

Where Does Freemasonry Really Happen?

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As I write this, it is currently 7 am in beautiful, snow-packed Kearney, Nebraska, on day two of our Annual Communication. Freemasons from across the state have converged on a two block radius to vote on pending legislation and Grand Lodge officers for the coming year, to eat and drink everything in sight and to spend more money at the vendor booths than we will ever admit to our wives. As we prepare for the first full day of business meetings, my mind wanders to Annual Communications past, where we performed the same rituals (both prescribed ritual and “superstitious” ritual), and find comfort in the familiarity of it all.

Of course, if you’ve ever been to your Annual Communication, it probably follows a pretty similar script to ours; on day one, the committees all meet, and most of the rest of us don’t show up until later in the day. The morning of day two involves opening up the business meeting for the year, a solid two hours of dignitary introductions, followed by discussion and voting on the pending legislation. I feel safe in saying that even some of the legislation and arguments are the same (is anybody else sick of hearing “If we raise the dues by another dollar, we’re going to lose members!?”) There will be banquets, more committee meetings, and by the end of the third day we’re all ready to go home and relax from our “vacation”.

When I was a brand new Mason, I remember thinking “Annual Communication must be where real Masonry happens, because my blue lodge meetings seem to be all about paying the bills and reading the minutes.” The first year I came to Annual Communication, I was so excited to see real Masonry done that it wasn’t until I was on my way home that I realized that I had just seen another business meeting on a larger scale.

Part of the problem is that I didn’t know what I was looking for. What is “real” Masonry? I had vague ideas of deep secrets that would improve me spiritually, men in dark suits in a dark room whispering the wisdom of the universe, and teaching each other important truths that would sustain them better than any food. When I didn’t find this in my lodge, I looked in the Scottish and York Rites, and while I found a lot of wisdom there, it was scattered and disorganized, definitely not the clean system of morality I was looking for. I looked and looked, and could not find those deeper truths, and for a while had almost given up on Masonry altogether.

What changed it for me, was a brother inviting me out for pie. I know that’s rather an anti-climactic event that must seem disappointing to many of you, but please, hear me out.

One evening, after a particularly boring meeting in which a number of us struggled to stay awake as we heard all about what we did at the previous boring meeting, a brother approached me and said “Hey, Adam, we’re all going out for pie tonight, want to join us?” I usually would say no, but it was a brother I respected, and so I figured why not. That evening, sitting around a table filled with a number of other Masons, I found my real Freemasonry: a group of men, supporting each other in their journey to become better men, along with a healthy dose of laughter, good natured ribbing, and a lot of love and respect for each other. Around that table were, to my untrained mind, the “heavy hitters” of Freemasonry: Past Grand Masters, Past Masters, 33rd Degree Scottish Rite Masons, Past Grand Commanders, and many other titles (sometimes all on the same person!). Sitting there, listening to these “top men” discuss things going on in their lives, and seeing that we all have many of the same struggles, I learned the true meaning of our ritualistic “on the level.”

At that table were men who were the tops in their fields as well; professors, bankers, and upper management. And then there was me! I wasn’t a past anything, the highest title I had held in lodge was Senior Steward, and I was, at best, a middling insurance salesman. I truly felt that I had no place at that table, and I sat there quietly, hoping not to embarrass myself. Of course, these men were much smarter than I gave them credit for, and kept drawing me into the conversation, asking my opinion, and finding ways to get me talking as well. By the end of the evening, I was as comfortable with these men as I was with my own family and I had learned more about Masonry in those few short hours than I had in the nearly two years I had been attending lodge.

True Masonry, I have learned, does not happen in the lodge. The lodge is nothing more than a school, for you to learn basic lessons to become a better person than you were when you began your journey. True Masonry happens in the dining room, or around a table at a restaurant, or even at a bar, and it is what happens when you work with other men who are on the same journey, and you take the theories you learned in lodge and find practical applications in your daily life.

Now, here we are many years later, and I still count those men as some of my closest Masonic friends. I meet some of them for breakfast on a weekly basis, and it's rare for a full two weeks to go by without me spending at least some time with each of them. And yes, we still go out for pie.