

Introduction to Freemasonry

By W. Bro. Dennis V. Chornenky
President, Masonic Restoration Foundation

This essay is designed to provide an introduction to the vast body of knowledge associated with Freemasonry in a meaningful and understandable way.

Freemasonry is practiced in most countries of the world and can be defined as a “peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated with symbols.” Within Freemasonry members advance through symbolic degrees, or ranks, in their intellectual and philosophical development. There are various rites that are practiced within Freemasonry around the world with varying numbers of degrees, but almost all lodges in the United States work the York Rite for the first three degrees of Freemasonry, which are the Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason.

In studying Freemasonry every person discovers that there are many aspects to the organization. They can be divided into three main categories—philosophical, historical, and organizational. The philosophical aspect of Freemasonry introduces the student to the profound subjects of initiation, symbolism and tradition, and their potential to impact his life for the better. The historical aspect teaches the student how the traditions and teachings that make up Masonry came to be, their central role in the spiritual search of mankind and the way Masonry has affected the world since its emergence. The organizational aspect helps the student understand how the organization is governed and perpetuated, and provides many opportunities for the development of leadership skills and an improved sense of personal responsibility.

While studying Masonic symbolism, history and organization can be interesting and exciting, the goal is to be able to translate the lessons and experiences that one gains from Masonry into one’s daily actions. Freemasonry, if approached with humility, an open heart and an open mind will make one a gentleman, a better family man, and a better citizen. It should also be understood that while Freemasonry is not a religion, it does encourage its members to be active in their own religious traditions.

Freemasonry

What is it, what is its purpose and how does it differ from other organizations?

Freemasonry is a traditional initiatic order. It is not a secret society, but rather, a society with secrets. While it has taken its modern form during the Enlightenment, its traditions, symbols and lessons reach back to pre-modern times.

The general work associated with the initiatic tradition and the purpose of Freemasonry, put simply, is to provide an environment where good men can come together to pursue meaningful intellectual and spiritual growth. It is often said that Freemasonry “makes

good men better.” One of the underlying tenets of the initiatic tradition is the belief that with each individual that becomes a better person the entire world profits thereby.

Being part of the initiatic tradition is what distinguishes Freemasonry from purely social or philanthropic organizations. While there are many different organizations that contribute large sums of money to charity, offer fellowship with like minded men or provide education, Freemasonry is unique in that it embodies all these things, but is actually focused on offering men a traditional initiation into the mysteries of life and death. The initiatic tradition is the core, defining characteristic of Freemasonry, without which there would be nothing to differentiate Masonry from other social or philanthropic organizations.

Initiation is a slow and sensitive process and requires great effort on behalf of both the candidate and the existing members of the lodge. For the initiatic experience to be meaningful and enriching, great care and attention must be afforded to each individual candidate. If the new Freemason is to become worthy of the title, he must spend time and energy learning about the history, symbolism and philosophy of the Craft. There is no way around it.

The process of experiencing the initiatic tradition, becoming a part of it and improving oneself through its lessons, is known as Masonic Formation. This is an ever continuing process of spiritual and intellectual formation that all Freemasons must undergo. It is the work of fitting the rough ashlar of our imperfect being into the perfect ashlar fit for the divine temple. It is a constant transformation through the use of Masonic symbols, rituals, and teachings on a journey of return to the center of our being. W. L. Wilmshurst, in his book *Meaning of Masonry*, writes that “the very essence of the Masonic doctrine is that all men in this world are in search of something in their own nature which they have lost, but that with proper instruction and by their own patience and industry they may hope to find.”

Initiation, Rite and Tradition

Freemasonry: a traditional institution that practices rites as a means of preserving and perpetuating the initiatic tradition.

Inherent in the traditional character of Freemasonry is that initiatic rites are viewed as an aspect of a divinely maintained natural order. In this sense, Freemasonry is one of the last remaining institutions in the Western world to preserve and practice traditional forms. Understanding the terms initiation, rite and tradition is essential to every Freemason’s development.

INITIATION

While having a number of meanings and possible interpretations, initiation is foremost a spiritual undertaking. To be initiated into Masonry, particularly in modern times, is a highly significant and meaningful step in one’s life. In a world too often governed by

busy schedules, loose tongues, and the accumulation of wealth, Masonry helps provide balance by teaching the values of stillness, silence and selflessness.

The term “initiation” comes from the Latin word *initiare*, which is a late Hellenistic translation of the Greek verb *myein*. The main Greek term for initiation, *myesis*, is also derived from the verb *myein*, which means “to close.” It referred to the closing of the eyes, which was likely symbolic of entering into darkness prior to reemerging and receiving light, and to the closing of the lips, which was a reference to the vow of silence taken by all initiates.

