

What Do Masons Do?
by
Richard G.J. Skoglund, PM
Payson Lodge No. 70
Payson, AZ.

This is hardly a surprising question. It is asked all of the time. And, most of the time, it comes from a prospective candidate.

There is a long standing tradition in Freemasonry to keep an aura of 'mystery' and 'secrecy' about our ritual and its teachings. This tradition has resulted in a two edged sword. It has prompted many curiosity seekers to join the Fraternity. When they fail to discover the supposed secrets they lose interest and leave while others, discovering that there really are "secrets" remain.

The obligations of all three degrees imply that we have secrets AND that we will suffer some bloody penalty for revealing any of those secrets to any person under the canopy of heaven.

To partially quote, all three obligations have the exact same wording: I solemnly and sincerely promise and swear that I will always hail, forever conceal and never reveal any of the secret arts, parts or points of the hidden mysteries of Freemasonry appertaining to the degree of Entered, Fellow Craft or Master Mason.

So! What exactly ARE the "secret" arts, parts or points of the hidden Mysteries of Freemasonry? Let us examine the wording carefully. Is it the Ritual? Freemason rituals are available in hundreds of books and on thousands of websites. Our rituals are re-enacted on the History channel and other TV programs with various specials that they keep running over and over again. Some are complimentary and others critical. You can find our passwords and secret handshakes all over the Internet. Most importantly, none of this is new!! Our ritual in its various forms has been well published for over 150 years!

As recently as 45 years ago before the internet and Wiki Leaks when Masonry was under attack in England the United Grand Lodge of England published the complete Ritual of all the degrees in the London Times in response to attacks accusing them of witchcraft, idolitry, etc, etc.

The reason why this is a pet-peeve of mine is because I think it is the number one reason why newly raised members are not active. They get their Third Degree, they might go out and buy a ring, lapel pin, decal or a bumper sticker (or not), and then you never see them again.

Why is this? I believe it is because they were told or read or watched on TV or the internet things about Freemasonry and what they really found was something completely different. They became disappointed, confused, discouraged and left.

When a new member is proposed we form a committee of "investigation." This is generally two or three members of the lodge who go to the candidate's house and talk to him and his family about the lodge. This supposedly allows the prospective member to

ask questions about Freemasonry and it allows the lodge to make sure the member is not applying for improper reasons.

The sticking point is that when the prospective candidate asks "Just what is it that Masons actually do? The answers are usually inaccurate or incomplete.

So, what is it that we are not telling him? One answer in my humble opinion is: We are an amateur theatre group that memorizes and performs an ancient ceremony and try to do it to absolute perfection. We perform the same three dramatic plays over, and over, and over again year in and year out. We memorize every word, movement, and detail of the ceremony until we can nearly recite it in our sleep. All other activities are secondary.

I inform each one that we are not performing the drama of initiatory ritual to entertain but rather, to teach. That Masonry is a progressive Moral Science taught by degrees. Our dramas impress upon the mind important basic truths about morality and the duties of a worthy and honorable man in society and that after the 3rd degree he is really just starting the never ending path to further light.

A second answer which, when I am one of those on the investigating committee, is to inform him that while we emphatically state in our obligations and Ritual that we have secrets. This is not entirely true. We use symbols and allegorical ritual to impress upon him the seriousness of what he is experiencing. The deeper true meanings of these Rituals of Initiation requiring much further study after completion of the 3rd degree.

Memorization of the lectures assists, but for the inquiring mind, only opens up more avenues of curiosity and study.

Therefore I have come to the conclusion that, the true secrets of Freemasonry are in the understanding the comes with continued study. Each individual accepting truth as he is capable of understanding it. This understanding, being different with each person, cannot be revealed to any person under the canopy of heaven, nor can a person write, indite, print, paint, carve, etc upon anything movable or immovable, it being his own, individual comprehension of the material he has studied. This has, over the year produced many books written about the symbology and Ritual of Masonry with each Author expressing his own personal understanding.

