

What Freemasonry Means to Me

Shôn Ellerton, July 12, 2021

How and why did I join Freemasonry? What it means to me. Some of the questions I get about it. And whether it's a good time to join.



For many, Freemasonry represents an institution of secret handshakes, odd-looking aprons, and ancient ritual with archaic language. Many also note, with fascination, Freemasonry's peculiar emphasis with geometry and symbolism, made popular (or infamous in some cases) by fiction-writer bestsellers, Dan Brown, or box movie hits like *National Treasure* starring Nicholas Cage. Others view Freemasonry, nonsensically, as an evil cult whose members slake the blood of goats obsessed with the desire to control and dominate the world. In any case, there is much that has been written on Freemasonry and, to be honest, most, if not all its secrets lie somewhere in the darkest recesses of the Internet if one really wants to look for it. In the world of the Internet, are there *really* any secrets left?

This is my first article on Freemasonry and what better place to start than to discuss what I knew about it, why I joined it, what did it involve, has it met expectations and what it means to me and, finally, why I think it could be a good time to join if one is interested in doing so. Indeed, very few of my friends are aware, at time of writing, that I am a Freemason at all which leads me to discuss why I would want to write about it. Be warned, it is one of my lengthier articles, so help yourself to a cup of coffee and relax.

What did I know about Freemasonry?

Oddly enough, it has not been too many years ago that I had really no idea what Freemasonry was and what it represented. I knew, since schooldays, a little about the Freemasons along with its iconic square and compass logo, associating it with a large international community service-oriented group, not unlike the Rotary Club which my godfather was a proud member of in Colorado. But as for its history and sense of true purpose, I did not know until I started to research it.

Sadly, it was not only until my grandfather passed that I knew he was a Freemason himself by discovering his certificates and regalia stashed in a box in the attic which my sister discovered. Although he never mentioned that he was a Freemason—many did not in those days for fear of persecution or job exclusion—his mannerisms, morals, kindness, generosity so reflect on what I now experience in Freemasonry. Even the language, spoken and written, by my late grandfather was eloquent, witty, and beautiful.

Although my father—being possessed with a strong talent in building physical things and being incredibly creative—taught me many useful and interesting skills, it was not him who read to me as a child or took me to museums or teach me history and science or inspire me on collecting beautiful things like postage stamps amongst many other things. That was done by my grandfather, and he did it with enthusiasm, fervour, and kindness. These are, of course, not traits uniquely exhibited by the principles of Freemasonry, but there are many redeeming characteristics which coincide with those of my late grandfather and Freemasonry.

Perhaps, in an unknowing conscious sort-of-a-way, I did have the principles of Freemasonry at heart but never thought to put them in practice. I sometimes wish that he did tell me something about Freemasonry when I was younger because I strongly feel that I would have benefited in my earlier days, morally and ethically.

It would be, and still is, ‘un-Masonic’ to persuade or invite someone into the order, even a member of one’s family. Unlike a cult, in which there is often a drive to persuade people to join but also make it difficult for them to leave, in Freemasonry, one must decide on their own free will and be of mature age to join. In Freemasonry, it is considered prudent that any candidate be just, of

sound judgment and with strict morals. Unlike most cults, there is no pressure to remain and unlike some cults, your well-being and your family comes first. Moreover, most cults take more than they give, many of them being impious money-making schemes proffering a false sense of being or the promise of superlative power which does not exist in exchange for money. There are even cults out there today who will punish dissenters and punish those who speak any ill of the cult and will take active measures to do so, usually through shunning, ex-communication, doxing, destruction of reputation, or through other unsavoury means.

In Freemasonry, it is not uncommon for everyone in the family of a Freemason to possess some knowledge of the workings of the Craft. In my case, through the rehearsal of memorising long passages of ritual, an act identical to learning the lines of a part in a movie or theatre show. On most nights, my young son insists that I rehearse ritual to him whilst in bed because it is one of the few ways that he will drop to sleep in no time flat, probably because of the complexity of the language. I also get the benefit of practicing it to keep it in memory.

When the son of a Freemason (known as a Lewis) grows old enough, he may certainly join but unlike most cults and religions, they are never born into it or even invited to join, although I dare say, there may be some influence in that department with some father-son relationships. I have heard quite a few stories of boys with a Freemason father growing up, not realising that they must make that independent call to join once they hit adulthood. In one of the stories I heard, a son of a Freemason said, when he hit his forties, after asking to join and being accepted into the order, said to his father, ‘Why didn’t you invite me in all these years?’ The answer was simple and straightforward. ‘You never asked’!

