

Westmount Lodge No. 671

April 24, 2012

What is Masonry?



The Duke of Sussex stated **“Masonry is one of the most sublime and perfect institutions that ever was formed for the advancement of happiness, and the general good of mankind, creating, in all its varieties, universal benevolence and brotherly love.”**

The question seems to always come up, what is Masonry, and what are those Masons up to? The Masonic institution is rather an enigma in the modern times. Masonry is misunderstood, not only by the authors selling thrillers, but by many Masons themselves. Many believe that Masonry is a social institution, designed to promote charity and civic duty in society, not unlike other civic organizations, such as the Rotary, and other honorable organizations. Yet, there is something different in the Masonic institution, Masonry is about internal growth.

Masonry differs from all other "modern" institutions in that it is both Traditional and Initiatic. Tradition is not defined with our modern conception of doing things how they've always been done – which is often the easiest misunderstanding of this word. Tradition comes from the Latin, and means "to hand down". Tradition is the handing down of knowledge from the past.

This is also another place for confusion regarding the word Tradition – our forbearers were not by nature of coming before us wiser than we can be ourselves, but rather made their own mistakes as we make ours each day. There is often a cult of old that can likewise provide a barrier in truly understanding Tradition. Tradition does not mean worshipping how things were done in the past, because even the Book of Ecclesiastes states, "Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?" For it is not wise to ask such questions."

Tradition is not simply doing things how they have always been done, nor is it idolizing a long lost past. . However, Tradition is also associated with an unbroken lineage. This lineage is made of individuals who through their own effort and the teachings and grace of their predecessors, hand down the wisdom they themselves have discovered and experienced. Wisdom can often be called sacred knowledge, for they are one and the same. How is it possible to give someone wisdom, one might ask? Well, this is exactly what separates Masonry from all other modern institutions and even religion.

We are all aware of the process of becoming a Mason and taking the first step. Through the initiation, the candidate experiences first hand the Masonic Ritual. It is this ritual that literally "hands down" an experience meant to elicit greater understand, or an experience of growing wisdom. This describes what initiation is – an expansion of understanding, both of oneself and of the world around us. All Masons who have gone before the Entered Apprentice experienced the same (or similar) ritual, binding the individual to the group in a shared experience.

Often newly initiated Entered Apprentices may feel confused about what just happened, and may not have necessarily "felt" anything different. What makes Masonry rather unique is that the handing down of what is called the initiatic secret is extremely subtle. The initiation is just the beginning of growing wisdom. It is like the first step a baby makes, and while the baby may stumble immediately afterwards, slowly and with practice, walking and running is possible. Masons grow and progress through years of practice.

The Masonic rituals are extremely interesting, because they cannot be traced to any individual creators, and are in a sense similar to plays or ceremonies, but yet they are different because the individual being "initiated", who has never seen them before, is a participant and not a viewer. In fact, many parts of the rituals and symbols, when explored by historians, share bizarre relationships to ancient religions and mythologies that could not have directly influenced the first recorded Masonic Lodges in the 1500-1700s A.D. The philosophical underpinning ideas in Masonry are also bizarrely related to philosophies of Native Americans and East Asians, when Masonry, in its current form first came about in Europe when there was little if any communication between these cultures.

Masonry is not considered a religion, but it still has spiritual or religious similarities. The philosophy underlying Masonry is universal to all religions and all cultures, and this is what separates Masonry from religion.

We have established that Masonry is a Tradition that hands down wisdom that is universal and perennial. In fact, Masonic lectures even say that Masonry is intended to make its votaries wiser, better, and consequently happier. Masonry is also considered a course of ancient hieroglyphic and moral instructions, taught according to ancient usages, by types, emblems and allegorical figures. The initiation itself introduces the candidate to the symbols and allegories of the Masonic ritual, but further study and effort by the candidate is what will expand his understanding. Many Masonic symbols have almost infinite symbolic qualities, and can mean one and ten different things, all at the same time, while also fitting perfectly together with other symbols or parts of the ritual like a beautifully completed jigsaw puzzle. For one interested in discovery, Masonry offers almost limitless potentials!

There are two other very important aspects of Masonry that deserve further explanation, one is the mysterious experience in a Lodge meeting, which begins first with the initiation and then grows and grows through years of attendance. The other is the bonding that happens between Masonic brethren, often referred to as Fraternity. The Mysteries of Masonry are the internal experiences of Masons practicing Masonry. What is truly the most fascinating is how the interaction in Masonic ritual changes the internal situation in the individuals participating. It seems that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and this unity of action in the Masonic Lodge, when all the officers, or ritual enactors, are unified in their roles; the whole body of Masons present unites in a mysterious experience of oneness. Each individual may experience this differently, but there is often a consensus among attending brethren regarding this experience. There is something mysterious about all this, and the best way to describe it is that there is some form of divinity living within the Masonic institution. While Masonry is not a religion, the primordial truths it hands down to its initiates are still emanating from the Great Architect of the Universe, or however you might conceptualize this Divinity.

Finally, the bond among Masonic brethren is one of the most pleasant parts of Masonry. The deep friendship that surrounds brethren that have grown together

in Masonry is also difficult to communicate. It is a type of male bond that would not have been created in any other situation than through Masonry. The brotherly love of Masons is both the goal and the effect of self-development and bonding that happens to men growing together. It is this self-development that is the catalyst for us becoming better men, to our community, to our families and to those with whom we associate.

Remember Brethren :-**All wise men share one trait – the ability to listen.**

R.W. Bro. John K. Johnston