The best way to hide any secret or secrets is right out in the open where anyone can access or see it. Hence, the Ritual and its accompanying mumbo jumbo has succeeded over the centuries in keeping hidden the true secrets from those who do not have the ability to understand or comprehend what they are actually reading. This is why it has always been available to all. Masonry DOES have hidden mysteries and secrets, but understandable only to those with the capability and desire to learn. It is a never ending quest for knowledge or, as we Masons like to say "further light in Masonry." The Ritual itself and the accompanying lectures designed to ignite the spiritual or natural curiosity of the initiate.

Of course, this is not what the committee of investigation says we do. The committee of investigation says we do the following:

- * We conduct a business meeting

- * We have a Charity fund. The funds raised are used once a year providing clothing to under-privileged children.
- * We help our brothers in need.
- * We do fund raisers such as Craft Fairs, BBQ's, Pancake Breakfasts and an occasional raffle.
- * We have fellowship with family Dinners prior to the once a month Stated Meeting and meet once a week for "degree practice" with coffee and an occasional cookie or donut.
- * We travel to other lodges and if asked, participate or assist in conferring any of the three degrees of Masonry on Candidates.

Now, every single one of these things is absolutely true. No question about it. However, it does not represent the key activity of the lodge which is to memorize and perform the same ritual over and over again. To memorize and perform are the first steps taken in an individual's quest to obtain the keys to enlightenment or further "light" or understanding of the secrets of the hidden mysteries of Freemasonry.

When a prospective candidate receives their first, second, and third degrees they are generally confused and bewildered by it all. It is certainly not what they expected, though there was a lot of coffee and cookies afterwards and, on his Third Degree, someone even brought some lovely sandwiches and a custom decorated cake, the candidate is completely blown away by the awe-inspiring feats of rote memorization he has seen performed. In some cases one man might recite, word for word, a lecture that lasts as long as 45 minutes, absolutely perfectly. The material is interesting, and confusing as well. Nevertheless, one thought in every candidate's mind is "I sure as hell hope they don't expect me to do that!!! I can't memorize worth a darn!!!"

Once the candidate has been raised, and is now a newly made Master Mason, he is ready to get to work. He is ready to participate in the BBQ, Craft Fair, Breakfasts or other fund raising activities.

If it is an active lodge with these types of functions he gets involved, gets to know the other members better and eventually realizes that he has joined a fund raising club donating his valuable time to provide free labor with the proceeds used to pay the bills and very little of it going to Charity. He is disappointed.

He attends the Stated Meetings and finds that they are nothing but business meetings being rather repetitious and boring.

He attends initiations and some other guy is getting his first degree. Then, the next time, a guy is getting his second. And then his third.

He is asked to participate in the degree work and is assigned a small part to get his "feet wet" so to speak. He finds that he simply cannot memorize and when he does participate feels very uncomfortable performing the part. It's just not for him.

Some then join the Shrine where they do a ton of stuff with the community and have a great deal of fun. But, chances are you won't see them back in the Blue Lodge very often – if ever.

Now this experience I am describing is not universal. There are lodges that rarely perform degree work, never practice and, if it needs to be done, they have it performed by an outside team. These lodges are slowly dying out due to a lack of interest and failing miserably to replace their aging membership. They have lost sight of the power of the ritual and the lessons inculcated within it. Therefore, in our lodge the practicing and delivery of ritual is what we focus on primarily with weekly practices. We have Mentor/Coaches who meet one on one with both officers and non-officers and practice realizing that not everyone can be an officer but they desire to participate in ritual work.

One year we may raise as many as 6 to Master Mason, the next year only one. It doesn't really matter how many we raise, it is the regular practices every week and the fellowship that results in a bonding of men with a common purpose – more light in Masonry which is the by-product. A “band of brothers” tied together by the cement of Brotherly Love and affection amongst whom no contention should ever exist but that noble contention or emulation of those can best work and agree. We form friendships that last forever.

I also believe in the “Build It and They Will Come” principle. Like attracts like. Members of a lodge who are performing ritual on a regular basis, whether they have candidates or not, are creating energy within that lodge which will attract like-minded men and only the duly and truly qualified candidate(s) will appear.

I have learned over the years that Freemasonry is not suitable for every man. Not everyone is looking for “light” or knowledge. They are content to just pursue their work or various hobbies.

