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Empty Chairs: I think I Remember

A Journey of Self-Reflection

It was the Social Board following a regular Friday evening lodge meeting. As we filed in, meeting friends, visitors and guests, the room filled with high spirits and appropriate gentlemanly banter, and everyone made their way to a vacant seat around a perfectly presented lodge dining table. As our DC brought the room to order, I found myself adjacent to an empty chair. I had not previously seen an empty chair at a Social Board, nor at any lodge dinner for that matter. And although I tried to put it out of my mind and concentrate on the festivities of the occasion, this dislocation, in what is effectively a chain of friendship around our table, kept luring me in.

Later that night on my walk from lodge to tram, and in fact all the way home, I could not shake the feeling I'd had sitting next to an empty chair. It sounds odd, I know, but I was puzzled as to why one empty chair at a table filled with 50 friends created such a deep response. Saying it out loud sounds weird, but I could 'feel' the emptiness from the vacancy next to me.

I didn't sleep much that night. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I obsessed most of the next morning too, and then it came to me. Perhaps the empty chair was a metaphor for 'dislocations' in my life. Losses. I knew what they were of course, but I'd stuffed them down and filed them away because, well, growing up in the 70's, men didn't show their emotions - so neither did their sons. But here I was, at 11am on a Saturday morning thinking about the empty chairs around my dining table - and crying like a baby. I always knew I couldn't outrun them, but I didn't expect it to be a freemasonry Social Board and a random empty chair that would stop me in my tracks. It just goes to show that the adage is true. No matter how together, how content, how happy you feel every day, if you have not properly addressed a loss, it will find a way of reaching you.

So, what were my losses? Well, firstly, I'd always wanted four kids. My wife and I had even picked out their names. I'd invented a name for my first daughter for her arrival. She was to be called "AOME", derived from the saying Apple Of My Eye. I imaged her having long curly brown hair and big saucer-like eyes just like her mum. We'd also planned for a Samuel Joseph, a Jacob Nathaniel, and an Emily Louisa. Samuel was going to be strong like his grandad. I imagined Jacob becoming an astronaut, and Emily following her mums' path into medicine. I wanted both sets of parents to live to be a ripe old age, and to stay in great health, so we could all have big family holidays together, where everyone could argue over who cheats the most at Monopoly. I wanted big noisy family fun mealtimes, with grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins and nieces and nephews. Almost none of that happened. Some of it, like the kids, was my own doing. Too busy chasing a career. We kept putting it off. Then, when it happened naturally (by naturally I mean by accident), and "Splodge" happened (that was the name we gave the blob on the first scan), the environment wasn't right, and we eventually lost Splodge.

As I sat around my empty table, unpacking mind-boxes filled with feelings I'd kept hidden out of sight, I owned up to a truth. I'd dealt with many of my empty chairs, but not all. And one in particular had been almost entirely unaddressed.

I zeroed in on one day in 2011. I'm visiting my parents. A brilliant working-class pair of inspirational grafters who'd give you their last penny if you needed it. I'd been in the door about 5 minutes when dad offered to make me an egg sandwich. This was code for "*come into the kitchen, lets catch up*". So, I followed him into the kitchen, and we started putting the World to rights. The usual back and forth banter ensued, punctuated with a few mucky jokes, and the occasional "*I heard that*" from mum as she enjoyed the semi-peace and quiet of a sudoku in the next room. Then, out of the blue, dad said, "*right, about that egg sandwich*", and before I could say a word, he grabbed an egg and proceeded to crack it into the toaster. As raw egg dribbled out of the bottom of the toaster, we both stood there in silence. We knew there had been a malfunction in dad's operating system, but out of deep respect for him, I was not about to break the silence and make a bad situation worse by saying anything. Then, just as quickly as the malfunction had happened, it was gone, and dad was 'back in the room' so to speak. He fried the next eggs instead.

My dad to me was a giant of a man, ex-military, confident, strong, would do anything for anyone, at any time of the day or night, and with hands like shovels too - yet in that moment, as we watched egg drip through the toast rack, I saw a nervous man, perhaps even a boy, puzzled and confused. We never spoke about it again.

