

Ritual: Who Needs It?
By Jim Tresner, (From The Oklahoma Mason, December 1997)

The short answer is, "We do."

To explain why takes a little longer.

In a very real sense, it is the ritual of Masonry that makes Masonry work. Ritual is the channel through which Masonry teaches. But it is more than that.

Because ritual is so important to Masonry, it's worth taking a little time to talk about the nature of ritual itself, and why it is central to the Masonic experience.

All of us engage in ritual all the time -- we just don't always recognize it. Most of us have a morning routine, for example. Some of us shave before showering, some of us after showering, and some shave while showering, but whichever it is, we usually do it the same way.

Most of us shake hands when we are introduced to someone -- that is a ritual. Pledging allegiance to the flag is a ritual. Bowing the head during prayer is a ritual. Making coffee in the morning is a ritual. Starting a meal with soup or salad and ending with dessert is a ritual. Our lives are filled and surrounded with rituals from birth to marriage to death.

Why?

+ Ritual gives us a framework to organize events.

We don't deal well with chaos. We make lists of things to do, to buy, to read. Ritual does the same thing for us. By doing things in a given order (which is the essence of ritual) we make sure everything gets done. Even churches that try to make a point of not using ritual, use ritual in that sense. The order in which hymns are sung, the collection is taken, the sermon is given, and prayer is offered seldom changes for a given congregation.

+ Ritual helps us in our relationships to others.

Almost all families have family rituals -- things they just do in certain ways. Those ritual might include such things as making it a point to eat together on certain days, calling at certain times of the day, giving certain kinds of gifts; there are thousands of possibilities. Those rituals strengthen the unity of the family.

+ Ritual is a powerful teaching tool.

In fact, it was probably the very first teaching tool. We know of hunting rituals among some tribes, whose purpose was to teach the young man how to hunt effectively. Mnemonics (phrases which help us remember things, such as “Thirty days hath September, April, June and November.. .”) are rituals, as is learning the alphabet by singing the alphabet song. The military developed many rituals (patterns of repeated behavior) to teach recruits how to maintain weapons.

The ritual of Masonry involves these attributes and more.

- + The rituals of Masonry -- the opening and the closing, the Degrees, even the ritual of voting -- organize the events and make sure that everything happens that is supposed to.

- + It helps us define ourselves as Masons and strengthen the fraternal ties that bind us together as Brothers. And that effect is international and cross-cultural. We know we have shared experiences with Masons from all over the world.

- + It is a teaching tool -- the lessons and values of Masonry are taught through ritual and symbols.

- + It helps set the tone and mood of the meeting -- it helps us set aside the concerns of the outside world and focus on the great truths of human and spiritual nature.

- + Masonic ritual gives full range to Masons to explore their own interests. Many of my best friends love learning and performing the ritual. My own interests deal with interpretation of the ritual and the symbols it uses -- and especially with the effects the ritual is designed to produce in the minds of initiates and the ways in which those effects are produced. Others are especially interested in the history of the ritual and the way it has changed and evolved over the years. One Mason I know is interested in the ritual from the standpoint of a cultural anthropologist, and enjoys tracing the ways the ritual relates to the great initiatory traditions of history.

And the ritual is large enough and complex enough to accommodate all those interests, and many more.

So, again, the answer to the question “Who needs ritual anyway?” is “We all do.” The ritual of Masonry meets many needs and many interests. It is not the same thing as Masonry -- any more. than a sermon is the same thing as a church -- but it is a primary way we teach and learn. It is the glue that holds us together. It is important. It makes us, us.