

Some Thoughts On Three

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For my first trick I'll need a volunteer. Fill in the blank with the first word that comes to mind. OK? On the count of _____!

Most people will say "three". Why? Well, it takes: "one, two" to establish the time interval, so we know exactly when "three" will occur. Three is just exactly enough to get the job done.

Three is just enough to get a lot of jobs done. It is one of the most important numbers to define the human condition. How can we say one number is more important than another one? Well, you've got to admit three comes up a lot more often than, say, 471 (which by the way is divisible by 3). But what about two? So many things come in pairs; eyes, ears, hands, etc. There used to be two sexes, but I'm not so sure anymore. Black and white, night and day, long and short, good and evil. Yes, there are lots of pairs to be sure, but threes have a special and often spiritual place in our world.

We say we live in a three-dimensional world (actually it's four, but there are only three that we can see, time is the fourth, but that's beyond the depth of this paper). Most flags have three colors. Speaking of three colors, all colors can be created from three basic colors; red, blue, and yellow if you're mixing paint, red, green, and blue if you are mixing light (as on a TV screen). That's because your eyeballs have three types of cones,

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sensitive to different wavelengths of light. If we had four types, we'd need four colors (wonder what they'd look like).

Many stools have three legs. Why? Well, a three-legged stool won't wobble. That's why photographers use tripods, they are stable. We have three branches of government. Why? Maybe because it's stable, like a tripod. It won't fall down if it gets off balance.

It takes three sides to make a triangle. And speaking of triangles, three is a triangular number. What is a triangular number? You add up each consecutive number. $1 + 2 = 3$. $1 + 2 + 3 = 6$. $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$. Etc. What's the big deal with triangular numbers? Well, as Masons we often shake hands. If everybody in a room shakes hands with everybody else, the total number of handshakes will always be a triangular number! Is that important? Probably not, but it is interesting.

Something else that's interesting: Are there any musicians present? If you ever took band you were probably told that 4/4 time was sometimes called "Common Time" and used a "C" as the time signature. "C" stood for Common and it stood for "Cut Time" because it was half of 2/2, half of 4/4 WRONG!

The "C" in common time is actually the original time signature! 4/4 came later. And it wasn't originally a "C". It's a broken circle. A complete circle represented 3 beats. Three was considered a perfect number of beats (because it was 3). Four beats was less than perfect, so it was represented by a BROKEN CIRCLE. And two beats was less perfect still, so it was represented by a broken circle with a line through it. So the number signatures came from the letters, backward from what you were once taught!

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Speaking of taught, do you remember what you were taught about numbers that are divisible by 3? If you add up all the digits in a number and keep doing that until it is a single digit, if that final number is divisible by 3, so is the original number! If the number you end up with is 9 the original number is also divisible by 9. If the original number is even and is divisible by 3, it is divisible by 6. And of course, the number 3 itself is a prime number.

Now this paper isn't intended to be a presentation of trivia about the number three, I have a purpose. Oh, and by the way, speaking of trivia, do you know where the word "trivia" comes from? It's Latin for "three ways". In the days of ancient Rome there were, of course, roads connecting cities. Where three roads came together people would often gather to rest and eat. There, they would visit with other travelers who shared news and gossip from other places. This small talk, happening at these informal gatherings was called trivia (tri for three and via for way) because it came from the "3-ways" where the roads met!

But, back to my purpose: Three has long been considered a perfect number, kind of holy. Many things in religion and society come in threes. There are 3 states of time; past, present, and future. All time falls in one of those 3 categories. When stories are told, such as fairy tales we often have 3 things, such as the Three Little Pigs. The first two will set a standard, the third is always the special one. And of course there is the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Three states of your soul's environment: Earth, Heaven, and Hell (discounting Purgatory). Birth, Life, Death. Three is a very spiritual number. I'm sure you are aware of this, but I want to point some out, in case you missed them.

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By the way, through the years much has been written linking Masonic math to the Kabbalah. I'm not even going to touch on that. That's a topic to explore on its own if you are so inclined.

So, let's get to some Masonic threes. There are the obvious: Craft masonry has 3 degrees. There are 3 dais officers (same in Royal Arch and Commandery). Minimum of 3 Master Masons to open a Lodge (any lodge needs at least 3 Master Masons, regardless of what degree).

Some more:

3 raps are very significant, both at the stations and the door and West gate.

Think of degree lectures:

3 pillars; Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty.

3 pieces of furniture; Holy Bible, Square and Compasses.

3 lights.

3 immovable jewels and 3 movable.

3 steps; youth, manhood and old age.

3 ladder rungs; Faith, Hope and Charity.

3 tenets; brotherly love, relief, and truth.

First 3 Most Excellent Grand Masters.

