

The Evolution of a Lodge:
a Pathway to Meaningful Masonic Experiences

This is the text of a presentation given at a regional symposium on Freemasonry by Bro. Daniel D Hrinko, held in Fulton Lodge No. 248 in Delta, Ohio on May 30, 2015.

Brothers around the region have come to the conclusion that many of their lodges are stagnant with meetings that are seen as boring, uninspiring, and likely to be considered a waste of time. Many have come to recognize that it has come down to either change or die. Having reached this conclusion, the next set of questions usually starts with “so what can we do?” Which is quickly followed with “where do we start?”

What I have to offer you is a roadmap of sorts based upon the principles of the Craft Driven Lodge. Rather than providing you with a list of activities and events that a lodge can pursue that will contribute to having a meaningful Masonic experience, the Craft Driven Lodge is based upon the belief that you can teach the brothers to create a Lodge experience that is custom tailored to fit their needs and interests. Specifically, if you provide the brothers of the lodge an opportunity to explore what is possible and empower them to have control over how the lodge is operated they will then create a lodge that reflects their desires and their interests.

It is similar to the old saying in mental health circles where you “give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him to fish and he eats for a lifetime.” We can apply to Freemasonry in this manner. Give a lodge a list of things to do and they will have several interesting meetings. Teach a lodge to work together to make great experiences of their own choosing, and you will transform the Lodge for eternity.

The purpose of a Masonic Lodge: It is important to reflect upon what is the purpose of a Masonic Lodge. A review of the authors from the early days of speculative Freemasonry such as William Preston, Thomas Smith Webb, James Anderson, and Jeremy Cross make it clear that the purpose of a Lodge is to provide a sanctuary away from world at large where brothers are free to teach, learn, and explore what it means to be a Speculative Freemason. It is also an opportunity to build trusting, supportive relationships that reflect the principles of Speculative Freemasonry and the power it can have to impart a positive impact in the way each of us lives our lives on a daily basis.

This fundamental purpose of a Masonic Lodge shows up numerous times throughout our charters and takes center stage in our ritual. One of the first things I learned as a Mason was an answer to an important question. I was

asked “what came you here to do?” We all know the answer to that question begins with “to learn.....”

Since we have all been reminded that the primary purpose of a Lodge is to teach the philosophy of Speculative Freemasonry through the ritual, symbols, and an exploration of their meanings empower, it only seems logical that the bulk of the time spent in a lodge meeting should focus on those very issues including the presentation of ritual in a quality, meaningful manner, explorations of the symbolism contained within the ritual, and discussions about the applications of the principles of Freemasonry and their impact on our daily lives. It is through this process that we truly “make good men better.”

Getting Started: Now let’s get down to the nitty-gritty about what this roadmap for evolutionary change looks like. The first step is to begin to have conversations with the brothers in the Lodge before, during, and after meetings identifying the strengths, weaknesses, and goals of that Lodge. These discussions can be held in officers meetings or open forms for brothers to discuss the Lodge and its future. Everyone involved should be actively encouraged to “share their voice” about what Freemasonry ought to be and how their Lodge can reflect these values. Asking them to reflect on memorable moments in their own Masonic career will help them see those elements that are truly powerful while looking past those more mundane aspects.

When holding these discussions, it is important to engage members who are currently active in the life of the Lodge, those who have recently become involved with the lodge, and those who may have faded from sight over the past several years. It is also important to engage “the old Past Masters” who are sometimes seen as a barrier. To dismiss them as “out of touch” or “irrelevant” means to lose valuable institutional knowledge about those elements of the Lodge that are worth keeping and have helped shape the character identity of the Lodge. It could be a particular dish served at a meal for official visitations or inspections by grand officers, a fundraiser supporting the community activity, or even a “tradition” of that Lodge that separates it from the other lodges.

These discussions should include an opportunity to make an extensive list about what should be happening in lodge meetings. These gems from your recent past provide the starting point upon which to build a more memorable lodge experience for everyone in the upcoming years. You should also begin to construct a similar list of what should not be happening in lodge meetings because these activities are seen as a distraction at best and a waste of time in most situations.

What to Change?: Areas of your Lodge to explore include the type and number of social activities before the meeting including dinners, social hours, and other opportunities to build relationships outside of formal Lodge meetings. Think

about it. If all you know about a man is what occurs between the opening and closing of a Lodge meeting, you know some very important things, that your relationship is very shallow and limited. However, spending time in a more relaxed setting you the opportunity to learn more about your brother and will contribute to a strong connection between you that will ultimately result in benefits to your Lodge.