My father, on the other hand, never seemed to hold any high opinion on Freemasonry and thus, never discussed it with me. Having confidence that he will probably never read this piece, I honestly do not believe he would have been a good fit for Freemasonry anyway.

What made me decide to give Freemasonry a try?

When a friend finds out that I have joined the order, I am usually asked why and quite often in a slightly perplexed way for those who have known me for some time, a person of logic and science with a fierce dispensation for independent

thought. After all, from an outsider's perspective, and I must cast my thoughts as to the Craft before joining it, such acts like parading around in odd-looking attire in precise square-form steps around a chequered floor in the middle of a temple surely reeks of conformity. But this explanation gets complicated, and I am jumping ahead of myself.

It was back in 2017 when I suffered from severe depression and still, to this day, it is a deeply haunting reminder that the mind must be given the same care as our physical faculties, particularly with men who are prone to harbour their innermost feelings to the point of explosion. Prior to this, I had a series of high-pressure, highly technical roles in the telecommunications sector much of it involving frequent moves and upheavals, some under the control of uncompromising managers, and general misshapen work-life balance. Much of it was my own doing. I was a workaholic with the misguided notion that everyone would appreciate you for working so disproportionately hard. I was overly ambitious, and I fiercely guarded my reputation and work often holding it in higher esteem than the works of others.

I remember having an interview with an executive manager of an engineering consultancy in Adelaide who plied a series of questions whether I was the 'right material' to be admitted into the inner circle of shareholders. Unlike Freemasonry however, you had to wait to be invited as asking to do so would only incur disfavour by the 'gods' above. In any case, the questions focussed on a variety of competencies and experiences. For example, technical engagement with the business, management of teams, financial skills, and so on. However, there was one called community engagement, a competency that, frankly, I had nothing to answer for. I asked what he meant, to which he replied, 'you know, helping out in your community, Lions Clubs, helping the Scouts, food and donation drives, that sort of thing.' I had nothing and left it at that. In any case, whether it was through my lack of being involved with the community or not, I was not admitted into the *sanctum sanctorum* of the firm.

I resigned from the consultancy due to an attractive offer as a business development executive made by another outfit which did not work out for very long as the whole company had a complete business restructure a few months later rendering my position, and twenty-five others in shotgun-fire fashion in the process, redundant. Luckily, I forged some good connections during my short period there leading to me being hired into a national fast-paced and demanding

telecommunication project rolling out cell-phone towers. It was during these ‘frog-in-the-water’ years that the stress levels built up to climax.

I fled telecommunications to work in government as an IT specialist, my first foray into the world of working in the public sector and as a contractor. Having redeemed a better life-balance ratio, I began to reflect on those community engagement questions presented to me years ago. Should I do something to help others? Can I impart some of my life experiences to others and vice versa? I could also make new friends in the process and perhaps join in other local interest groups.

And that is what I did. I know of both the Lions and Rotary clubs and the community work they do. Having a large Lions Club lodge in our suburb, I decided to enquire about it. They hold two evening meetings and dinner per month, one for members only and the other for members and partners. I was invited to attend a couple of meetings in the ensuing month. I was given a free meal, always schnitzels for some reason, and sat on one of the many tables making introductions and engaging with the members. I went to about six of them in total and befriended someone there who shares the same interest in photography. However, despite the good food and the pleasant chats, there was something missing for me. I noticed that the usual cliques formed themselves at each meeting; perhaps the way the tables were arranged. Most seldom talked to others from adjoining tables but rather, to be in the comfort zones of the group they usually talk with. Another aspect was the average age of the group, which was decidedly older than me. Age is not usually of concern to make friends but, in general, we tend to forge good friendships of people roughly around our age. Of course, like all things, there are exceptions to the rule. The final straw for me was when the friend I met at the lodge pulled out due to internal politics and squabbling. I uphold what the Lions do, and I applaud groups like these for helping the community, but for me, it was just a little too staid.

