

Jose Marti: Freemasonry and the Pursuit of Liberty
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Biography

José Julian Perez Martí was one of the greatest known writers in Latin America, more so, in the Spanish-speaking world. He was known as Cuba's national hero, El Apóstol de Nuestra Independencia (Apostle of our independence), and was instrumental in helping and motivating the Cuban revolution against Spain. He has written important literature that shaped the history of Cuba, and has also created literary works such as poetry, plays, children's stories and articles. Today we, in this lodge, refer to him as our brother.

Brother Martí was born in Havana in 1853 to a Spaniard father and a mother from the Canary Islands. His political beliefs were first influenced by Rafael Maria de Mendive, a professor of the Escuela de Instrucción Primaria Superior Municipal de Varones (Municipal Higher Elementary Training School for Boys) that Martí was enrolled at in 1865. He expressed his support for the revolution during the Ten Year War as a teenager and was eventually caught and sentenced to prison. His sentence ended after being ill from his incarceration and he was repatriated by the Spanish authorities in the hopes that the action would strengthen loyalty upon the teenager. He continued his studies in Spain, and received degrees in law and philosophy from the University of Madrid and Zarazoga before returning to Cuba. From his studies, he honed his artistic talents but he was eventually banished again for vocalizing ideas and supporting the need for an independent Cuba. He then traveled to different places such as Paris and Venezuela, but eventually settled in New York in 1881. He earned a living as a teacher and a writer in the United States and other Latin American countries. From his travels he had strengthened his ideals of revolution and freedom. His journey from rebellious school boy to revolutionary champion began during his exile.

In 1882, Martí began devoting to the task of preparing and coordinating for Cuba's revolt against Spain. It became what was known as Cuba's Third War of Independence. He initiated the formation of the Cuban Revolutionary Party upon gathering the support of war veterans Antonio Maceo, Maximo Gomez and others. Together, the Party raised funds for the revolution and launched a government that would be in place once the war against Spain was over.

The Cuban revolutionary action was started in the year 1884. Historian Philip Foner explains Martí's urgency to start the war: "Martí's impatience to start the revolution for independence was affected by his growing fear that the imperialist forces in the United States would succeed in annexing Cuba before the revolution could liberate the island from Spain. Martí noticed with alarm the movement to annex Hawaii, viewing it as establishing a pattern for Cuba..."

Shortly after the revolution launched, Martí died in battle on May 19, 1895.

Brotherhood

In our very first lesson as an Entered Apprentice, we are taught to hold true the valuable tenants of our institution. One of them stating: "In the State, you are to be a quiet and peaceable citizen, true to your government and just to your country. You are not to countenance disloyalty or rebellion, but patiently submit to legal authority, and to conform with cheerfulness to the government of the country in which you live. In your outward demeanor, be particularly careful to avoid censure or reproach."

The Paradox of Freemasonry

An Entered Apprentice mason immediately conforms to the admonitions of the craft, that is, the Ancient Charges. One of the charges teaches masons to never create distrust among men and society. One must submit to the counsel of his superiors – may it be king, lord or master. The formation of oppositional parties that subscribe to the subversion of peace and good order of society is strictly forbidden. As we all know, all political and religious topics in the lodges are refrained. If this is the case, how is it that José Martí, along with other known revolutionary freemasons such as Jose Rizal in the Philippines, Guiseppe Garibaldi in Italy and Benito Juarez in Mexico, formed their own factions against governments, and yet we still recognize them as our brothers?

Brother Alex Davidson relates about such fraternal discourse over the years: *“The great paradox of Freemasonry is that its history is inextricably interwoven with the history of 18th and 19th century revolutions, at the same time as its writings firmly reject political disobedience and condemn subversion and revolt against the government of any land.”*

The explanation offered by our brother John Locke, philosopher of his time, somewhat summarizes the definition of liberty. He stated in his book, *Two Treatises of Government (written in 1690)*, *“that we cannot be obliged to a government to which we have not given some sign of consent, and that ‘the end of Law is to preserve and enlarge freedom’. Governments are dissolved when the ‘Legislative, or the Prince, either of them act contrary to their trust’, and ‘Power reverts to the people’, who may then establish a new legislative and executive. It is the people who decide when a breach of trust has occurred, for only the man who deposes power can tell when it is abused (II, 240). In the case of dispute ‘the final appeal is to God’, by which Locke specifically meant revolution.”*

Many Masonic philosophers shaped their ideas from Locke’s interpretation of liberty. One of our requirements, as we well know, is being a man, **free born** of lawful age and coming under the tongue of true masonic report. It therefore contradicts our Masonic values if one must submit unconditionally to tyranny and subjugation. Respect to a civil power is only granted if one can freely perform all his fundamental functions in society. A power that resists the freedom to do this duty nullifies the basic elements constituting us as masons. Tyranny does not match freedom nor does it compliment it. Therefore, liberty is sought and trumps every argument of Masonic debate. This is a logical reason why our brothers were central to the revolutions during the past four centuries.

