

Victoria Lodge of Education and Research
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opinions expressed in the following paper are those of the writer and do not necessarily express those of the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research)

No Masonic Funeral Service By Request

by Bro. Robin Heppell Confederation Lodge, No. 116, B.C. & Y.R.

"Masonic funeral ceremonies are performed as a token of respect and fraternal affection to the memory of a departed Brother. " This is the first line under the General Regulations of a Masonic Funeral Service from the Book of Forms and Ceremonies.

I have been a Freemason for nine years. Raised in the spring of 1993. Over this time I have continued to learn from the great teachings that the Fraternity provides through its lessons of morality and integrity. I often wonder what my life would be like if I never decided to become a Freemason. One thing that is for sure, is that I probably would not be the co-owner of the many great friendships present in this room. Plus, as I have stated on other occasions, the Masonic teachings have dove-tailed with my Christian faith for a better understanding of both. The result of not taking that step would have been a man much smaller than the one that stands before you today.

As most of you are aware, I am a funeral director by profession. A fourth generation one at that. My uncle and grandfather, two funeral directors, are very well respected in their community which is a medium-sized town on the outskirts of Toronto. When I was younger, walking around this small community with my grandfather, it was amazing for a little city boy, to witness people going out of their way to say, " Hi ,"to him. Respect is a by-product of our profession when you have been able to help people during some of the toughest times of their lives. That is not saying that all in our profession draw that same admiration from the public. My grandfather was obviously taught how to be a man of integrity. I would later find out where these great lessons were learned.

After starting at McCall's, I would learn about the traditions of different denominations and groups. There was one group of men who would come in and take over various parts of the facility. They would get dressed in one room, line up in another and then parade into the chapel. We would have to set the chapel in a special way so that they could walk around the casket and they would hand out twigs of evergreen or cedar to everyone wearing the same outfit as they were. We were also told to be most attentive to these men as the McCall's themselves were part of this group. There was a purpose to all of this commotion, they were gathering to pay their respect to one of their own. Good guys who were present to say goodbye to another good guy.

This is where I received my first lessons of Freemasonry. There were a lot of these "Masonic Funerals" when I started. Probably one or two a month. I started to get to know some of them, two in particular, two Scottish guys. One of them with slicked-back, perfectly-combed silver hair, always in good spirits and the other a wise, little old man with not much hair at all. Some of the staff were also Freemasons. I started to pay attention to what was being said during these services and became more and more intrigued. I figured out that this is the same group that my grandfather and uncle belonged to in Ontario.

Where do I apply? Who do I talk to? How do I become one of them? These were the questions that I asked. No one ever asked me, "Come join us?" I had to ask. And the only reason that I did was because of what I had witnessed at these Masonic Funerals.

Unfortunately, we don't have many Masonic Funerals any more. We are lucky to have just an Acacia tribute, where there is no ritual spoken, just a bunch of guys in suits,, no aprons, putting a piece of evergreen on the casket or on a table if the casket is not present. Why?

I guess tradition just doesn't carry much weight anymore. We see it in the funeral industry. More memorial services than funerals. And even people saying, "I don't want to put my family through that, I don't want to have a service at all, it will be easier on them." Unfortunately it is not easier on them. There is no closure, no saying goodbye, no sense of community when life as we know it is over. But I can assure you that a family, who has been able to come together with family, friends and co-workers, have an easier time dealing with the death of a loved one.

We face the same trends with Masonic Funerals. As I am now more focussed on the pre-planning part of funerals, I have met with many Freemasons, even some of you, regarding their funeral arrangements. When it comes to the part about having Masonic involvement, I get the same type of statements, "It's too much work for the officers; I don't want the service to be too long; The other people attending will not understand." I'm lucky if I walk away having them agreed to an Acacia tribute.

What will the public get out of that? A Poppy service for a Legion member has more meaning.

Is our membership to the Fraternity just that, a membership? We have learned some of the greatest lessons of life through our association with the Fraternity. Why not use this opportunity, our last opportunity, to let everyone who cares about us, who respects us, who feels that they should be at our funeral, know how much an affect our membership in the Craft has had on us during our lives?