Soon after, my dad was diagnosed with vascular dementia and died less than 4 years later.

What the 'egg' event did for me was to fire me into action. For the years that followed until he died, almost nothing else mattered. At my earliest opportunity I quit my job so I could spend as much time as I could with my dad. At first, I was like an addict. I felt I needed to absorb every second I could to make up for lost time - at the literal expense of everything else. If you stood in my way, I would tear through you if I thought it would help him. If doctors were slow with treatment, I'd keep at them until we got action. I didn't care who I threw under the bus. If you hadn't done your job properly, if you'd compromised my dad's care in any way, I was going to find out and expose you. I didn't care about 'normal'. I didn't care about '*constraints of the NHS*'. "*Don't tell me what 'normally happens' with dementia patients. This isn't a dementia patient. This is my dad. He's a person. He has four kids and a wife...*" I shout at clinicians as they fumbled paperwork looking for evidence to prove to me that'd done everything they could.

On reflection, my behaviour was a combination of my own guilt, and hope. Hope that someone, anyone, could find a one-in-a-billion fix that suited my dad. Or hope that they could at least tell me that there had been a mistake, and there was nothing wrong after all. What I wanted more than anything was an impossibility. I wanted to hear that there had been no malfunction on egg sandwich day. I needed to believe that I wasn't losing him. If I could still reach him... I felt that as long as I could still make him laugh, I could do what the doctors couldn't. I could keep the dementia away - no matter how lost he may appear to other people.

Accepting that I was fighting a losing battle didn't come easy. Accepting that my role now was to watch as the disease took him was impossible. I realised I had taken him for granted.

I had assumed that my giant would always be there. The man that wasn't even my biological dad, the man that had on so many occasions literally saved my life (not least by taking on me and my two scraggy-haired sisters when he became our step dad), and for bringing a new sister into the family, I thought would be around forever. Instead, it became apparent that he was to quickly fade away into a skeleton of skin and bones - passing through a journey I would not wish on any enemy.

After the egg event, on the 3hr drive home from my parents' house, there was just one thing on my mind... just one phrase... "*I think I remember*" ... I.e. I think I remember everything about my giant. My giant. My dad. My friend. The man who helped me build a value-system that defines me to this day. The man who encouraged me to be more virtuous, and to always strive to be better tomorrow than I am today. Yet, the more I tried to remember every detail, the more I realised I had not been present. I had not shown up in the way he had done for me. I would prioritise work and other less important parts of life ahead of significant events like fathers' days, birthdays, anniversaries... and, I am utterly embarrassed to say, sometimes, even when I was physically present, I was not totally mentally present. Worried by work, or other things that do not matter when judgement day arrives. I stole from time I should have given to my giant.

Why am I telling you this very personal story? What has this got to do with empty chairs or even Freemasonry? Well it is simple. We all very often take things for granted. We sometimes only half listen. We fail to enquire about another's well-being. We often mingle with the same people in the lodge instead of mixing with newer members, older returning members, or

strangers... We do this not because we're fundamentally rude, but because we're pack animals, and often, because it's easy to do what's familiar or feels safe... In my case, it's because I sometimes lack the confidence to strike up a conversation with someone I know nothing about. Perhaps through a fear of rejection. Feeling unworthy. Feeling like I do not yet fully deserve the right to sit my full weight in the Lodge room or at the Lodge table. But therein is the trap... a race to the bottom... a fast-track to empty chairs... and it's not until you find an empty chair sitting next to you, with a void of conversation, a gap in the chain, a dislocation, that you really feel the gravity of a person missing for an evening, a month, or gone from your life for good.

So, at my February Social Board dinner, although the empty chair next to me allowed for a bit more shoulder and elbow room, the deafening noise of its emptiness helped me find my way back to something I thought I needed to leave behind – 'egg sandwich' day, and the ultimate loss of my dad. And, just like that, I realise my giant was influencing my life again. He had taught me to recognise empty chairs and think about what they mean.