Looking for another alternative means to help the community, I researched the Rotary Club and the Freemasons. The Rotary Club did attract my attention, but I wanted something more than talking about my business, what I do and to network with like-minded people. The Freemasons, on the other hand, also helps the community but they have something else which piqued my interest. Throughout history, they have cast doubt on extremism and despotism, religious or political, and paved the way to enlightenment through morals, principles and virtues told through a rich tapestry of stories. The principles of Freemasonry are

often at odds in regimes of excessive political or religious power. For example, Freemasonry was illegal both in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union because they were deemed a threat to the political dogma of the day. Nazi Germany was responsible for eradicating approximately two hundred thousand Freemasons sending them to concentration camps, along with many others who were deemed a threat to the Nazi order. Today, many nations have banned or discourage the practice of Freemasonry, including China and Saudi Arabia in which it is outlawed and many other nations under the leadership of a theocracy or dictatorship. What I learned about Freemasonry seemed to resonate with me. Not only are they contributing to the community, they are also pointing a beacon towards a better society in terms of morals and virtues. They are also combatting, or at least in strong opposition to, extremism and fundamentalism.

What was the process of becoming a Freemason like?

Knowing that my grandfather joined the Freemasons and knowing that he, well, turned out to be quite an amiable and honourable fellow, I sent an email back during October 2018 to the Freemasons explaining my interest to know more about them. I did not expect a prompt reply and neither did I receive one. Then late January 2019, out of the blue, I got a phone call from the Freemasons by a well-mannered gentleman who wanted to know more about me and invited me to come down to the next lodge meeting, which would not happen until early March.

I did just that not really knowing what to expect. I rucked up suited albeit not quite the fashion that my to-be fellow Masons were wearing, which was formal black suit attire. I looked slightly out-of-place, but no one cared. I was led into the anteroom in which a series of tables were laid out in a large U shape, which was to be used as the smorgasbord or festive board in which refreshments are to be served after the goings-on in the lodge room itself. All the Masons except me and that other led their way into the lodge room in which the door was closed with communication held by a cryptic series of knocks between the Mason who was with me, known as the Tyler or Outer Guard, and the Mason directly inside, the Inner Guard. During the next hour and a bit, there was not really much to do except have a chat with the Tyler and wander around the anteroom which was adorned wall-to-wall with boards showing names of Past Masters and various pictures of antiquity and other bits of memorabilia.

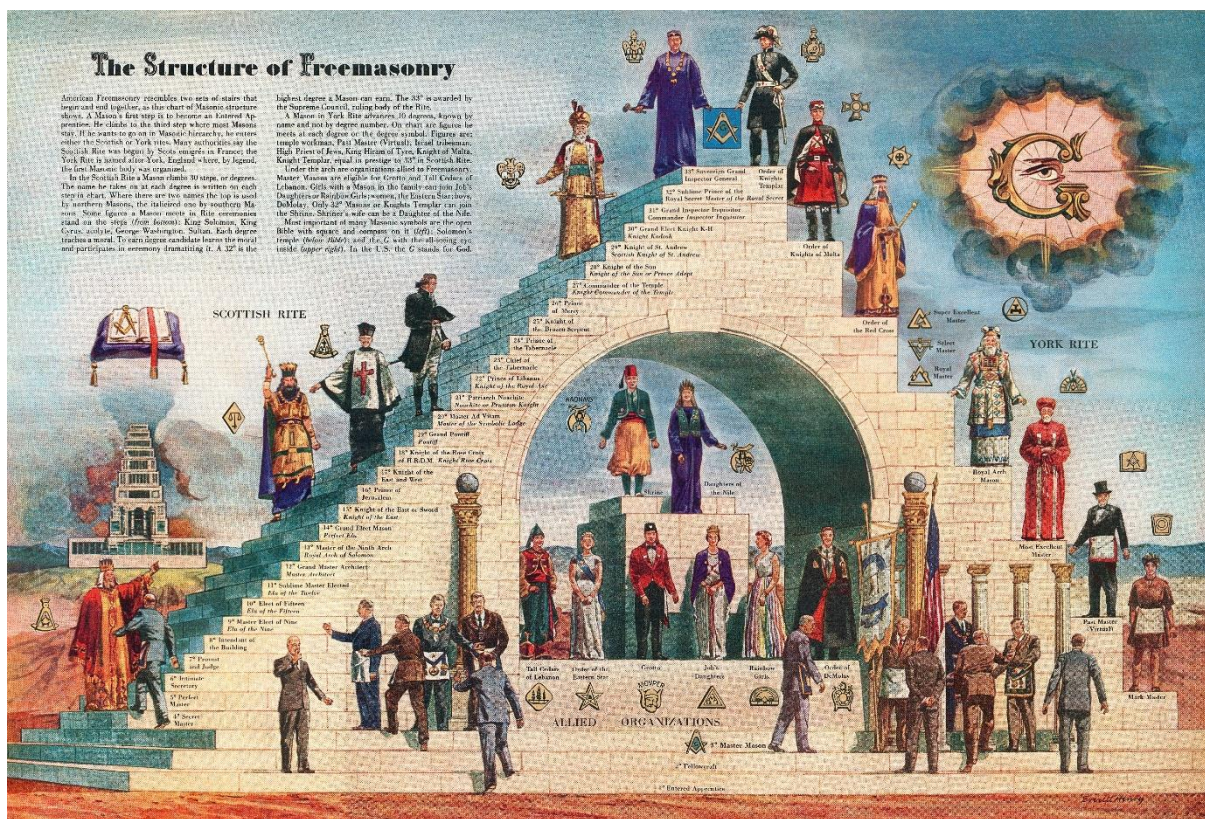
After a while, the rest came out, un-donned their regalia, warmly welcomed themselves to me and offered me to sit down as their guest of the evening. Much like the Lions and other community groups these days, the average age was around the upper fifties or so; however, when I visited other lodges later, I found that there were lodges with a younger set. As I was to find out later, people from all walks of life, race, religion, and colour were in abundance, but of course, no women, something I will touch on later. One thing I was to find out about Freemasonry is, when you are the guest of honour or if it is one of those occasions in which you are being progressed up the ranks of Freemasonry, is that *all* attention is on you for the evening. Moreover, the countless hours of preparation by others to prepare any candidate for the next step, or degree, is astonishing to say the least. More recently, when my six-year-old son joined the Scouts and was invested by a ceremony, it threw me back to my initiation into the first degree, although on a much less grand scale of course.