I have a rare opportunity tonight. Usually at Lodge when someone goes off, up on their soapbox, telling the Brethren how we should be acting, supporting the lodge etc., they are preaching to the converted. But tonight, I have the audience I want. I'm not looking at the fringe members of the Craft, it's apparent why we don't want them promoting the Craft if it doesn't mean much to themselves. You're it! You are Freemasons who are always looking for that deeper knowledge, to make you grow just a little bit more. Obviously you respect, admire and hold dear the teachings of the Fraternity, so why not show everyone who loves you, respects you, just what we are all about. It is your last chance!

At a funeral, there is a captive audience. People are there to show their respect for you. They either loved you or respected you and probably both. It is a great way to promote the Craft through a salesman who is respected by all those present.

Let us reflect on some of the ritual that is presented in the Masonic Funeral Service, as this is what non-Masons are learning from this beautiful tribute to a member who has been raised to the Grand Lodge Above.

For the benefit of those who are not members of our Fraternity, it may be well to explain that from time immemorial it has been the custom of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons, at the desire of a Brother to perform the last sad rites over his remains. In conformity with the usage we have assembled in the character of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons to offer the last tribute of our esteem for him and our steady attachment to the principles of the Institution.

Our Brother has reached the end of life. The brittle thread which bound him to earth has been severed, and the liberated spirit has winged its flight to the unknown world. The silver chord is loosed; the golden bowl is broken; the pitcher is broken at the fountain; and the wheel is broken at the cistern. The dust has returned to the earth as it was, and the spirit has returned to God Who gave it.

This evergreen is an emblem of the immortality of the soul. Let it remind us of our high and glorious destiny beyond the world of shadows, and of that imperishable and immortal spirit within us which the tomb shall never receive, and over which death can have no power.

We can trustfully leave him in the hands of that beneficent Being Who has done all things well, and Who is glorious in His holiness, wondrous in His power, and boundless in His goodness; and our endeavour should be so to improve the solemn warning now before us that on that great day of account we, too, may be found worthy to inherit the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world.

This is great advertising and promotion. We will never be accused of soliciting at a Masonic Funeral, so let's show our stuff. I have had many non-Mason, attendees at Masonic Funeral say how beautiful and meaningful the Masonic service was.

How many other opportunities do we have to let the public know who we are, what we stand for and most of all why it is a great honour to be a Freemason? Only Three. Masonic parades, public Corner stone layings and Masonic Funerals.

Our involvement in the Victoria Day parade as a whole Masonic Family is great but how do we attract new members from the crowd? If they contact us, we are supposed to have known them for five years before we can sponsor them, and we are still relying on them to find us.

The laying of a corner stone is now a rare opportunity to be in front of the public and are we really going to attract people to want to join us just for doing what "Masons" are supposed to do, setting bricks with mortar.

Many of us have gone through our lives not soliciting for membership the people that we are closest to: sons, grandsons, nephews, friends and associates. We are modest by nature regarding our involvement in the Craft, but along with our faith, we can let the world know or at least our circle of influence know, how great Freemasonry is and how much it meant to us because it is who we are!

As I climb down from my soapbox, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to present my observations.

I would not be here in front of you if it wasn't for my exposure to Masonic Funerals. Would that have had an affect on the Fraternity...probably not, but on myself...most definitely! So at this time, I would like to take this occasion to say a big "Thank you" to all the Brethren and their families who Requested to have a Masonic Service!

HELP STAMP OUT CANCER

For many years the Order of the Eastern Star has been collecting used postage stamps to raise funds for cancer projects, During the year ending 30 April 2001, the Star was able to raise almost thirteen thousand dollars for cancer research and for making cancer dressings throughout our province. You too can assist this very worthwhile project by carefully clipping stamps from envelopes and by collecting used post cards and foreign envelopes, storing them in the accompanying envelope then forwarding it to your local Chapter of the Eastern Star or to the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research. Remember, you too can help stamp out cancer.