So, my name is Tony and I notice empty chairs. Do you? Whether it's a vacant seat on your commute that's usually occupied by the old lady in the red hat., or the man with Downs Syndrome that was always at the bus stop as you walked past - but this time is missing., or the empty rocking chair in the nursery that you 'walk past' in your mind's eye so many times, where you'd planned to rock your unborn children to sleep - the children that never arrived. There are empty chairs in all our lives. Some temporarily empty. Some permanently empty. But all relevant.

So, as days, evenings and lodge events come and go, as we progress our lives, I am reminded of the lost opportunities for friendships and connections I did not take at other Social Boards. In just 3 years in Freemasonry I have counted 10 people that “I think I remember”., that have gone on to become empty chairs.

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, I’ve been further reminded of empty chairs through lack of contact with friends, work colleagues, Brethren, and loved ones; through the stories of people suffering loss as a result of coronavirus; and also as a result of social distancing (quite rightly) curtailing lodge and Freemasonry activity - and the charity that it ordinarily influenced 365 days per year in pre-coronavirus times. Every time I look at my Masonic ‘book’ and listen to my ‘self-learning’ rituals, I feel that loss. I felt that loss even more recently in a virtual lodge ‘ZOOM’ meeting where the Father of our lodge advised the loss of 167 Masons to coronavirus.

With that in mind I’d like to take a moment to toast our empty chairs and think about who occupied them, within the lodge or at home. As we raise a glass in toast of them, whether they’ve past to meet the great architect, or are just missing today, think about them, and think about your friends and families too. When you’re with them next, really be with them. Be in the present moment. Listen. And I mean really listen. Mingle more too (when safe to do so). Make an effort to sit next to, or take wine with, the people you don’t know that well in the room. Be thankful in that moment that they’re there, and so are you. Because when you catch yourself saying “I think I remember” about a missing colleague, or about a family member or friend, it’s often too late.

When my dad died, a good friend of mine told me that someone is only really gone when the last person ever mentions their name. In that regard, people can live through us forever. The memories, and feelings that go with them, shouldn't be stuffed down and forgotten about. They should be celebrated. As Freemasons, we have a duty to keep every brothers' memory alive by toasting and saluting our empty chairs.

Just before submitting this paper, I gave it one last proof-read. I was just about to press send on the email, when something in my subconscious told me to type "empty chair freemasonry" into a Google search. In 0.5 seconds, Google returned over 3million matching results! Completely overwhelmed, I clicked the 'next' button frantically 15 or 20 times. Then, randomly, a link to an article by The Grand Lodge Of New Brunswick caught my eye – so I clicked its link. As the article opened, I noticed the title "The Empty Chair Ceremony" written in large black bold letters across the top of the page. Underneath read, "A remembrance day ceremony", and described a beautifully honorable masonic ritual believed to date back to 1875 when it was used in Masonic lodges to pay tribute to those who did not return from the American Civil War. As I read further, I learned that the ceremony, and others like it, (the 'Vacant Chair Ceremony', and the 'Empty Chair Degree', which incidentally, is one of the few rituals to be performed in public) have been used at many lodges Worldwide on Remembrance Day to pay respect to fallen Brother Masons in WWI, WWII, and other wars, as well as to being adapted to remember Past Masters and Members on or after their passing.

Glancing up before continuing to read, the hair on the back of my neck stood up and goosebumps covered my arms. Out of over 3million references found by Google, I had randomly

selected an article published on my birthday. I've never questioned the presence of a higher power, and, I always believed I had a guardian angel, but this seemed unbelievable. It felt so unbelievable that I called my statistician friend. I played the sequence of events back to him, starting with a 1 in 50 chance of sitting adjacent to an empty chair in the lodge, 'feeling' a connection to it, questioning those feelings and taking time to explore and write about them, then selecting 1 article randomly from over 3million found, and the article I selected being published on my birthday. Apparently, the chances of that happening are 1 in 1 million-million (or 1 in 1 trillion). That makes me feel very fortunate.

So, I invite you all to be upstanding and join me in a toast to your empty chairs, wherever they are. To AOME, Samuel, Jacob, Emily, and dad. Long may the memory of you live on. To absent friends.

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