Being seated at the festive board table, and then after a baffling series of rituals comprising of finger waving and clapping and various other toasts, we tucked into some food and drink and played the usual raffle for charity. There is a good series available on Netflix called [*Inside the Freemasons*](#) which show a few scenes of what a festive board is like. I had absolutely no idea what to do but everyone understood, and it turned out to be a very cordial evening.

A further three months passed until I received a phone call that my wife and I would be visited by two members of the lodge. It really turned out to be a friendly and informal chat over an apricot crumble and mugs of coffee. This is standard practice to meet at the home of the candidate and be introduced to the wife and the rest of the family. It all went seemingly well, and a month later, we were invited to an informal 'Xmas' dinner (in July!) at a restaurant with other members of the lodge.

Finally, I was told that there would be an annual fee for membership which, in Australia, is well under two hundred dollars a year. Bearing in mind that I have been forking out more than five hundred dollars a year for being a member of Engineers Australia, which, to be honest, has contributed absolutely nothing to my career, apart from receiving a monthly magazine which I never read, the personal gain in terms of friendship, well-meaning, learning and charity in Freemasonry has been valuable to me. As a caveat, I would like to point out that membership fees in other Grand Lodges around the world may be considerably higher than those in Australia. I can only say from experience.

It was not until August of 2019 (nearly a year later since I sent that email), I was to be initiated as an Entered Apprentice (1st degree), and over the next couple of years, passed into Fellowcraft (2nd degree) and finally as a Master Mason (3rd degree). For those unfamiliar, the first degree brings the candidate out of darkness into light to progress a path of learning. The second-degree focusses on adulthood and responsibilities and the sublime third-degree focusses on death and how to make best use of time in our world, the sublunary abode. The overall process took about three years but understandably so. There is much to learn in the art of Freemasonry and progressing too fast and not appreciating the meaning of it is a bit of shame. I am only speaking of my experience of Freemasonry in Australia as I have heard of so-called ‘crash courses’ in certain jurisdictions in the United States, which, to my mind, spoils it bit.



One aspect of Freemasonry which is sometimes not clear to some is that Freemasonry (as in the Craft or Blue Lodge) has three degrees of which the *highest* is the third degree (represented humbly by the third step in the image above). Some may have heard of other ‘higher’ degrees, going up to the 33rd degree; however, these are not technically higher degrees, but degrees bestowed from side orders, chapters, or appendages. Once becoming a Master Mason, these side orders are then opened as additional pathways one can explore. Referring to the image above, take two for example, the York Rite (on the right)

progressing up to the Royal Arch and the Knights Templars and the Scottish Rite (on the left), the pinnacle of which is the 33rd degree. There are also the fun social orders including the well-known Shriners (aka the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine – acronym for A MASON) who contribute enormously to the running of Shriners children's hospitals and have a predilection in driving around in very tiny cars while wearing red Fez hats (for the kids of course!). You can see the Shriner with his red Fez hat in the illustration standing beneath the arch. These side chapters and appendages are, no doubt, extraordinarily complex affairs and only now am I touching the tip of these as I write.

