

“What Makes a Man a Mason?”

Winning Article

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Well that must be the easiest question to answer! Isn't it? Surely!

You just ask 'My mate down the pub'. "Freemasons? Oh Yeah, I know all about THAT lot. They've got funny handshakes and they are all strange: They dress up funny and do really weird things. They're all in it for what they can get! Oh, I know believe me!"

That may be his or her genuinely held belief about what makes a Mason. Is it their fault they think that way?

Much of the mainstream media would not disabuse 'My mate' from that viewpoint. For them that is what makes a Mason. Perhaps we could do more, but that is another subject.

OK. Let's move on to the newly initiated Entered Apprentice and ask the same question.

Standing in the North for the first meeting after his initiation: Perhaps (probably) a little nervous.

He may well gaze to his left, to the East, at the Master, decked out in all his finery. Maybe he is in awe of this man in total control of his Lodge. At complete ease despite being the centre of attention. Seemingly impervious to the fact that all present hang on his every word.

To the right of the Master: A handful of men in large, dark blue aprons with ornate gold designs. Maybe with gold chains of office about their necks. Figures who, even to our novice, are obviously very senior and very well respected.

He may then look at the Officers of the Lodge. Collars, cuffs, jewels and wands in abundance. Gavel being banged, seemingly at random. Columns: one up, one down.

Everyone seems happy, confident and comfortable except, maybe, for our new Entered Apprentice.

Looking round the Lodge he sees a variety of aprons of different colours, sizes and decoration. His borrowed white one seems very plain by comparison. Many of the men even seem to have medals on their breast pockets!

He watches bewildered as the Master brings the Lodge to order. "What am I supposed to do?" he wonders. He tries to copy the others but... "They make it look so easy. What do I do with my feet? Is it left hand or right? I'm certain everyone is looking at me. What am I doing here? Is this really for me or have I made a massive mistake being here?"

As the meeting continues he is astonished by several brothers delivering long and complicated passages of ritual, with little or no prompting, and no book or paper to refer to. The deliveries made with feeling, passion and no hesitation. Some of the pieces being eight or more minutes in duration!

The end of the meeting approaches and the Master once again calls his lodge to order. Our Entered Apprentice again tries to copy the others, but it seems so strange and alien.

The meeting finished, the lodge empties as the brethren go for a pint or a quick cigarette before the festive board.

One of the brethren waits until everyone else is getting changed and, when they are alone in the lodge, asks what he thought of the ceremony.

Our Entered Apprentice enthuses about what he has seen and heard. He makes no mention of his confusion about the coming to order. Our more experienced brother says “Would you do me a favour? Would you mind if I go through the step and sign with you. It’s just that I remember when I was initiated I found it so strange. It took me ages to get it right. I felt a bit out of place to be honest. Everyone, and I mean everyone, was in the same boat when they started.”

They spend a couple of minutes going through the process, and then join the rest at the bar. It’s not mentioned to anyone else, and indeed the others may not even be aware of that small deed.

Driving home after the festive board our Entered Apprentice’s head is full of thoughts about the evening. What makes a man a Mason?

The Master? He must be a good Mason. He will be, but not because he is sitting in the East and running the Lodge.

The Grand Lodge officers to the right of the Worshipful Master? Wearing their fine and impressive aprons. They will be but not because of their decorative attire and senior status.

The Officers of the Lodge? They will be but not because they know what they are doing or that they are on the ladder. Not because of the collars, cuffs, jewels, or wands. Not for the gavels and columns.

The other members of the Lodge and visitors? They will be but not because of the colours of their apron. Not for the ‘medals’ on show. Not because they DO know the step and signs.

The brothers who delivered those flawless and very lengthy pieces of ritual? They will be but not because they are good at remembering and presenting ritual perfectly and with feeling.

The big thing our Entered Apprentice will remember will be that small act of kindness shown by the brother who asked for the ‘favour’ of teaching him the step and sign.

The empathy shown by him in admitting we were all the same when we joined. The reassurance that he felt when he realised we all found it strange and alien in the beginning. It didn't go unnoticed that it was done discretely and with kindness: That the other Lodge members weren't told about it, at the time, or subsequently. Just a very small act but such a big impact. The thoughtfulness behind it.

The brother that took him aside could well have experienced the same small act of kindness when he was new. The brother receiving it could well pass it on to the next initiate, next month, or to another in 20, 30, 40 years' time. It would likely have the same lasting effect on the recipient.

Who was it who asked the question? It could have been the brother who was initiated at the meeting two months ago. It is just as likely to have been the brother who was offered, and declined, the gavel by the Worshipful Master at the beginning of the meeting. Or any other brother present.

That is what makes a Mason.