you are out of state. So your cable-tow would be very short. Instead we will take an average Mason in his twenties and thirties. This Mason has a wife, girlfriend or significant other (*please tie a knot in the individual end*). He has a job, sometimes he works late, but mostly 40 hours is all he needs to survive (*please tie another knot in the individual end*). His other has a parent that is having difficulty in life (*please tie another knot in the individual end*). The Lodge has asked him to get in line at lodge, without understanding the commitment (*please tie a knot in the Fraternity end*).

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He has to start to get his certificate and learn his parts (*please tie another knot in the Fraternity end*). He has to help the lodge for dinners, clean up, bulletins (*please tie another knot in the Fraternity end*). He has been asked to travel more with the Lodge inside and outside the District (*please tie another knot in the Fraternity end*). Now he has been asked to join the Royal Arch (*please tie another knot in the Fraternity end*). The Shrine has now asked him to join (*please tie another knot in the Fraternity end*). He just found out he is to be a Dad (*please tie another knot in the individual end*). He has to help with the baby, his wife also works or he may have to work later hours to make some extra money (*please tie knot in the individual end*).

We can see that many situations can arise in a brother's life or are own. Now this can usually be worked out with good leadership in the Lodge as well as much needed help from the Brethren with longer cable-tows. Just remember the first part, the length of the Freemason's cable-tow, is the measure of his means and ability to aid. As it is the Individual mason to know when enough is enough, it is also the Lodge's responsibility not to take advantage of a brother. Balance in Masonry starts from the individual, but should weigh in at a Lodge level with the help and guidance of the Brethren. If we are truly individual living stones, supported by others to form a Living Lodge then we are obligated to help balance each other out.

A cable's great strength is only apparent when it is put to use. So it is with Freemasonry. The strength of our craft remains hidden until it is put to use. We can also think of the cable-tow as the bond connecting the individual Brother to his Lodge and to Grand Lodge, those venerable institutions that give direction to a Brother in his journey through life. Consider what we have just learned. The cable-tow, which connects the tug to the barge at sea, is not of a specific length. In fact, the amount of cable let out by the tug as it attempts to direct the course and speed of the barge depends on the condition of the sea and the burden of the tow. The heavier the burden and the rougher the sea, the longer

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the cable-tow that is necessary. Strange as it may seem, in stormy seas, a tug actually gives more secure guidance and direction with the longer cable-tow.

So, too, with our Masonic cable-tow: that bond that binds a Brother to his Lodge and to the Craft. What about the Brother who finds himself encountering stormy seas or who finds the burdens of his responsibilities bear heavily on him? Undue pressure from the Lodge or from his Brothers to attend meetings, participate in degree work or to "be a good Mason" may cause his cable-tow to snap and sever his bond to the craft. Finally, once the nautical cable-tow is severed, the state of the seas or the poor condition of the disabled ship may make recovery of the tow impossible. The ship is therefore lost while the tug stands by – helpless. So might a brother be lost to the craft. And Masonry would thus be barren.