Another Greek term for initiation was *telete*. In the *Immortality of the Soul* Plutarch writes that “the soul at the moment of death, goes through the same experiences as those who are initiated into the great mysteries. The word and the act are similar: we say *telentai* (to die) and *telestai* (to be initiated).” The fact that *myein* means “to close” and its Latin translation, *initiare*, is derived from the earlier *inire*, which means “to go in” or “to begin,” further suggests that a notion of endings and beginnings was inherent to the ancient understanding of these terms. With this understanding initiation is a new undertaking, the beginning of a new, spiritual life.

RITE

The word rite is derived from the Latin *ritus*, which comes from the Sanskrit *ri*, meaning to flow and is usually associated with a stream or a way. This term is closely linked by its definition with the term tradition and denotes the continuous performance or preservation of something sacred associated with the divine.

TRADITION

The word tradition derives from the Latin *traditus*, past participle of *tradere*, meaning to give or deliver into the hands of another, to entrust. This word also has Indo-European roots coming from *trans*, meaning to give. With this understanding tradition is transmission. It is the handing down of knowledge and far more than mere repetition.

Tradition is that which has kept its original character and retains its transcendent aspect. Freemasons are concerned with that part of tradition that is most inward and elevated, and thus, what constitutes its very spirit and essence. Tradition also means permanence in what is essential and integrity of principles. One of the ancient charges of Freemasonry, repeated at the installation ceremonies of many jurisdictions states that “You admit that it is not in the power of any man, or body of men, to make innovations in the body of Masonry.” For to make innovations may break the transmission.

Symbolism

The expression of relationships.

Symbolism in its most basic sense means using one thing to represent another. Words, signs and gestures are all forms of symbols. Freemasons, however, study symbolism in a deeper sense.

The term symbolism is derived from the Greek *symbolon*, which was a token of identity verified by comparing its other half. In this sense, symbols are the representation or affirmation of a concept or truth by reason of relationship or unity of parts. The meaning represented by the symbol, is actually greater than the whole of its parts.

Freemasons are concerned with this aspect of symbolism, the gathering of what is scattered, as a means of better understanding the whole of existence. By gathering knowledge from the spiritual traditions of the world and uniting good men who otherwise would have stood apart, Freemasonry serves as the center of union in the Mason's quest for the truth. Benefiting from the meanings and truth we find hidden within symbols requires synthesis, association and application. Each symbol, when properly perceived by the knowing initiate reflects the hidden relationship between the material and spiritual world and thereby reveals the reality of a higher order. Seriously studying symbolism is an important aspect of growing in Freemasonry.

Expectations

Some things to consider about Freemasonry and personal responsibility.

If the purpose of Freemasonry is "to make good men better," men should only become Freemasons if they are good and consider themselves capable of becoming better. Determining the qualifications of men seeking admission is an essential aspect of upholding the integrity of our ancient institution. The investigative procedures of lodges are designed to ensure that the brethren of the lodge have sufficient information about the candidates they vote on.

Ritual is intended to be performed in a solemn manner to provide the most meaningful experience possible for the candidates and the membership. Creating an atmosphere that may lead to a positive transformation of the individual is the goal of Masonic ritual.

Time between degrees should be used for intellectual study, contemplation and self-development. Candidates should demonstrate some degree of improvement in their understanding of Freemasonry before being advanced to the next degree. When this is properly observed every Mason grows into a better man and the bonds of virtue that tie together the brotherhood of humanity are strengthened.

It is intended that lodges provide their candidates with instruction about the teachings and symbols of Freemasonry. Qualified Masons are always encouraged to provide Masonic instruction to their brethren in the form of presentations, answering questions and promoting discussion. The focus of the Mason's intellectual and philosophical development should be on applying the teachings of Freemasonry in his daily life.

Freemasonry helps teach the importance and benefits of duty and service. If every Mason works hard and takes responsibility for all he does then Masonry will thrive. Masons are expected to attend all meetings of their lodge, and if unable to do so, inform a brother or the secretary of the lodge of the reason in advance.

Officers of a Masonic lodge serve in their offices as a privilege and not a right. It is intended that brothers attain positions of responsibility only after having demonstrated their good faith, ability to make a serious time commitment and sincere desire to correctly perform the necessary duties. The election of the Master is always of importance and only those brethren should be considered for this honor and responsibility who are well versed in Masonic teachings, who have the resourcefulness to lead and whose personal character can serve as an example to be followed.

