FORMAL DINNER SPEECH

FOR

GREGORY HARSELL

Hello everyone. It’s wonderful to be here to share this very special evening with each one of you. (**If you want to acknowledge anyone in particular, do that here**). I would like to take a moment to thank \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ who so generously \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and of course \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for his \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Of course we are honored to have with us \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ whose leadership inspires us and guides us to increasingly greater heights of accomplishment and more meaningful depths of understanding and compassion. Each year at this time we gather together to celebrate our connection and accomplishments. We search for meanings and methods to improve communication, understanding and outreach. We honor the ties that bind us to each other and in doing so we strengthen our inner fortitude as well as our bonds of brotherhood. The Feast of St John comes at a time in the calendar that inspires us to take a moment to reflect upon the year we’ve had, the challenges and opportunities we faced individually and as a group, and the hopes and plans for a mutually fruitful and successful future.

We have just experienced the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. The days will be short for a while. The evening and night are time for contemplation and reflection, and we, as a group, have a tremendous opportunity to share some thoughts, explore meaning and discover new ways in which to share and exchange blessings. At this time of year we have the sometimes overwhelming opportunity to look at our lives, our families, and our place in our communities and acknowledge all that we have while discovering all that is still needed for so many people around us. An essential component of our dedication to our purpose as Freemasons is the opportunity to learn. Another is the chance we all have to share, and as we share we can choose to make a conscious effort to consider our partners, friends and brothers, as we have never done in the past. Each year that we are blessed to be here together to enjoy this feast is another golden opportunity to inspire with the spirit and energy we find within each other.

This year we are guided by the motivating and provocative thought, “Never look down on a person unless you are helping them up.” No matter what gifts or burdens each one of us has materially, spiritually, emotionally or intellectually, there is always more that we can give to those in greater need. And while, at times we may think that our own personal lot in life poses insurmountable problems, every moment we live provides us with possibility to reflect, re-evaluate, and learn.

It was Albert Pike who said, “Above all things let us never forget that mankind constitutes one great brotherhood; all born to encounter suffering and sorrow, and therefore bound to sympathize with each other.” Let’s go one step further…. we are bound to **sympathize**, empathize, and **ACT** as needed to watch out for our family and friends, neighbors, and community. We would want the same consideration for our loved ones and ourselves.

It is our mission as members of our local and global community to reinforce the timeless message of humanity and consideration for our fellow man and it is our mandate to be vigilant about certain non-negotiable principles. We are all here on earth to be accountable for our own lives and to be sensitive, compassionate, constructive, and generous regarding the needs of others. We do this by teaching, by instilling friendship, morality and brotherly love. The very principles that were promoted by John the Evangelist were focused on sharing light, symbolically, in the darkest times. Whether physical or metaphoric, as I said earlier, these are the darkest days of the year, but they don’t have to be the darkest days of our collective soul.

Light comes in all forms. Light is knowledge. Light is wisdom. Light guides us. It shows us the way with gifts of knowledge, understanding, wisdom, partnership, friendship, and an extended hand of greeting with the intent to share. We don’t look down on each other. We must always keep in mind that the only reason to extend a hand is to offer friendship and solace. We are freemasons because we believe in the mission of this historic brotherhood. Sometimes we take that mission for granted. (**If you want to make a little joke you can say**) And sometimes it takes a lavish, delicious, formal dinner and getting all spruced up in our festive regalia to remind us of all that we are so blessed to have. There is so much that we can share with those around us who might be less fortunate! Ironic, isn’t it? Exciting but Ironic…

Pope Francis has said, “The Son of God became incarnate in the souls of men to instill the feeling of brotherhood. All are brothers and all children of God.” Some people remind us, “The opportunity for brotherhood presents itself every time you meet a human being.” While others have said, “The crest and crowning of all good, life’s final star, is brotherhood.” As we examine the principles that guide us, and as we concentrate on sharing examples that illustrate the power and inspiration to be found within the Brotherhood of Man, I cannot help but make an observation, and that is that the context of brotherhood is one that should be so pervasive that we barely see it, we hardly discuss it. We just **live** it… with every fiber of our being. Our souls are the embodiment of the mission. It’s the place we naturally come from deep in our hearts. We just have to be patient while our minds catch up!! (**Wait for the laugh**). It’s the stuff of every day life that conspires to distract us from living with the ultimate Utopian integrity we all house deep inside. It’s also the every day stuff of life that inspires us to see our reflection in each other and to remember that we are all brothers, connected by humanity.

Think about great moments in the Bible, in ancient and recent history, in every day life. Every day we have opportunities to participate in genuine meaningful instances of pure acknowledgement and support of one another. As Freemasons we dedicate ourselves to our brothers. Over half a century ago, pope Benedict XVI composed an essay titled, “The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood.” In it, we find the passage from MT 23:8, “…You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers.” The term brotherhood is no longer limited to those who share the same bloodline. We learn that the metaphorical use of the term is ancient, even though proof is fleeting. We discover that Plato described fellow citizens as “brother” with the passage, “We and our fellow citizens are all brothers born of one another.” And so a “brotherhood of the spirit” was born.