Martí believed that freedom is an innate right of every human being and the 400-year invasion of Spain is a contradiction to this right. In one article, Martí explains how liberty is different from submission to evil: *“We are free, but not to be evil, not to be indifferent to human suffering, not to profit from the people, from the work created and sustained through their spirit of political association, while refusing to contribute to the political state that we profit from. We must say no once more. Man is not free to watch impassively the enslavement and dishonor of men, nor their struggles for liberty and honor.”*

José Martí: A Journey of Liberty and Literature

In Martí’s search for Cuban national liberty, he employed his writing to win many a minds and also to chronicle the present standing of the Cubans’ revolutionary cause. It is however

important that not all poetry is political or philosophical in nature. In some poems such as Verso Sencillos' Verso II, strange lands such as Egypt and Persia were touched upon and how he would have preferred the mountain air over the two countries.

*I know about Persia and Xenophon,
Egypt and the Sudan,
But I prefer to be caressed
By fresh mountain air.*

*I know the age-old history
Of human grudges,
But I prefer the bees that fly
Among the bellflowers.*

At one glance, the poem describes Martí's desire for peace instead of conflict. Despite his part in the Cuban Revolutionary Party and his role in the search for independence, this shows that his inherent purpose was to achieve peace. As a brother mason, he knew that the promotion of peace and order is highly imposed upon us and brother Martí understood the rule and lived by it. In the lines of *I Cultivate a White Rose*, he evolves from favoring peace to favoring forgiveness. As the color white symbolizes a sense of purity, to never abscond from moral integrity and arrogance.

*And for the cruel person who tears out
The heart with which I live,
I cultivate neither needles nor thorns:
I cultivate a white rose.*

His contemplations of peace were also his motivation to fight for it. He pondered on the goals of his writing whereas he described them as "...*daggers | sprouting blossoms from hilts*". He describes his poetry as if it was to be used as a weapon to create good things. He once quoted that "*Like stones rolling down hills, fair ideas reach their objectives despite all obstacles and barriers. It may be possible to speed or hinder them, but impossible to stop them.*"

As in most poems, they are the emotional descriptions of an era. Since Martí was born during the Spanish occupation, he envisions that his poetry is instrumental to achieving peace. He writes for his fellowmen and those who seek freedom. In these lines, Martí used remarkable metaphors to describe his poetry.

*My poems please the valiant;
Sincere and brief; my poetry
Is rugged as the steel they use
To forge a sword.*

One could say that as our brother, Martí's contribution would be his ideas. He wrote some of the most influential literary piece in the Latin American history and has also taught at many institutions in different countries prior to the Cuban Revolution. It should be said that poetry was his "craft". He uses words with such clarity and melancholy, to assert his environment's emotional physiology while assimilating his own. In his poem *Dos Patrias*, Martí described as having "*two countries: Cuban and the night.*" He describes his country similar to being in a statement of darkness, whose identity is masked by melancholy and truth remains in the dark.

He uses the sun as a metaphor for the truth, as we use the Great Architect as our truth and light. Despite the negativity in tone of *Dos Patrias*, it should be noted that hope radiates most of his poetry. He talks about balance in one of his articles where a “*force of passion*” is in equilibrium by the “*force of interest*.” He says that “*An insatiable appetite for glory leads to sacrifice and death, but innate instinct leads to self-preservation of life. A nation that neglects either of these forces perishes.*”

This view of Cuba perhaps was influenced by his comparisons with the countries he has visited. Martí had found America as a lovely country, appealing in the sense of apparent freedom which is noticeable through its culture. Martí once said that “*Like bones to the human body, the axle to the wheel, the wing to the bird, and the air to the wing, so is liberty the essence of life. Whatever is done without it is imperfect.*” This fascination for American liberty is seen on his article *Impressions of America*:

I am at last in a country where everyone looks like his own master. One can breathe freely, freedom being here the foundation, the shield, the essence of life. One can be proud of his species here. Every one works, every one reads... I am deeply obliged to this count, where the friendliness finds always a friend and a kind hand is always found by those who look honestly for work.

Other works by Martí values hard work and integrity. Once he was asked for an autograph and instead wrote: “*The only appropriate autograph of a man is that which he leaves written with his works.*” Martí states that a legacy should be built among achievements over the course of life. Over the course of his life, he has made ponderous works that contemplate on existence. In *A Morir*, he begs the Grand Architect to give him justice, a well-deserved death of a freedom fighter.

*I wish to leave the world
By its natural door;
In my tomb of green leaves
They are to carry me to die.
Do not put me in the dark
To die like a traitor;
I am good, and like a good thing
I will die with my face to the sun*

Conclusion

Amidst the revolutionary era of Cuba, Martí possessed the will to fight for peace. He demanded that liberation be the only reward, at the cost of his life. He, has shown, as a Masonic brother that brotherhood extends far beyond the walls of the lodges. He has possessed an innate desire to promote the welfare of his countrymen, and to promote the freedom for truth and knowledge, which will only be available at the presence of liberty. As it is understood, the equality of our brethren encompasses religion and politics and we have abstained from philosophical debates about such topics. We, however, bear enlightening revolutionary ideas that has caused many members to be actively participating in the shaping of civil statutes, revolutionary movements and political climates. Martí had the same morals that steered towards patriotism and social

justice and believed that “*one just principle from the depths of a cave is more powerful than an army.*”