

Are Lodge Meetings Supposed To Be Enjoyable?

George B. Yeates

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

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At the annual meeting of a lodge in my home town this past December, the newly installed Worshipful Master in his inaugural address, in part, said to us that he would not, after the Lodge was opened, condone private conversations going on from the sidelines, nor permit coaching and prompting from the those not specifically designated to do so, nor allow commentary about the business on the floor unless that person wishing to speak first addressed the Chair and was properly recognized.

Man alive! Did he mean to say to an old blabber mouth like me - that I must keep quiet during a meeting - not to open my mouth except to insert a cough drop? Why, I might explode! But, seriously, give some consideration as to why we attend lodge meetings.

Remember: Lodges started in England as a place for men to gather together to EAT, DRINK, and SOCIALIZE; discuss the events of the day, talk about work and vocations, and to learn about this activity called Freemasonry.

One of the more widely circulated posters of the 1700's was one entitled "Night", published in 1738. It depicted a Worshipful Master of a lodge going home from a Lodge meeting. He is crocked to the gills and is being escorted by his Tyler who also appears to be sloshed. The poster depicts night life in London. It isn't a pretty scene but one can get a good idea of life in the big city. Tippling among the Freemasons must, most certainly,

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not have been uncommon and was most probably very well known for Hogarth to have been intimately aware of such goings on. Hogarth was one of the most famous artists who produced these posters. They were the tabloid news of the time, just as are the publications you see nowadays at the checkout counter of your super-market.

Back in the 1700's, men attended lodge meetings to have a pleasant evening. They could get away from the humdrum of everyday life.

We have in most lodge rooms a small stylized column on the Junior Warden's and on the Senior Warden's pedestals. Their reason for being there? Nowadays, they serve no useful purpose except (perhaps) to give the Wardens some exercise in laying them down or standing them up. But originally they served a very useful purpose. Meetings were held in an inn or pub and the consumption of food and beverages was constant. Whilst the Lodge was at serious business, eating and drinking were forbidden. When ritual, lecturing, paying bills, electing, and voting was being done, the Senior Warden's column was upright so that all present would know to exercise proper decorum. However, when a period of refreshment was declared by the Master, the Senior Warden's column was laid down and the Junior Warden's column was placed upright. If the Junior Warden's column was erect, it was "Katy bar the door!" - Eat, drink, and be merry! Have a good time. In those days, the Junior Warden's column stayed up much more often than did the Senior Warden's.

Haven't we digressed greatly since the 1700's?

I attend quite a few Masonic meetings during a month. Perhaps, too many. What with Kiwanis Club and many Church activities, I have a full set of activities almost all the time. When I tell my lady about the meetings, she likes to ask, "What did you learn?" I have

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often told her that we have lectures and schools. My usual rejoinder is that I learned very little and she then asks, "Why do you go?"

My answers: The reason I attend lodge meetings is that I enjoy the company of like-minded men. I enjoy the exchange of ideas. I like the small talk, the jokes, the funny stories. I like to hear about the welfare of friends whom I see all too infrequently. I do like to hear an interesting speaker, even though I may already have a somewhat "little bit" knowledge of his topic. Sometimes I take a note or two to further explore some facet of the topic with which there is some disagreement. Shucks! Nobody knows it all! We even argue with the Grand Lecturer about points in the ritual - saying, "That's not the way. Charlie Sinclair taught it!"

Speaking of Ritual: In the Royal Arch Chapter years ago, a new edition of the Text Book was published. The word "Cherubims" was used. The singular word is Cherub (an angel). In Hebrew, the plural is formed by adding "im". In the Text, the need was for a plural Cherub. The previous edition of the Text used the word Cherubim. The Grand Lecturer in charge of this new edition, in his infinite wisdom, declared that Cherubim needed to be a plural word. In English we form the plural by adding an "s". So, the text was printed with the word "Cherubims". It took almost ten years to convince Grand Chapter that, properly, we should say "Cherubim" and to change the word in the ritual book.

But, I digress.

Are Masonic meetings supposed to be enjoyable? Certainly, they are! If they are not, men will stay away in droves. From the attendance records of Lodges in today's world, we must have a great many unenjoyable meetings.

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What would make a meeting to be such as would entice a man (on a cold winter evening) to get dressed up, turn off the TV, lay aside a good book, irritate his spouse by leaving her at home alone, and go across town (sometimes drive 25 miles) to attend a Lodge meeting?

Years ago, I had a good friend, who had recently finished a term as Master of his Lodge. He bragged about the fact he had not had even one lecture program given during his year as Master. The record for attendance at that particular Lodge during his year was very poor. But, he didn't care, the ritual in his Lodge was very good.

We all (well, most of us) like to hear good ritual in our ceremonies. However, if a Lodge only opens, transacts some business, reads the minutes, and closes, no matter how good or letter perfect the officers are in conducting the affairs, that is a boring meeting and not worth attending. Better to stay home and watch TV.

There is a saying about one Lodge: The most interesting part of the meeting was when the Secretary read the minutes. Wow! I bet all the brethren were glad they attended. However, some Secretaries can get into the act and liven up the festivities. Listen to the tongue-in-cheek rendition of the minutes for a work night meeting of my Lodge way back in 1987.

Off the cuff remarks by the Secretary on 12 May 1987:

At least once in the life, of each of us there comes an experience which leaves a lasting imprint upon the psyche.