Throughout history there are countless stories of aggression, war, conflict, disaster, but the one common thread found in the most horrific of stories are the legends of unbreakable bonds formed in times of unspeakable hardship. During World War II, the Tuskegee Airmen, a group of African American pilots and fighters, was formed. Because of the strict segregation laws that still existed in the military at that time, this brave group of fighters literally stood alone. They had no one but each other for moral and physical support. But with skills, determination, and tenacity, they went on to become the first group of African American military aviators to see combat. Obstacles had to be surmounted. Civilian flight schools willing to educate non-white pilots had to be found, employed and paid. Training grounds had to be improvised. Archaic government dicta had to be overturned to see to it that these soldiers could stare down bigotry in the pursuit of placing their lives in **REAL** danger. After years of red tape, training and continued resoluteness the brotherhood that is known as the Tuskegee Airmen finally had the opportunity to face combat. The 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 332nd fighter group participated in the Allied invasion of Sicily and both became the first and only African American military units to actually engage in combat. Led by Lt Col Davis, Jr, the airmen as a brotherhood and unstoppable alliance distinguished themselves and their evident strength in teamwork yielded them the notoriety of having set a fairly ominous record. The pilots of the 99th apparently set a record when they shot down five enemy aircraft in less than four minutes. That’s teamwork and true brotherhood in action! What brotherhood really consists of is **connection**, empathy, and a passion for humanity. All it takes is willingness and at least two people who are ready to unite in a common cause based on mutual respect.

There is wisdom in Ecclesiastes 4: 10-12, “For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him [that is] alone, for [he hath] no one to lift him up.” **(If you think it’s appropriate and want to make a little joke you can say**)…. I think it’s pretty clear from this passage that we should travel in packs… or at least **pairs**… (**And wait for the laugh**). Each one of us is responsible for our own existence, but we are also accountable to each other as peers in a global community. Remember the adage, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” As we learn together, our mutual goal is to provide nourishment and inspiration that will inspire and motivate us for a lifetime.

Think about where you were during the summer. Think about traveling, seeing the world, learning about new customs and discovering traditions and ways of life throughout your journey. Imagine being on a train traveling through Europe, from Amsterdam to Paris. The scenery whooshes by as the train travels from town to town. And then the idyllic scene is brutally interrupted with the sound of breaking glass and gunshots. That train going through Brussels had 556 passengers on board. Unfortunately one passenger had an arsenal of weapons and started using them. Fortunately, however, also on board there was a **group** of three young Americans- Anthony Sadler, Alek Skarlatos, and Spencer Stone, a true and close **brotherhood** of three friends, two of which were in the military. Alek heard the gunshots and breaking glass and reflexively shouted, “Spencer- GO!!” The trio wrestled the shooter to the ground took his gun away from him, and continued to “immobilize” the attacker until the authorities arrived. If those three hadn’t acted instinctively, **in unison**, and with concern for their fellow travelers, the scene would have been very different, but they knew how to care for their fellow man and carnage was averted. The principle of watching out for your neighbor as you would for yourself took on an entirely new meaning that day on that train.

With the celebration of the Feast of St John the Evangelist we come full circle in our year. We honor his teachings of loyalty and brotherhood and we emphasize his contribution as we reflect on the symbols that inspire us in life. We acknowledge the counterpoint of the celebration of St John the Baptist directly opposite this time of year, around the summer solstice, and both celebrations give us a chance to pause, reflect, learn and recommit to the causes and concerns we choose to address in our lives and in our community. Celebrating this feast and having the wonderful opportunity for each one of us to extend a hand to the other is good practice. It’s symbolic and humbling. The gesture democrtaizes us and acknowledges us at the same time. When we are all on equal footing and a level playing field, we are all on the same plane. No judgments. No arrogance. No evaluation of or if who is better than whom. As Freemasons we are all brothers. We are each special and distinguished and honorable men and each one of us has a unique contribution to make to his family, friends, community and comrades. We are proud to be a part of a timeless order dedicated to learning, sharing and doing for others. With our involvement comes a pervasive atmosphere of respect, contribution and possibility.

As we have all heard, each one if us is only as strong as the weakest link in the chains of life we choose to be a part of. When we use the meaning and significance of this feast as our guide, we honor the possibility that all men will succeed in life. It may seem like an altruistic goal but when we all believe that as a team … or a brotherhood… we will work together so that each one of us prevails, the picture of the future looks bright. As each one of us works towards the goal of mutual success, we can then look into the distance and spread our message further to our communities and beyond.

With all of the struggle and strife that seems to be more and more pervasive in life we need to be inspired by the strength and enthusiasm of our brothers. It is time to take action to ensure well-being at every level of life. No one in this room is at the top of the heap. There is no one here that couldn’t use encouragement, a kind word, an explanation for a difficult problem or question or a helping hand to solve a constructive puzzle. Take a look around you and ask yourself, “What do I need? How can I help?” By asking these two questions, we work on our own symbolic circle of participation and contribution. The more we know, the more we are liberated from our own limitations, the more we can then begin to be more fully alive and present for those in our lives that need some attention in order to fulfill their own personal visions of completeness.

Life is moving very quickly these days and it conspires to speed up even more. Information, connectivity, news, Mother Nature, global conditions…. all bombard us every day and the sensory input tends to become overwhelming to some, most, or all of us. Through our dedication to being Freemasons we are fortunate to have a place of respite and refuge; a place in which we have the time and means to regroup and rededicate ourselves to our lives, our causes, and each other. Tonight is one of the longest nights of the year. Let’s use it wisely to plan our agenda and plot our course so that each one of us is fully present when a hand is extended to us. Let us be able to use our clarity and powers of observation to know when to extend a hand to someone that needs to be raised up. Let’s use our resources to acknowledge all of our blessings and all that we can share to insure that 2016 will be the most fulfilling, informative, and enriching year yet!

I want to thank all of you, my brothers, for allowing me the opportunity to share my thoughts tonight and I look forward, as I extend my hand in friendship and brotherhood to each one of you as we use that gesture to renew our commitment to our causes as Freemasons. Thank you all!