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By Ed Halpaus, Grand Lodge Education Officer.  
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**“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.”** Duke of Sussex

**What is Masonry?**

**By Andrew J. Korsberg**

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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 Elks Club, Rotary, and other honorable organizations. Yet, there is something different in the Masonic institution that has nothing to do with civic duty and promotion of moral behavior – 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 is not secular, and cannot be reduced to mere methods or household traditions, like specific foods at Thanksgiving dinner. 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."<sup>1</sup>

Tradition is not simply doing things how they have always been done, nor is 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. Tradition consists of the lineage, but Tradition is not limited to the individuals of the lineage. Tradition is experienced through the handing down of wisdom. 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.

When one decides to become a Mason, he petitions a Lodge for membership. This candidate for Masonry is then interviewed and voted on by the Lodge. If all is affirmative, which it is almost exclusively today, the candidate is then initiated with the First Degree of Masonry, also called the Entered Apprentice Degree. Through this 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.

You may be wondering what I am referring to. Well, it is extremely difficult to communicate, because the greatest effect of initiation is primarily internal and cannot be measured or communicated in the standard way. Often the best moments of communicating this understanding may happen in a glance or slight smile with another brother – both Know – and to be honest, that is the best way to explain it.

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:10.

The Masonic institution is, as I've said, not a standard secular institution. Masons hand down wisdom to their new members through initiation rituals. These rituals are often what are considered the secret parts of Masonry, when in fact, as is evidenced by what I was just trying to explain, the secrets of Masonry are the experience of growing wisdom, and cannot be explained with words.

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.

It is these underlying similarities that are found in all religions across the globe, and in all Traditional societies, that are a framework of understanding that is not limited by culture, religion, or even time. These underlying, or rather primordial "Truths", are called the perennial philosophy, and Masonry is one outward form of the same universal truths found in all societies. This is exactly why Masonry is not considered a religion, but while it is 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 brothers, 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 brothers 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 brothers is one of the most pleasant parts of Masonry. The deep friendship that surrounds brothers 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.

So, when the layman wonders, what are those Masons up to? I hope these explanations help clarify why it is that Masons are often so dedicated to the Craft, and yet at the same time have difficulty explaining why.

**Words to Live By: All wise men share one trait – the ability to listen.**

The latest Education Video by our education committee is now on You Tube, it's titled "Unspotted by the World." It can be viewed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/glmned>

The latest Masonic Monday Question, and some of the past questions, can be viewed at [www.Lodgebuilder.org](http://www.Lodgebuilder.org) – [www.mn-masons.org](http://www.mn-masons.org) – and at –

<http://halpaus.blogspot.com>

With "Brotherly Love",  
Ed Halpaus  
Grand Lodge Education Officer

**Seek to mentor a Brother Mason:  
It's good for him, it's good for you, and it's good for Freemasonry!**