Becoming A Mason

QUALIFICATIONS OF A PETITIONER

There are physical, moral and spiritual qualifications. A petitioner must be a man of at least 18 (21 in some states) years of age. He must be free of any previous felonious criminal convictions and be of good moral character. He must also believe in a Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul. The physical qualifications are necessary because the person must be free to make his own life decisions and be responsible for himself. The moral qualifications are self-evident for the viability of any brotherhood and the lofty ideals of our society. The spiritual qualifications support the entire structure of Freemasonry and affirm the Order's consistency with the great Mystery Schools and religions of the world.

THE SECRET BALLOT

After a man has applied for Masonic membership, and his background has been thoroughly investigated, the lodge members vote by secret ballot to accept or to reject him for membership. Masonry's secret ballot is another of its ancient customs. It has been rather aptly said that when a petitioner is voted upon for Masonic membership he undergoes the "Ordeal of the Secret Ballot." To be elected, he must receive an affirmative vote from each and every member present at that meeting.

PREPARATION FOR INITIATION

If a man senses the stirrings in his heart for a deeper understanding of life than that he has heretofore found, he will seek until he finds the fraternity. This longing of the heart is the beginning of his initiation which is why each candidate who comes seeking light is said to be first prepared in his heart. While Freemasonry is not a religion, its rites are of a serious nature, dignified in their presentation and which impart teachings that, if properly understood, obligate a man to lead a better life. To get the greatest good from the rites, a candidate should prepare his mind and heart to understand and absorb the teachings of Masonry. The candidate should pay close attention to every part of the

ritual. The form of the rituals may be new and unusual to the candidate, but such forms have always been part of the initiatic traditions of the world.

MENTORSHIP

As every new Entered Apprentice needs guidance and assistance, many lodges will assign a learned brother to serve as his mentor. In this way the needs of the Entered Apprentice can be met and his potential properly cultivated. The mentor is meant to assist the Entered Apprentice with reaching the required level of proficiency and with answering the required questions prior to advancing to the next degree.

The term mentor originates with the name of a friend of Odysseus from Greek mythology, who was entrusted with the education of his son, Telemachus. A mentor, properly defined, is a trusted counselor and guide. In taking on the role of an educational institution, Masonry sets standards that it seeks to elevate each Mason to, and provides the means by which those standards can be attained. The mentor, or guide, serves as the principal facilitator of those means.

The mentor's broader role is to aid the new member in developing meaningful bonds with the fraternity in general and the brothers of the lodge in particular. The rest of the lodge members also play an important mentoring role and the new Entered Apprentice should feel comfortable engaging his new brothers in conversation and asking questions on Masonic topics.

Many lodges present new members with Masonic books to help them develop an understanding of the lodge's philosophical and intellectual interests. The books may differ for each candidate, depending on his level of knowledge and experience with symbolic and philosophical subjects. By assisting each candidate early on in his pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement, the lodge endeavors to develop within him a lifelong interest in Masonic Formation.

History of Freemasonry

There is a difference between what is often referred to in the ritual as "Masonic tradition" and the actual history related to the Order. While using the term "Masonic tradition" can imply many things—from the association with older initiatic rites to certain Masonic customs or practices—it is most often used to mean Masonic mythology when used in the ritual. While most societies and spiritual traditions have certain mythologies about their founding, these accounts and descriptions are usually impossible to prove and serve a symbolic purpose.

The study of the actual history of Freemasonry, however, is an exciting, but highly debated field. Freemasonry is often described as having "emerged" in 1717, when four London lodges joined to form the Grand Lodge of England, but its traditions, symbols and lessons can be traced to pre-modern times. The two most prevalent Masonic origin

theories among scholars are related to the Knights Templar, a medieval order established during the Crusades, and operative masonic guilds of the Middle Ages.

The theory that the Freemasons are direct descendants of the Knights Templar, while highly controversial, has maintained a continuous presence in Masonic scholarship, in so small part due to the popularity of books representing this view at the bookstands. This theory holds that after their suppression by the King of France and the Catholic Church in 1307, the Knights Templar transferred their wealth and power base to Scotland, where the Church could not reach them, and with time and various developments evolved into what we know today as Freemasonry.

The theory that Speculative Freemasonry, as it is known, emerged from the operative masonic guilds that built the cathedrals of the Middle Ages is the one currently accepted by the majority of scholars. According to this school of thought, the operative masonic lodges began to accept members of the aristocracy during the Renaissance as *accepted*, and not operative, masons as civil society developed.

