

The Lodge Meeting Experience

By Bro. Daniel D. Hrinko

Freemasonry presents itself to the world as an order that assists men in the process of pursuing enlightenment. The commonly stated goal of the Fraternity is to make good men better. This involves a process with many steps. The first and most basic step is where we follow specific rituals to move a man through his preparation, initiation, passing, and raising as a Mason.

During these rituals, the candidate receives specific instructions which revolve around symbolism and allegory and contain essential elements of universal morality. The intent is that the man participating in the ritual as well as those observing the ritual will glean important lessons about universal morality and integrate these lessons into their daily lives to achieve this goal of making good men better.

A second step in this process is the formal education of the candidates and members about the symbols, lessons, history, and meanings associated with the ritual and allegory. These lessons are often presented in a didactic manner with one learned brother sharing what he knows with the others in a lecture or class format. This often includes a review and memorization of some element of the ritual, through questions and answers, historical information about the past experiences of Freemasonry, or some author's thoughts on the subject found in a journal, pamphlet, or other publication. These first two steps, the experience of the ritual and the sharing of educational material, are intellectual in their character and are a necessary foundation for the complete experience of Freemasonry.

However, these and other steps can involve the emotional aspects of the human – and Masonic - experience which allows us to bring a richness and quality to the Masonic experience which defies being understood in a simple, intellectual description.

An essential component of the memorable Masonic experience is the formation of relationships. As we pledge our fidelity to one another and invest our time in the study of Freemasonry, we begin to build upon our common bond as Freemasons and forge relationships that can contribute to our quality of life. As these relationships form, we begin to look forward to the time we spend together where we can share those events in our lives and include our brothers in our day to day existence. This can be a powerful connection filled with emotions that defy description or explanation, yet add a quality to our lives that is unobtainable in any other manner.

Men are not only intellectual beings but emotional ones. Our emotions play an important role in our ability to remember events when they are highlighted by feelings of joy, sadness, fear or any of the thousands of other emotions of which we are capable.

Emotions are not intellectual. They are difficult to comprehend, often irrational, and are typically beyond description. However, when properly attended to, emotions are able to

lift the ordinary to the extraordinary; the mundane to the exquisite. Though often uncomfortable to some, emotions bring color and quality to numerous experiences in our lives. Music, foods, smells, places, and other trivial things can rise to a level of importance where they take a special place in our hearts and minds.

No one who has ever been duly prepared and conducted through the door of the Lodge for the first time can claim, with any honesty, that it was an unemotional experience. It may be beyond words and difficult to explain, however, the power of emotions in this circumstance is undeniable. Through due attention to emotions, the ritual of initiation and the manner in which our ritual is performed can greatly enhance the experience of all involved. But, when poorly executed, it can create an embarrassing event which conveys little if anything of the true light available through Freemasonry.

Most lodges take great care to present the ritual in a moving and accurate manner, clearly recognizing that this experience is important to the new member's understanding of the Fraternity and its lessons. Such efforts are to be applauded. Some say that observing a candidate or brother experience a degree gives us a chance to vicariously experience that degree as well as we recall our own degree. This is clearly a heart-warming experience. Some of us look for these opportunities and choose to serve the lodge by becoming officers and taking an active role in the ritual work, an experience that has its own emotional rewards.

But what about the rest of the meetings when the ritual is not being performed? What about the time the rest of us spend in lodge long after our first reception? Should we not also attend to the needs of our Brothers and make use of the power of emotions to enhance our experience in Freemasonry? Can we make emotional experiences occur during those other meetings to keep the Masonic experience a fresh and vibrant as those first and early experiences?

When we review the ancient charges and the early writings of the Fraternity in its current form, we see clear references to our responsibility to spend our time in lodge wisely attending to important tasks. Our charters tell us that we should be making Masons. We should also be improving ourselves in the arts and sciences associated with the craft. Reviews of various versions of the ritual almost universally state that we come to learn and to improve ourselves in Masonry. This idea has been a central element in the responsibilities of a lodge from its early days. Given that these are essential and important tasks, we should pursue them with the same intensity of passion and emotion as is exhibited to our rituals of initiation, passing, and raising.

The ceremony of opening a lodge has been described as a transformative process whereby an ordinary room is transformed into a sacred space, one where we are to separate ourselves from the profane world and practice the "Royal Art." In all lodges we start, symbolically, in darkness bringing light into the room in preparation of the work of the evening. When properly performed, the opening ceremony provides us with an opportunity to leave the distractions of the day-to-day world outside the door and focus our attention to the reasons we gather and the tasks at hand. It has been said that in the

opening ceremony, we symbolically build a representation of King Solomon's Temple and use that space to work on our own ashlar as we keep the designs on our own trestle board in the forefront of our minds. Given that this is such a critical event, as no lodge can work without properly opening, should we not then also attend to the order of business and the consideration for the emotional consequences of our actions as the meeting progresses?