Also up for consideration is the manner of presentation of ritual which can include the lighting of the room, the pace of delivery, and the exploration of various educational topics and programs. I have yet to hear anyone say that a poor presentation of ritual is something in which she can take pride. Setting aside time to train individuals in the ritual not only in its accuracy but in its meaning and emotional qualities will go far to building confidence so the presentations are engaging, meaningful, and dramatic.

When it comes to educational programs, it is hard to go wrong if your educational programs start with a word, phrase, or paragraph from the ritual and begin to explore the meanings and implications of that particular section. To be honest, who in their right mind would complain about such educational opportunities?

Roadblocks and Barriers: A third list should be formed that focuses on identifying fears, worries, and barriers to implementing these ideas. Quite frequently, well-intentioned but uninformed brothers will often say that “the Grand Lodge will not let us do this” or that “the ritual insists that we do this.”

To address this barrier, significant time should be spent studying the Constitution and Code of Bylaws of your Grand Lodge as well as your ritual. Do not rely on someone’s questionable memory of what he thinks the code or the ritual is based upon his time in the East 10+ years ago. Open your books, read it for yourself, and explore the possibilities. One important question to address is whether silence on the part of the code and the ritual is a prohibition or an opportunity.

As these lists are developed, it should become clear that a consensus among many of the brothers will begin to evolve. Administrative activities such as minutes, bills, the details of who is bringing what to the picnic, and other such items are likely to fall near the top of the list of things that need to be reduced if not eliminated from most Masonic meetings. Other activities such as meaningful presentations of the ritual, fellowship, educational programs, and a chance to gain “more light in masonry” are likely to rank pretty high on the list of things that need to fill the Masonic meetings.

Choosing Where to Start: Idea should be developed to figure out which 2-4 items on those lists should be considered as a starting point. It is likely that the high level of agreement on these items will make implementing them

relatively straightforward with you in opposition. For those who are being oppositional, ask them if they would agree to a “trial period” of 3-5 meetings to see what the experience is like. Usually such an opportunity to “try it on for size” will soften even the most stubborn of hearts.

Some Specific Strategies: Before moving further down the road map, and the offer some strategies which have been successfully used in various lodges. Regarding administrative items such as minutes, bills, and the details of planning events, I am aware of numerous lodges who have successfully made changes by publishing their minutes and making them available to anyone interested in reading them an hour before the meeting. Those who are curious about the specific details of what is in the minutes are free to come early, Peru’s them, ask questions, and to make suggestions for corrections. When the particular part of the meeting comes up, rather than reading the minutes, the master asks “are there any changes or corrections to be made to the minutes?” This is soon followed by “they stand approved as read/amended.”

Regarding the payment of bills, lodges have successfully made use of an annual budget. This budget is developed once each year, provided to the brothers, and then discussed at a meeting and approved by a motion that specifically says that the budget is “approved and authorization is granted for all bills contained within the budget.” This means that routine bills that everyone knows are coming, common donations, and other predictable expenses will be paid as they arise without further discussion and/or vote. It is important, for good accounting practices, that the treasurer provide a written list of all bills paid in the previous month to be included as part of the minutes.

Regarding the specific details of planning for an event or activity, many lodges have successfully made use of committees. Those interested in participating in and planning a particular event are made part of a committee who meets outside of the stated Lodge meeting time to work out the details of who does what to make this event a success. The Committee Chairman then presents a brief summary and report to the Lodge as part of the minutes.

A different strategy used by a Lodge in Indiana includes the development of an “executive committee” in the bylaws of that Lodge. This committee is empowered to handle most administrative items relatively independently. The committee consists of the worshipful master, Senior Warden, Junior Warden, three trustees, and a brother elected “at large” from the membership. Individual brothers curious about the administrative side of the meetings can attend the “executive committee” meetings usually held 5-7 days before the stated meetings to deal with their responsibilities. Others who have no interest in “how the sausages being made” are free to read the summary in the minutes.

Many lodges have found success by changing the way the Lodge room is lighted and the manner in which the ritual is conducted when it comes to highlighting the primary focus of the Lodge meeting, that being to teach, explore, and apply speculative Freemasonry. Entering the Lodge room that is fully lit does nothing to separate it from the world at large. However, entering the Lodge room that is darkened significantly with the light over the altar being the only source of ambient light creates a dramatic presentation where the brightest thing in the room draws your eye. Clearly the brightest thing in the room is our altar and emphasizes the importance of why we come. The pacing of the ritual being slower, more deliberate, purposeful, and meaningful further accentuates the importance and solemnity of why we have gathered.

Agendas for Meetings: Another area to consider addressing is the nature of the agendas used in Lodge meetings. Most lodges have a standard agenda that they have used without question ad infinitum. Taking a cue from the world of entertainment, it makes sense that if the purpose of the meeting is different, the order of events should likewise be different.