What's all with the regalia and all that ritual?

The question that always pops up when asked about Freemasonry is why oh why do they wear all those funny aprons, memorise thousands of words of ritual and perform them, or most of them, behind closed doors?

Let's start with the aprons, sashes and all the other associated regalia.

When you start off as an Entered Apprentice, you have a basic white apron, then when you progress to Fellowcraft (or sometimes known as Journeyman), you have two floral embellishments, and then when you reach Master Mason, you have a 'proper' Blue Lodge apron with borders and other bits and bobs in what is known as Cambridge Blue colours (light blue). Further down the page, there are some illustrations that make this a bit clearer. And then you get pendants and sashes depending on where you are in 'going around the chairs' as minor and principal officers in the lodge progressing to the Master of the Lodge. These officer positions start from Inner Guard, Junior Deacon, Senior Deacon, Junior Warden, Senior Warden and then Worshipful Master, or the Master of the Lodge. There are several other positions including Chaplain, Director of Ceremonies, Secretary, Steward, and an Outer Guard or Tiler who must attend as well.

Once attaining Master of the Lodge or Worshipful Master, your floral embellishments on the apron are replaced by Tau symbols (like a 'T') to signify you as a Past Master, and should you wish to progress to Grand Lodge, you 'progress through the chairs' again (*grand* junior deacon, *grand* senior deacon, etc) ultimately to become a Grand Master but your apron is more elaborate and your garb is in the darker Oxford Blue.



Entered Apprentice
Mason Apron



Fellowcraft Mason
Apron



Master Mason Apron
in Cambridge Blue



Worshipful Master Apron
in Cambridge Blue



Grand Craft Apron in
Oxford Blue

Now on to the ritual.

Every ritual is done ceremonially and solemnly and with great meaning. For instance, no one will ever forget doing their third degree, a profoundly sublime experience. Hence the common expression '*to be given the third degree*'. The order of how degrees are opened and closed in the lodge are meticulously enacted and do so in a shell-like or peeling-the-onion kind of way. For example, if the lodge needed to be opened in the third degree, it is first opened in the first degree, then after the Entered Apprentices retire, it is then opened in the second degree, and again, after the Fellowcrafts retire, it is opened in the third degree. And it happens in reverse when the lodges are closed from the third to the first by bringing in the Fellowcrafts and Entered Apprentices again. This goes a step further when a new Master of the Lodge is installed, there is a brief time between third degree opening and closings when all Master Masons who have not attained the position of a Master of the Lodge or Past Master must retire and then to return to continue from the third degree going down again. It is all very much calculated, formal and probably rather confusing at first.

A Mason can attend any other lodge as a visitor and it is often encouraged that Masons should visit as many lodges as possible in their area to expand their knowledge of others outside their lodge and to give support to those lodges undergoing ceremonies and rituals, not to mention taking part in the festive board. Given the significance of a third degree being bestowed, it is often the case that many other Master Masons will travel from afar to be an observer or take part in the ritual. As with everything in Freemasonry, symbolism seems to be ever limitless and, on account of being a Mason for a relatively short time, I have, no doubt, only skimmed its surface of its meaning.

So why all the fancy garb? One may question why we have uniforms in the military, or Scouts uniforms chequered with badges and insignia, or even, if one thinks about it, the wearing of a tie to work. One can go further. Why do many women and some men adorn themselves with earrings? Ties, earrings, and today's Masonic aprons don't really have any practical purpose, but in the case of earrings and ties, we are so used to them that we're often hardly aware of them.

This naturally leads me to ask the question, why all the ceremony and ritual? Again, one must ask why we have grand ceremonies performed when we have some special national day or event, or perhaps, the Changing of the Guard in Britain, or the opening of the Olympic Games. Because it's spectacular, fun to do and gives some colour and purpose to, what would be, a mundane and ordinary affair. Even the Swedes, along with their philosophy of *Jantelagen* of not showing off have elaborate ceremonies with their royal guards not to mention the peculiar celebration of St Lucia Day with girls carrying lit candles on their heads. It simply adds a little colour to life.