Another interesting side effect of learning ritual work and study of its hidden mysteries is the deeper understanding of the Moral and Spiritual lessons each individual member or officer attains and how it affects his attitude and behavior outside the lodge in his daily life and relationships. Masonry really can make some good men better. With others it simply doesn't stick or make an impression and they eventually leave.

Our Lodge has built a large Masonic Library over the years. We encourage all Masons, whether they be new or “old timers” to read and learn from the material available. The real “secrets” of Masonry being contained therein.

In my first few months after attaining the status of Master Mason many years ago, and finally being allowed to attend a Stated Meeting and Dinner, I found that I would go to a meeting and, on the way home think "joining up with this bunch of old fogies was the dumbest thing I have ever done." Then, a few days later I would find myself wondering "When is the next meeting again?" There was something there I quite couldn't understand or grasp. There just has to be something secret that they haven't told me yet as I kept being drawn back to the lodge even though I was rather discouraged and disgusted.

Over time it began to grow on me. Hearing the same ritual over and over again is almost hypnotic. I found that sitting in lodge left me feeling centered and more peaceful. Parts of the Third Degree lecture kept coming back and haunting me. Somewhere in that long, rambling and disconnected dissertation using words and phrases that I did not understand, there was a message for me.

Then something happened. After going to meetings for a few months I found that I had, through osmosis, memorized significant portions of the ritual without even trying! This got me thinking. What would happen if I actually tried to memorize some ritual? So, I started with the Apron Presentation. I did manage to memorize it, though it took me several weeks. Next, I thought, well, sure I memorized it, but I will just forget it in a few days. This is where things got really interesting. I didn't forget it! I can't remember someone's name for fifteen seconds, but I could memorize a page of ritual? How did that happen? I'll never forget the first time I delivered it (or anything) in lodge. It was an exhilarating experience.

Next I decided to try to memorize something "big." So, I worked on memorizing the Third Degree Lecture. This is a 3,000 plus word piece. It was hard. I had great difficulty memorizing it and it took me three months just to memorize and even forever to learn how to deliver it as effectively as it was delivered to me during my Third Degree. I am, 20 years later, still working on the delivery.

Yet, once again, something remarkable happened! I didn't forget a single word once it was committed to memory! I can deliver it effectively with emphasis and pauses any time, any where, any place.

I then endeavored to learn the ritual work of every degree of every officer in the Lodge from the Senior Steward through the Worshipful Master.

That took another year and half with my wife as degree coach, working most evenings. She is an excellent coach – very patient.

Reciting ritual is like a meditation. It is a soothing experience. To deliver it in a lodge confers a great and powerful feeling. To perform this ceremony as a shared experience among a group of men, who have worked to memorize it just like you, leaves you feeling a kind of "charge" through your whole body and you leave the meeting feeling relaxed and at peace.

In the process of memorizing, the quest for deeper understanding of the subject began to arise and I found myself reading more books on Masonry. Eventually the reading or search for more "light" or understanding of the secrets and hidden mysteries becoming more important than the memorization of the Ritual and lectures.

In my lodge I see a man, the founding Master of the Payson 70, who is 90 years old. Last week he passed on to meet that "Judge Supreme" and be congratulated for a job well done and received into the Joy of his Lord. He had every single word of all of the Masonic ritual and lectures memorized. He could still recite it with a strong and powerful oratory even though he looked like he would fall over at any moment. If the process of memorizing Freemason ritual can keep your mind that sharp all of the way into the age of 90, I say there has to be something good in it. I am 71 years young now and hope to be able to still deliver the lectures and ritual as well as he can when and if I ever reach 90.

This man has set an example that I endeavor to emulate. He once confided to me that he also found that memorization of the Ritual and lectures spurred him on to reading, studying and endeavoring to obtain further "light" or understanding.

To finally wrap up this dissertation, I wrote these thoughts and opinions because I want the new prospective candidate to be informed as to what we “do” in a Masonic lodge. That they are fully aware of what will be expected of them and what they can expect in return. I want them to know that, besides the occasional fund raiser, the bulk of our “work” involves rote memorization, performance of the same and the by-product that it produces which sparks the never ending quest for further “light” or understanding of the secrets of the hidden mysteries. In addition I hope that this can be useful to those who are asked to be part of an investigating committee.

This concludes all I have to say on the topic.