I would like to offer this suggestion that a lodge have three different agendas. One for business meetings, a different one for meetings and educational presentation and/or discussion are the primary focus, and the third being for a meeting where ritual work is the primary activity.

Most lodges are quite proficient at business meetings so no specific comments or suggestions will be offered about that particular model. For a meeting that focuses on an educational presentation and/or discussion, it makes sense to conduct the opening ceremony, make the expected introductions, and move directly to the program. Only after the program has been completed will any residual administrative items be addressed and only then if required or necessary. This allows the brothers to gather after the meeting to continue their discussions about the material presented during the education program and/or discussion.

Meetings where the exemplification of ritual is the primary focus call for a specialized agenda. As a lodge, you have gone to great efforts to create a solemn mood focusing on the purpose of our meeting, speculative Freemasonry. You have done this through an impressive presentation of the opening ritual. Once this mood is established, it should be continued by moving directly to the presentation of the ritual of the evening to allow that prepared heart, opened mind, and focused attention to absorb more of the light presented through the ritual. It is important to remember that each presentation of the ritual is not only an opportunity for the candidate to be exposed to the lessons of Freemasonry for the first time, it is an opportunity for the brothers in the room to reflect on their own experiences, review the lessons of the ritual, and seek further light during this meeting. At the conclusion of the ritual, the meeting should be closed as efficiently as possible to allow time for social gathering,

reflections, congratulations of the candidate, and to begin to move into the next phase which is teaching the candidate about what just happened.

Now the Real Work Begins: Up to this point, the workload has been relatively light. You discussed what you like, what you do not like, and what you would like to see. You developed a list of ideas, and several have come to the top as good candidates for things that you can do to help your Lodge improve its practices of Freemasonry. Now comes the hard part. Brother Henry Ford said that when opportunity knocks, it is often ignored because “it comes dressed in dungarees and looks a lot like work.”

Let me make this perfectly clear change is hard work. However, it is necessary for a lodge to remain active, vibrant, relevant, and fulfilling its purpose. Without this effort, nothing changes. And as we all know, staying the same is easy, but fatal.

As the ideas chosen by the brothers to be there starting point are put into place and the trials of these ideas are implemented, make note of how the concerns that were initially expressed about these ideas are being addressed. Talk with those who were skeptical about their thoughts on what is happening, and make further adjustments based upon the responses you get from the brothers of the Lodge.

One of the most important steps is to make sure that when implementing these ideas, it is important that you publicize what you are doing among the brothers who may not be active in the Lodge. You may be surprised to find that when exciting things are happening in the Lodge, those who have been “dormant” from Lodge activities may discover that these revised activities result in meetings that are a good use of time and worth the effort to attend.

As changes are implemented, the discussions about the state of the Lodge, the desires of the brothers, and the goals of Freemasonry should continue. It is important to make sure that everything centers around being speculative Freemasonry’s. If we lose touch with our roots as speculative Freemasonry is, we sacrifice that which defines us and we deteriorate into a social and/or charitable organization much like every other one. Therefore, everything you do should be able to be explained by saying “because Freemasonry teaches us ... (insert Masonic principle here)..... therefore we (insert activity here).....

Change Never Ends: It is important to recognize that over time, the composition of the membership of a lodge will change. New men join, old men leave to meet the Great Architect of the Universe, and sometimes our life events take us away from our lodge. Regardless of the cause, the membership will evolve. As a result, the Lodge should evolve to reflect the desires and interests of the men who are actively involved in the life of the Lodge.

As much as I admire many of the qualities of the Freemasonry practiced by my grandfather, I do not drive his car, I do not wear his suit, and I do not do everything the exact same way he did. However, I do treasure his values and the teachings passed on to me by my grandfather.

In a similar way, I would expect that my Lodge should treasure the Masonic values being taught by evolving in its style to remain relevant to me in the 21st century and, hopefully, to my grandchildren in the decades to come. To put it bluntly, if in 25 years my Lodge is exactly the same as it is right now, I will be greatly disappointed. I may be sad that certain things I thought were important may no longer be part of what the brothers of tomorrow want, but I must accept that the brothers of tomorrow will be running my Lodge, not me.

For Lodges to remain relevant and effective in fulfilling their purpose of creating a space for the training and development of Speculative Freemasonry, the Lodge must continually evaluate what it is doing, why it is doing it, and evolve its style to remain true to the ancient principles of Speculative Freemasonry while effectively engaging the brothers of today.

This roadmap offers you an opportunity to start that process in your lodge. Where it will take you is entirely up to you. It is not a simple recipe for activities to copy, but a challenge for you to break free of the shackles of the mindless traditions of the past that serve no valuable purpose and take charge of the future of your Lodge and begin to create the Lodge that you look forward to attending have Masonic experiences you wouldn't want to miss.