This happened tonight.

An impoverished person of exceedingly limited vision was brought forth in a halting demeanor into what was supposedly a conferral of one of the degrees in Masonry.

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Rank, putrid, offensive, foul aptly describe the flow of improper, imperfect, infamous, inept, and inane renderings of badly mutilated ritual that was showered upon this brave Adonis, whose expectations most assuredly must have been centered upon better treatment.

When one cogitates upon the beautiful and carefully constructed verbiage of the ritual as taught by our Grand Lodge, one is struck with horror that so much damage could possibly have been woven into the structure of Masonic ritual by a group of thugs posing as Masons.

But even in the time of darkest adversity there comes a spark of light which, when promulgated, will pervade the darkness and shower an effulgence of luminosity into even the most stygian of atmospheres. The brethren were raised from the depths of despair to the apogee of well-being, the acme of "gemütlichkeit" by the presence in our midst of a sacred COW. Dispensing light and truth, our own "C.O.W."¹ brought order from chaos, consolidated the yin and yang, and advanced us to the pinnacle of Plotinus's most heavenly place.

'Tis wonderfully well that the hurts of feelings and spirit are quickly healed when a generous application of Masonic friendship is given to him who is wounded. "All's well that ends well," the bard says and such was the ending of the travail of our Adonis this evening. Smiles came upon his countenance when he came to the realization that all really was well and that he was really among friends.

Worshipful Masters are inclined, in the conduct of the business of the Lodge, to say to the Secretary, "Brother Secretary, clear your desk." One evening, while I was Secretary in my Lodge, the Worshipful master instructed me to "Clear your desk." I did so. Wiped everything off the desk onto the floor. Replied to him, "Worshipful Sir, the desk is clear." He didn't tell me again to clear my desk.

¹ "C.O.W." = Committee on Work.

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I am a firm believer that Lodge meetings should be enjoyable. They don't need to be buffoonery, in fact they should not be. But, consider, the men in the lodge hall are there, willingly, to have an enjoyable evening. Help them to accomplish that.

Mark Twain wrote: "The human race has only one effective weapon, and that's laughter. The moment it arises, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments slip away, and a sunny spirit takes their place."

The Lodge officers need to search out and find out what the members like, dislike, enjoy, hate. There is a distinct need to know what kind of programs the members desire. Of course, features such as dancing girls and beer drinking contests are taboo. Some brother reciting "Mary had a little lamb" probably would not go over too good either. Allen Roberts in his book, "Key to Freemasonry's Growth", has a cartoon depicting a Worshipful Master slumped in his chair and saying, "Whadda we do next, brother Secretary?" Allen is saying to us: Presiding Officer, you are in charge, you are the one who already knows what is to be done next. You make the plans, you carry them out.

OK! What is the solution to having enjoyable meetings? I do not know. There are so many variables. Each Lodge is different. There are different men, different customs, different locations. However, some universal requirements crop up every place.

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There is a distinct need to:

1. Start on time.
2. Don't let the meeting go on way past the usual quitting time. *When I was Sr. Warden, the clock was mounted on the west wall near my chair. I was instructed, that if the clock got close to 9:30, I was to pull the cord. No meeting went past 9:30 PM.*
3. Have a comfortable lodge room. *Turn on the heat or the A.C. early in the day.*
4. Remember: Older men need to go to the toilet more often than do young men.
5. Serve refreshments. NO BOX COOKIES!
6. Serve a dinner. Perhaps charge for it. Don't use it for a money maker.
7. Get the officers to speak clearly and loudly.
8. Use good ritual. Doesn't have to be perfect but should be in the "ball park."
9. Offer some interesting programs.
10. Use some humor. *Tell a funny story, break the ice.*
11. Remember: The Officers set the stage. They must be well prepared.
12. Get to know the members of the Lodge by NAME. The Worshipful Master needs to be a one man welcoming committee.
13. Do not do the same thing every month. We need variety!
14. Publish a bulletin. Let the members know what is planned for the future. But, don't make the bulletin too long or too wordy. The members do not read long bulletins. Put the essentials on one page. Perhaps they will read that.

Gosh! What a litany! 'Taint easy running a lodge if you want the meetings to be enjoyable.

We proposed a question in the topic for this paper, "Are Lodge meetings supposed to be enjoyable?"

You can bet your bottom dollar they are!

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If the meetings of your Lodge are not enjoyable, then express your dissatisfaction. Get the Worshipful Master to one side and tell him how you feel. Tell the Senior Warden also. Let the Lodge know what your likes and dislikes are. Just staying home and not attending will not change a thing. Your officers sincerely want to have a thriving lodge. Many times, they simply do not know what the members want. It is up to you to instruct them. After all, it is your lodge!

I can't leave without giving you one short chuckle story. Here it is:

A dietician was once addressing a large audience in Chicago. "The material we put into our stomachs is enough to have killed most of us sitting here years ago. Red meat is awful, soft drinks erode your stomach lining, Chinese food is loaded with MSG, vegetables can be disastrous, and none harm of us realizes the long-term harm caused by the germs in our drinking water. But, there is one thing that is the most dangerous of all and we all have, or will, eat it. Can anyone tell me what food it is that causes the most grief and suffering for years after eating it?"

A 75-year old man in the front row, stood up, and said: "WEDDING CAKE."

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