

Letters in the Sand

Today I want to talk a bit about a couple of aspects in the development of our ritual – our tradition of using symbols and of keeping the ritual secret and in code.

Freemasonry has been defined as a beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols. But many have asked why we use symbols. Why don't we simply and plainly say what we mean?

The answer is that Masonic symbols serve the purpose that symbols in general perform: they are visual shorthand, a way of conveying an idea, a concept, or a principle with images rather than words. Not only is teaching by symbols more vivid and effective, it allows us to think more deeply and consider more carefully their meaning. Some approximation of this can be understood by those who remember the old radio dramas that we heard before television became pervasive. Our imaginations supplied details that make the program so much richer than when we saw them on TV.

Many of the symbols we use in Freemasonry to teach moral and ethical principles are drawn from the tools of the operative stonemasons of the Middle Ages; other symbols are drawn from various traditions of religious and esoteric beliefs.

These symbols have different meanings at different levels. They may mean one thing to the non-Mason, who is not schooled in Masonic symbolism; have a different meaning to a new Mason, and an even deeper meaning to the educated Mason.

For example, in Operative Masonry, a tool is an implement or device which either informs its user of facts not easily available or not otherwise perceivable to his five senses, or which alter the shape, form, substance, or position of materials. But in Speculative Masonry, these tools also inform our senses and our sensibilities, and they help shape our lives with important lessons of character and ethics.

In addition to using symbols that have both open and more veiled meanings, much our ritual was not written. In part, this was to protect it from being provided to those unauthorized to have it. But there was another reason as well. In contemporary society, we take for granted that a large majority of the population can read.

But in the late 17th and 18th centuries, at the time Freemasonry as we know it was founded, a large portion of the population could not read, and it was important to have a system of education that did not depend on the printed word. This was more of an issue as one traveled from England across continental Europe.

Nevertheless, in addition to the “mouth to ear” approach, there were many Masonic Monitors. These were compilations of lectures, including charts showing different collections of Masonic symbols. By using these charts, Master Masons could teach new Brothers what the individual symbols looked like. By reproducing these symbols from these charts, the instruction could be performed as the ceremony was occurring.

It was felt that when Masonic Ritual was accompanied by pictures, or pleasing or intriguing representations of the symbols, the lessons of Freemasonry became easier for many to remember. And even as literacy increased, the visual display of symbols served to reinforce the lessons of the Ritual.

This is because all of us learn information in different ways and on different levels. We learn by what we hear; by what we read; by what we see, and by what we appreciate from an aesthetic point of view. When we read something from a book with an easy

To read typeface, printed on pages that are not too bright or glaring, our reading experience is enhanced because it is a visual pleasure to read the information. That pleasant experience may make us more inclined to associate positive memories with the information we are reading, and possibly makes the information easier to recall.

In the late 18th and 19th century Lodge, it was common for these symbols to be reproduced in some impermanent medium, often outlined in a box of sand or drawn on a slate with a piece of chalk or charcoal. When the meeting was concluded, it was simple to obliterate all trace of the Masonic symbols by brushing over the sand or by erasing the designs from the slate.

When Masonic Lodges were no longer renting rooms in taverns, inns, and common areas; and began occupying their own buildings, there was no need to worry about removing the symbols when the meeting was concluded.

So Tracing Boards became more permanent fixtures and began to be printed in oils, either on canvas, or directly on to the walls of Lodge rooms. Often the work was performed by a Brother who was not a great artist, but one who simply wanted to serve the Lodge. But in other places, trained and talented artists were available to translate their impressions of

The symbols of Freemasonry into inspiring images and to construct Tracing Boards that not only greatly beautified our Lodges and buildings but also helped to teach the new Mason.

But we must go beyond the beauty of the tracing board and the beauty of the ritual. Never was it clearer: what we get out of Freemasonry is directly related to what we put into it, for it is only by careful study of our symbols and reflection on the lessons taught in our ritual that we can grow intellectually, morally, and spiritually.

Source: Grand Lodge of Virginia

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