

About Masonic Funerals

Here's our next 'living stone'.....let's talk about funerals. Society today doesn't like to talk about anything to do with death and funerals. But, allow me a few moments to remind you of an obligation we have to the brethren of this Lodge, and to any Mason for that matter. That is to honor him publicly as a last tribute of respect upon his death.

There are only a few occasions when Masons perform their public ceremonies, such as the laying of the cornerstone of a public building or church, the open installation of lodge officers, and on rare occasions, the dedication of a new lodge building. By far, the most common is our Masonic Funeral Service. Only Master Masons in good standing can have or participate in Masonic funeral services in Virginia. Twenty-four other Grand Lodges now permit Entered Apprentices and Fellowcrafts to have Masonic burial rights. Texas, and Alabama are the only southern states to allow that.

In Virginia we open a "Lodge of Sorrow" as the first official act of an incoming Worshipful Master, and close it is his last official duty at the end of his term. Doing this allows the Lodge to merely go to a funeral home, church, or gravesite, declare 'the lodge of sorrow at labor' and perform the service. Afterward the Master will dispense with the lodge, during his will and pleasure. A funeral service is the time when non-Masons are introduced to Freemasonry – perhaps, for the very first time. It's during that somber service that most people present will form an opinion and their perception of our Fraternity. Not being members of our Ancient Craft, and generally knowing very little about Freemasonry, they are often very curious as to who we are, what we stand for, and what is it that we believe in as an organization.

Conducting Masonic Funeral Services is as old as the Fraternity itself. In the days of Operative Masonry, stonemasons buried their own with great solemnity and reverence. The deceased Brother was a man they had worked with side-by-side for years – perhaps, even their entire lives. They extolled his virtues and the contributions he had made to the Craft's work. They spoke of the Eternal Life after death, and the need to perform 'good works' toward all humanity throughout the course of a man's life. The entire guild and all of their families turned out in force to mourn their Brother's passing, and to express their sympathies to the Brother's family. This tradition has been carried forward for centuries to our present day Speculative Masonry.

The first thing any non-Mason will observe is the size of the turnout. If it is small, they may conclude that his Lodge did not hold the deceased Brother in very high esteem. Or, even worse, that Freemasons are much too busy with their own private lives and interests to practice the tenets of Charity and Brotherly Love of which we so loudly boast. In other words, they may conclude that we do not practice what we preach. If the turnout is large, the non-Mason is likely to come away with a very different impression of both the Fraternity and the deceased Brother.

Always remember that a Masonic Funeral Service is the final tribute we can pay to our fallen Brother. That's the appropriate time to thank the Brother's family for allowing him to share his time on Earth with our Fraternity. You may not have known the Brother personally, but if he was a member of your Lodge, he certainly deserves your presence at his funeral service. If he was a Brother, then he's entitled to all of what I refer to as the "lights, rights and benefits" of being a Freemason – and that certainly includes a well-attended Masonic Funeral Service. That's why if at all possible I will alter plans and make myself available for a service. After all, you would hope for a large turn out at your funeral, wouldn't you.....so pay it forward.

Attending these services are, in many ways, just as important as attending Lodge meetings – perhaps, even more so, because, as we can do nothing more for our Brother, the Funeral Service is really for the benefit of the deceased Brother’s family and friends, and it exhibits our genuine care and concern for one of our own. We must tell his loved ones, and demonstrate it by our physical presence, that our promises to be true to them are not hollow promises or empty words. We owe our Brother something, and this may be the last opportunity we will ever have to repay that debt.

For those that may have forgotten, the Masonic Funeral Service is one of the most beautiful pieces of our ritual. Simple, honest, and straightforward, it offers each of us an opportunity to reflect upon our own mortality, and to reaffirm our individual faith in the immortality of the soul. It draws its inspiration and words of comfort not only from the Holy Scriptures, but also from many of the world’s greatest literary geniuses. No one can listen to our service and not be impacted by the gentle, yet powerful, words that touch the heart of every person present – both Mason and non-Mason alike.