The Master of the Lodge has the responsibility to conduct meetings that meet several requirements and expectations. At the most basic level is the administrative expectations of the Lodge and the Grand Lodge. Expectations regarding the number of meetings, required activities, and other administrative rules must be met. These are generally of little interest to most in the room, and yet they are a necessary part of lodge operation and require periodic attention. If this is all the Master considers when planning the meetings of the Lodge, he will then miss many opportunities to create a moving Masonic experience regardless of the business before the lodge.

However, if we follow the opening ritual with programs, presentations, or discussions about Freemasonry, then we build upon on the emotional intensity created by a well-executed opening ceremony. Making use of the opportunity of a receptive mind, prepared by the opening ceremony, allows the lessons to be heard, properly considered, and the benefits derived. Following the program, the meeting can then progress to the exploration of the applied aspects of Freemasonry by discussing the opportunities in the world around us, the needs of those in sickness and distress, and the opportunities to assist through the box of fraternal assistance.

Administrative requirements such as committee reports, balloting, and other activities can then follow when they are required. A review of the past meetings and the finances of the lodge can be held, if not already done outside of the meeting or at a separate business meeting, along with the schedule of upcoming activities.

By following this path, the lodge has transformed a space from an ordinary space to a sacred space focusing on the Light of Freemasonry and the study of the related principles. A well-run meeting might then transition to the *practice* of Freemasonry by service to the fraternity and to the application of Masonic principles through meeting the needs of our needy, widows, and the community. The administrative requirements are then addressed as a necessary but recognized as not being the true purpose of our meetings.

Once the administrative duties necessary to the operation of the lodge are completed, the lodge now must find a way to return its attention to the true purpose of the lodge—that being the study of Freemasonry and the training of Masons. This transition can be made in several ways. One can be in the form of a review of the events of the evening, a summary of the essential elements of the program presented, or the moral principles being applied in the activities planned in the upcoming events of the lodge. Some lodges choose to use a ceremonial “fraternal chain” or “Chain of Union” other activity to remind themselves of the tie of brotherhood which binds them together and their commitment to

the practice of Masonic values. Once the focus on Fraternity has resumed, then the closing ceremony can begin.

The closing ceremony, like the opening, represents a transition from one state to another. Just as the opening transforms the profane into the sacred, the closing returns that sacred space to its natural state, one of being a common space with no special qualities; an ordinary space within the profane world. This transition should be given the same due attention as the opening as it is no less important. It is a time to charge the brethren to go forth and practice what they have learned of Freemasonry during their time at labor in lodge and celebrate the progress they have made on their ashlar.

Thus the circle is completed. We have taken an ordinary space, transformed it into a sacred space dedicated to the practice of Freemasonry. We have left the distractions of the profane world behind us and directed our attentions to those matters of essential importance. We have felt the comforts of fraternal bonds and the joy of learning about Freemasonry as we continue our progress on our ashlar. The administrative responsibilities of the lodge have been met, and we have reminded ourselves of our true purpose in lodge, that of learning and improving ourselves in Freemasonry. We have charged ourselves with applying what we have learned in our daily lives, and have completed the circle as we closed the lodge allowing it to return to an ordinary space.

Meetings that follow this arc allow us to harness the power of human emotions to further strengthen those fraternal bonds that we have worked so diligently to forge in the rituals of initiation, passing, and raising of each brother in the room. We have also met our responsibilities as a lodge to provide the best opportunity for brothers attending every meeting of a lodge to learn to subdue our passions, and improve ourselves in Masonry. It is this process that has supported the perpetuation of our order for centuries and, when followed with diligence, will continue to support it in the coming years.

Fraternal bonds, like all relationships, require a conscious effort and the constant attention of all involved to continue to be vibrant and of benefit to anyone. Those that are neglected are doomed. Those that are attended to, maintained, and nourished will thrive and grow.

About the Author: Bro. Daniel D. Hrinko has been a Mason for 37 years and considers himself as a 'self-taught' Mason which he views as a crime. He has served as Master of Clark Lodge No. 101 in Springfield, Ohio in 1983 and again in 2005 and is the Charter Master of Arts & Sciences Lodge No. 792, Grand Lodge of Ohio, founded in 2010, a Craft Driven Lodge.