

WHAT HAPPENS IN LODGE (SHOULDN'T STAY IN LODGE)

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Please accept my thanks for inviting me here this evening. I am happy to visit with you again and your hospitality and kindness is well known to me.

Worshipful Master McGrew asked me to give a "general Masonic address." I think that may be the most difficult assignment I've ever had. Freemasonry has so many facets, that it is difficult to craft an address that does justice to the whole, unless you are willing to spend several hours on the topic at hand (which I assure you will not be the case this evening).

I settled on what I believe to be the question on everyone's mind, when it comes to Freemasonry. That question is: *Just what is it that those guys do behind those closed doors?*

Popular culture really has no idea as to the answer to that question. Novels, TV shows and movies inevitably gravitate to funny hats and conspiracy theories in their effort to define Freemasonry. But none of those things offer much in the way of an explanation of what actually happens at a Lodge meeting.

Tonight, that's what we are going to explore: The mystery of what happens in a Masonic Lodge meeting.

Every Masonic Lodge conducts a ritualistic opening ceremony before transacting any business. The opening ceremony is actually quite brief – usually just about ten minutes long. Because of its brevity, its importance is often overlooked. Many times the ritual opening is viewed as an annoyance, to be hurried through as quickly as possible, or, in some cases, reduced to an abbreviated set of declarations, after which we can get down to the business of reading minutes and paying bills.

If you are here this evening and you are a member of the Eastern Star, or the Order of the Amaranth, or if you are a DeMolay, a Rainbow or a Job's Daughter, you will have some familiarity with the concept of the opening ceremony.

While I cannot speak specifically to the opening ceremonies in any of those organizations, I can tell you that the opening ceremony in a Masonic Lodge has a specific purpose and it is seldom appreciated and even more seldom understood.

This physical structure is an ordinary brick and mortar building. It's a very nice facility and it is certainly more than adequate for its purpose of providing a space in which Masons and other related bodies can comfortably and safely meet. But it is only a building and there are thousands of others similar to it within a radius of just a few miles.

As Masons, we are taught that each Masonic Lodge is a representation of King Solomon's Temple. We are also taught that we are each engaged in building within ourselves a spiritual temple – a house not made by hands, eternal in the heavens.

Our ritualistic opening ceremony represents both a transition and a transformation. The ceremony is the last step in our transition from the profane world to the spiritual world. It is a part of our preparation for Lodge. Hopefully, that preparation began hours (or days) earlier, when we first began to contemplate the significance of the evening's meeting, when we began to dress for the meeting and when we began to greet each other upon arrival. Remember, the opening ceremony is the last step of the transition from the profane to the spiritual. The preceding steps are equally necessary.

While it is certainly important that the Master, Secretary and other officers are prepared for the evening's business meeting, it is just as important that each member present has prepared himself physically, intellectually and spiritually.

It's easy to tell when Masons have not prepared for Lodge. When we spend no time thinking about the meeting in advance, show up in sloppy attire, mumble half-hearted greetings, stumble through the opening ceremony and begin checking our watches to see just how quickly we can finish this and get home, the transition from the profane to the spiritual is never fully complete and we miss the experience of Lodge being the "sacred retreat" to which our ritual refers.

Preparation is an essential part of the Lodge experience and without it we limit ourselves to a mere shadow of the benefits that our Fraternity has to offer us.

As the opening ceremony is a transition, it is also a transformation. During the ceremony, we display what we refer to as the "Great Light" in Masonry, the Volume of Sacred Law, and we invite the Grand Architect of the Universe, to whom this Lodge and all others were erected, into our midst. At that moment this room, in which you are now seated, is transformed from the ordinary to a sacred space. Our ordinary Lodge rooms become, quite literally, holy ground.

This transformation calls for a response from us. Unfortunately, we too often fail in our response. The only acceptable response to being in the presence of the sacred, and, indeed, Deity, is the presentation of the best that we have to offer. The only acceptable response is our best in

appearance, our best in thought and our best indeed. Anything less than that is unworthy of Masonry.

The simple fact is that when we assemble and open a Lodge of Masons we are here to meet our Creator and anything other than our best efforts in all respects indicates that we either don't understand why we are here, or, more disturbingly, we understand but simply don't care enough to respond appropriately.

In the conferral of our degrees, we find that Masonry has a single aim and purpose – to teach men to subjugate their passions and desires, and, in so doing, improve themselves and achieve their potential for a more fulfilling life and draw nearer to their Creator, the Grand Architect of the Universe. Sadly, the majority of Masons do not understand this. They have never been taught this most fundamental truth about our Fraternity.

Several of our Past Grand Masters have recognized the need for Kentucky Masons to be educated as to the genuine aim and purpose of Freemasonry.