Our Manual of Ceremonies covers in detail the actual service and the proper placement of the brethren in line to process into the room where the service will be held. Our funeral program lasts about 13 to 15 minutes, depending on who is reciting the ritual. Plan to be at the funeral home or church at least 20 minutes before the scheduled starting time. Be sure you wear a clean apron and gloves (someone from the lodge will have them in the preparation room for you). Always wear the apron on the outside of your suit or sport coat for the service. Dark color suits (black or blue) are most appropriate for the occasion. At some point you may be asked to take the position of an officer in the procession. If asked, you may wear the jewel of that office.

Make sure that before you leave the preparation room you cease all talking, and present yourself with decorum and dignity...remember...people are watching! The officers (Master, SW, JW, and the chaplain who carries the Holy Scriptures) will enter the room and go to the head of the casket, or gather around the memorial table where the cremains of the brother have been placed. The rest of the brethren will enter the room and process, two-by-two, to the foot of the casket or move to the other side of the table. Be sure to allow plenty of room for those entering the room behind you. Move around to the sidewall of the room if necessary.

We actually have two different rituals that can be used for a funeral. *The Evening Memorial Service* is used quite often in a church or funeral home setting. The other is the *Graveside Service*, and actually either service may be used at the discretion of the Worshipful Master. For most of the services, we use a portion of the graveside ritual. During the service the brethren will have several verbal responses to make. ‘*So mote it be*’... will be given three times, and the fourth time you’ll respond with ‘*So mote it be, now, from henceforth, and forever- amen*’.

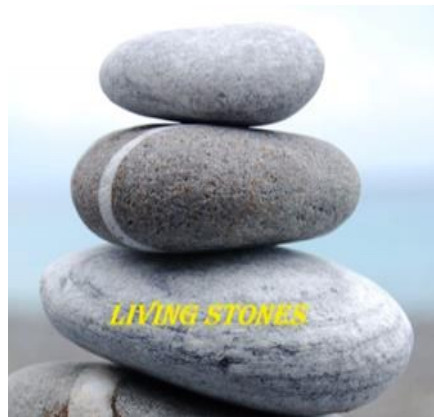
Later in the service the Master will ask for ‘*grand honors, my brethren*’. Grand honors is given by stretching your arms outward, and upward toward heaven and repeating ‘*His spirit to God*’, moving the arms to your chest, crossing left over right, and repeating ‘*His memory in our hearts*’, and finally uncrossing the hands, moving them downward toward the floor, and open in front of you, repeating, ‘*His body to his maker*’. These words and motions are repeated 3 times in unison.

At the conclusion of the service the brethren should wait quietly in place while the Master takes a few moments to greet the family and offer the Lodge's sympathy. Once he is finished, the brethren, with dignity and decorum, retire to the preparation room where the Master will declare the lodge of sorrow dispensed with, remove aprons and gloves, pack up the Lodge paraphernalia and be on their way. Before you leave, make sure you sign the lodge attendance form so the Secretary can have an accurate record of who attended the ceremony and what part they took in the service.

So, my brethren, if you receive a call from your Lodge or see a Masonic Funeral Notice in the newspaper, take the necessary time out of your busy lives to pay this final act of respect and tribute. No, you may not have personally known the Brother, but he was your Brother none the less....and that alone is enough to justify making the effort to attend and to demonstrate to the world that we Freemasons do, in fact, sincerely care about each other – both in life and in death.

Each of us will one day cross the threshold of death. After spending years in the Masonic Fraternity, how would your family feel if most of your Lodge Brothers were too occupied with their own self-interests to attend your Masonic Funeral? How will your loved ones feel about the organization you belonged to for so many years if they can't muster more than a small handful of members to gather around your casket?

This is one obligation and commitment that each of us should earnestly strive to fulfill even if we can't always attend Lodge meetings. Let's demonstrate to the world that we are men who practice Brotherly Love – all the way to the edge of the grave.



Living Stones - Masonic Thoughts for Today's Mason
Douglas M. Messimer, LEO Fraternal Lodge No.53 6-19