However, many of this theory's previously held assumptions are now being re-evaluated in light of a debate about the process of the so-called *acception* and whether this was an aspect of operative and not speculative Masonry and whether the emergence of Speculative Freemasonry was more a question of evolution or creation.

While it is possible that the truth may contain elements of both theories and others, what is important is that the individuals who were active in shaping Speculative Freemasonry perceived it as an initiatic institution through which men could develop their moral and philosophical potential. Closely investigating the lives of the founders reveals their extensive connections to older secret societies and traditions that no doubt influenced their perception of the role of the Masonic Order.

In general, there are many problems associated with studying the Order's history, but the secrecy of the initiatic tradition and the difficulty of interpreting available evidence has likely played the largest role in keeping mainstream scholars largely unaware of, and often uninterested in, Freemasonry. Persecution of Freemasonry by totalitarian governments has also made Masonic organizations in many countries seek to maintain a private existence with a minimum amount of exposure.

What should be clear about Masonic origins, however, is that the individuals who were active in shaping Speculative Freemasonry perceived it as an institution in which men could develop their moral and philosophical potential. Closely investigating the lives of the founders reveals their extensive connections to older secret societies and traditions that no doubt influenced their perception of the role of the future Masonic Order.

Speculative Freemasonry has a foundation that consists of more than Protestant Christianity and the meaning and value of the deliberate presence of other traditions in the Craft needs to be taken into account. The courtly philosophical climate of sixteenth and seventeenth century Britain, even where it followed only Puritan or Anglican trends,

was strongly influenced by the underground tradition sometimes referred to as Arcadia, which encompassed within its philosophy elements of Gnostic, Neo-Platonic, Hermetic, and Kabbalistic thought. As Rosicrucianism surfaced in the early seventeenth century it also showed an affinity to the Arcadian stream of thought.

The main characteristic of Arcadianism was the renewal of interest in the thinking and literature of the pre-Christian world. Various Pagan and Gnostic traditions that had survived through the Middle Ages received a certain sense of renewed credibility and promise in the eyes of their adherents, as Renaissance thinking began to place greater importance on them. In understanding the streams of thought culminating in Arcadian attractions, it is necessary to look before the Renaissance. Kabbalistic thought, for example, had gained recognizable form among certain groups in the thirteenth century, well before Petrarch and the later Italian translations of the Hermetic texts.

Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries the Scholastics, a group that Thomas Aquinas belonged to, had spent great effort interpreting classical Greek texts from Arabic sources and including them in the literature of the Christian tradition. Equally, one need only to consult the history and plight of the so-called "ABC's of Heresy" (the Albigensians, Bogomils and Cathars) to see that Pagan and Gnostic influence of the early heretical Christian and Manichean movements had survived in Europe long after the Roman collapse. It was this combination of existing traditions (or remnants of them), the rediscovery of older traditions and the renewed interest in their origins and philosophies that shaped the circumstances in which Speculative Freemasonry was formed.

Scottish historian Dr. David Stevenson, in his well-researched book, *The First Freemasons*, maintains that the evidence "indicates that the emergence of Freemasonry involved an act of creation, not just evolution." By noting the key influence of William Schaw and his interest in Hermeticism and the Art of Memory, Stevenson paints a larger picture of how in the years "around 1600 the legacy of the Middle Ages was remodeled and combined with Renaissance themes and obsessions to create a new movement."

A close study of the broad range of philosophical literary works produced during this period in Europe reveals a distinct current of symbolism embedded inside seemingly mainstream publications. To those well versed in Masonic symbolism the central themes of the initiatic tradition become quickly evident upon examination of this literature. It was precisely out of this philosophical climate, united through organizations such as the Royal Society, and through extensive correspondence that is now well documented, that the most well known proponents of seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Freemasonry emerged.

Men like Sir Robert Moray, Elias Ashmole, Jean Desaguliers, James Anderson, and their numerous friends and counterparts from all across Europe. Even if some of their writings regarding the history of the Craft may appear more mythological than factual, in light of the evidence now available, it is clear that they viewed Speculative Masonry as a custodian of the initiatic traditions of the past, charged with their propagation and preservation.

While studying the history of Freemasonry may appear difficult and to require an extensive, in-depth knowledge of some of the most complex and least understood aspects of world history, it is a worthwhile and highly rewarding endeavor. Developing one's knowledge and understanding of Masonry, even if one small step at a time, is actually developing one's understanding of human history as a whole and its spiritual nature. The more one learns about the profound influence that Freemasonry has had on the development of world events, the more one begins to appreciate its presence and want to learn more. Every Freemason is a philosopher and student of life.

Copyright by Dennis V. Chornenky
2005