Addressing the Grand Craft of Kentucky in 1958, Most Worshipful Grand Master William O. Ware said,

“It is my sincere hope that the future will disclose many Masons in this Grand Jurisdiction who will have responded to the need to become learned in the real meaning of Freemasonry. Then, and only then, can we expect Freemasonry in Kentucky to fulfill its intended purpose and become the beneficent spiritual power in the lives of each of us that it was destined to be.”

Again, to be clear: Masonry has a single aim and purpose -- to teach men to subjugate their passions and desires, and, in so doing, improve themselves and achieve their potential for a more fulfilling life and draw nearer to their Creator. If that reality is not at the center of whatever activity it is in which you are engaged, then what you are practicing is not Masonry. We are not a charity, we are not a social club, we are not a mutual aid society, although all of those things are laudable and, after a fashion, each can be considered to be an attribute of Masonry. Indeed, if we are engaged in the practice of pure Masonry, that is, the act of improving ourselves in Masonry, then all of the attributes of Freemasonry will naturally occur – we will practice charity, we will come to the aid and assistance of each other and we will have satisfying social relations with each other. The practice of Masonry as intended brings harmony and order where there is otherwise discord and chaos.

Masonry has existed for many centuries and in organized fashion for over three hundred years. It continues to exist because it works. Just as our Lodges are transformed to a sacred space, our lives can be transformed in a manner that displays that spiritual temple erected to the glory of the Creator.

If this sounds somewhat intense, it certainly should. Masonry is not a casual endeavor. It is serious work for serious men and if you are unwilling to commit yourself to the lifelong pursuit of self-improvement and the search for Deity, then you are in the wrong place.

The last sixty years have seen the number of Masons in Kentucky drop from a high of slightly over 100,000 (in 1959) to our currently level of about 30,000 members. In that same period of time, as we have seen a decrease in members, we have seen an increase in indifference to the moral lessons of Masonry (both inside and outside the Lodge), an increasingly casual approach to the practice of Freemasonry and a lowering of our standards in the areas of dress and ritual. We have seen men become members of our Lodges who have no interest in ever becoming engaged in the practice of Freemasonry. Many of these men have been elevated to leadership positions in our Lodges and Grand Lodge. We have failed to teach the tenets of Freemasonry because so few members actually know what those tenets are. Because we have largely ignored the spiritual and philosophical foundations of Freemasonry, we have devolved into little more than just another service club. In these respects, our wounds are self-inflicted, and, in similar fashion, they can only be self-healed.

The practice of Freemasonry is a call to a commitment to excellence. Further, our commitment to excellence is not like the white apron that we put on when we come to Lodge and remove when we leave. Our commitment to excellence in all things is the tangible proof that we are pursuing improvement. Carrying that commitment to excellence outside the Lodge is every bit as important as the commitment that we show when in Lodge.

In his closing address, delivered at the 1970 Grand Lodge of Kentucky annual communication, M. W. Grand Master Carroll Curtis said,

“Ever keep in mind that only high quality and excellence is acceptable to Freemasonry. It is of paramount importance that there be high quality in the moral standards and practices of our members; in the leadership of our officers; in the dignified and impressive conferring of our degrees and the conducting of all our ceremonies; in the DAILY PRACTICE of our Masonic obligations and teachings; indeed, high quality is necessary in everything Masonic. As Masons, we do not claim to be better than everyone else, but in order to actually be Masons, there are certain standards that we must uphold.”

Past Grand Master Curtis recognized that the transformation in a man's life that happens in Lodge (and as a result of the practice of Freemasonry) must be carried outside the walls of this building. It is in the profane world that the practice of Freemasonry has its greatest benefit. As we improve ourselves, we necessarily improve the society in which we live. Daily effort at self-improvement makes us better men – and that means we are better husbands, better fathers, better brothers. Our quest for improvement (our commitment to excellence) is what sets us apart from the rest of the world and is the characteristic that makes Freemasonry unique.

I address this question to my Masonic Brothers here assembled: What happens in your Masonic Lodge? Are your meetings ordinary events, merely just another gathering of men? Or is

the dynamic presence of the Great Architect of the Universe felt and experienced by those in attendance?

The way that you answer those questions will shape your individual future. Collectively, your answers will shape the future of your Lodge. And those answers will, in part, shape the future of the world in which you live.

Freemasonry was not designed to be an ordinary experience in any respect. It is not meant for men who accept the ordinary. Freemasonry is an extraordinary experience and calls men to seek their greatest fulfillment.

So, what goes on in a Masonic Lodge? When practiced in the manner in which it was intended, it is a transition from the profane world to the spiritual and a transformation from the ordinary world to the sacred. It becomes the place in which we, those of us fortunate enough to call ourselves Masons, can engage in the most important work of our life – the construction of our spiritual temples, built with eternity in view.

Again, thank you for your invitation this evening, and I wish each of you a joyous holiday season.