3 ruffians, 3 blows.

3 Fellowcrafts travel West.

3 (true) grips.

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3 most revered orders of architecture.

3 most revered senses.

3 wages of a Fellowcraft.

3 jewels (both Fellowcraft and Master Mason).

Most officer's duties are in groups of three.

How many Master Masons MUST be present to communicate the (secret) word? How many syllables in it?

Passwords of Fellowcraft and Master Mason have 3 syllables.

You (used to) have to survive 3 votes.

Listen to the Masonic prayers. Listen to the groups of three in the wording.

Grand honors are not a salvo of 9, but three groups of three! The "perfect" number 3 times the "perfect" number 31 What makes you a Royal Arch Mason? By 3 times 3 and under . . .

Let's look at the Royal Arch. There are threes and 3 times 3s in use. There are 9 officers, grouped in 3s. Three Masters of Veils in a straight line, the Royal Arch Captain, Principal Sojourner, and Captain of the Host in a triangle, and the dais officers in a straight line (at a right angle to the first line of officers). Veils 2 and 3 have 3 words in their passes. We communicate our words in groups of three: 3 letters, 3 syllables, 3 syllables.

There is the Triple Tau, and it's in a triangle. Let's not forget the triangle. Three lines, 3 sides, 3 corners. Its total angles divisible by 3: Nine, actually. Excuse me, 3×3 . And we do form our triangles!

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In the Commandery we pray in a triangle. 3 dais officers. 3 in standard guard. Etc.

Do we see how the important things happen in threes? As I said before, 3 have long been considered a special, somewhat reverential number through history and in various societies. A Muslim man can divorce his wife by saying "I divorce thee" 3 times!

Most oaths are taken in threes. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Look at the Blue Lodge obligations:

Own will, presence, and lodge.

God and 2 Saints (1=2=3).

Hele, conceal, not reveal. That's saying the same thing 3 times.

Arts, parts, points.

Have been, now, future – that covers it all.

Trial, examination, information. (You notice I'm paraphrasing some of this, and you know why.)

Regulations, laws, rules.

Edicts, laws, resolution.

Aid, assist, help.

Initiate, pass, raise.

Then there are 6 classes of people we won't accept as members. 2 x 3 is a less perfect number. (666 is 3 instances of -2 x 3 - think about that implication!)

Person, family, property.

And so on. (Hey - that's 3 words too!)

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Why are so many words that mean nearly the same thing so often grouped in threes? Besides the reverence for the number 3 and the symmetry it seems to lend to phrasing, it comes down to this: Good, Better, Best. You see, when our language was young there weren't so many words and rules as we have now. They didn't have superlatives. You know, like fast, faster, and fastest. If someone was fast you would say they were "fast". If they were real fast you might say they were "fast and quick". If he was the fastest he might have been "swift, fast and quick"! You used one adjective to describe, 2 adjectives to mean more, and 3 to indicate the most of all!

So when you hele you keep it secret. Hele and conceal: top secret. Hele, conceal, and not reveal: absolutely unequivocally double top secret for your eyes only!

So stating something 3 times was the ultimate degree of something. Hence. the third degree. Also, in ancient incantations, something had to be repeated three times. If you were invoking a power, dark or otherwise (or trying to at any rate), there was to be NO question who you were calling upon or what you wanted. And, as much of the language of our ritual is archaic, the triple word play survives.

So the next time you see a 3-ring circus or give 3 cheers, give a little thought to good old number 3. One more bit of history: Have you ever heard that "3 on a match" luck? That refers to lighting 3 cigarettes off one match. That was actually true! During the wars soldiers often had to conserve their few matches. So when someone lit up, you had a cigarette ready to get a second one lit from the match. But not 3! If you kept the match lit long enough to light 3, the enemy could sight on it. Very bad luck indeed!

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In closing, there are also three rules to a good speech. One is to make it interesting and accessible. Two is to leave them wanting just a little bit more. Thank you for your attention.

After I presented this speech, a number of other threes were pointed out by some of the listeners. Here are a few of the best of their suggestions:

On your mark, get set, go!

Friends, Romans, and Countrymen.

We wish you a Merry Christmas (sung 3 times before the words change)

Tried, not deny and do it again.

Peter denied Christ 3 times before cock crowed.

3 wise men (at least in popular stories and song).

On the third day he rose from the dead.

Earth to Earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

Truth, whole truth, nothing but the truth.

Knife, fork and spoon.

Grand Lodge – nominate 3 times. Also proclamations sometimes in threes (not always).

See no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil.

And last but not least, we have that most famous (or is it infamous) Masonic 3. The seafaring man. He often is heard declaring that "I have three" maybe he just needs a comma. I have, three, who . . . etc.