As mentioned above, a substantial amount of work is prepared by anyone taking part in a ritual, especially that of initiating, passing, or raising a candidate to the first, second or third degrees, respectively. It is not uncommon for an experienced Freemason to have learnt by heart around ten thousand words of ritual, some of the lengthier passages being fifteen hundred words or more at a time. Each section tells a story through allegory or provides a lengthy charge to the candidate or explains the principles of Freemasonry through symbolism and working tools. For example, the compass, square, level, plumb rule and so on. Each of these working tools were operatively used in the days of stonemasonry but in Freemasonry, these tools have been extended to provide an allusion to morality and principles. For example, the level teaches us equality and the square, morality. This is known as speculative Masonry.

The wording in ritual is rich, beautiful, complex, and surprisingly terse. For example, one of my favourite passages in the explanation of the working tools for a second degree is:

“To steer the bark of this life over the seas of passion without quitting the helm of rectitude is the highest perfection to which human nature can attain, ...”

Prior to any ceremony weeks or months in advance, some of us put up our hands to do some of the ritual. For longer parts of the ritual, it can take up to two months of practice to get it right, because during the ritual or ceremony, everyone does it verbatim through memory with only the Director of Ceremonies to help out if anyone forgets a bit or gets stuck, which naturally happens from time to time during the ritual. The important thing is that everyone tries their best and gets involved and this is one of the redeeming features of Freemasonry, is that everyone is actively involved, rather than turning up and sitting passively and trying to engage in scintillating conversation with others at some of the other local communities I attended to in my neighbourhood.

There is, no doubt, those who undergo delivering ritual will improve their mastery of the English language and increase their confidence in speaking amongst a group of people. There are those today who will spend huge wads of cash to complete so-called speakers’ training courses. Whereas in Freemasonry, it’s practically built in! Words and phrases that I never existed frequently pop up over the parapet, which adds to the mystique and allure of rediscovering so much of the English language that has died out over the centuries. There is an

argument that the language hasn't 'kept up with the times' but this is one of the endearing features of Freemasonry. It is oddly fascinating to ponder that the wordings I come across today in ritual is exactly, or nearly so depending on the Grand Lodge, the same as what my grandfather went through and before then back to the early 1700s. Like everything else in the lodge room, perhaps except for the use of a laptop for the Secretary to look at the meeting minutes, an electric organ, electric lighting and air-conditioning, the ever-changing modernity of life is absent from the lodge room.

Delivering ritual means different things for different people. I asked another, what does it mean for him, and his response was that it gave him more confidence in business meetings. For me, I enjoy delivering ritual because it's probably the only time I've ever had a chance to act or play out a drama as part of a story. Being immersed all my life in science, computing and engineering, such activities like drama and acting are not really required, whereas those who are, for example, studying law and learning the ropes of conducting themselves and speaking in court will find certain aspects of Freemasonry ritual startlingly similar, as well as the language employed. As for memorising, it has not been tremendously difficult for me as I have had years of experience since childhood in memorising quite lengthy classical piano pieces. A similar process and technique.

Perhaps another reason for the practice of delivering ritual from memory is to keep the memory cells active and stem the onslaught of dementia. Who knows?

Crossing the threshold into esotericism and mysticism

What surprised me about Freemasonry is just how complex it is. Modern freemasonry extends back to 1717, but in reality, it goes back to ancient Egypt. Still, to this day, new research into Freemasonry reveals something that somehow, got lost in the annals of time. Not surprisingly, given the vast tract of time Freemasonry has been around, an abundance of history intertwined with mythology and storytelling has created a world where science juxtaposes itself with art and where reality juxtaposes with the spiritual. It is rife with paradoxes and mystery. The hard-nosed evidence-based scientist crunching out numbers, which I prefer to call as an analyst, or atheistic sceptic often dismisses such forays into the unknown, metaphysical, or supernatural as delusionary or even dangerous; however, if one looks back at some of our greatest scientists like Nikola Tesla, Thomas Huxley, Isaac Newton, and Albert Einstein, they have all

dabbled to some extent into the other-worldly and unexplained. Doing an Internet search of famous Freemason scientists will reveal plenty including Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Fleming and, more recent technologists like Steve Wozniak from Apple. Not to mention that many famous politicians have been Freemasons, although, sadly, there seem to be fewer these days which is a pity in my view, as I believe the world would be a better place if we had a stronger sense of morality, principles, and ethics in some of today's leadership. That is my opinion, of course.

Esotericism in Freemasonry, at least for me, is an appealing one because I am a strong proponent of the teaching of hard facts to build the physical elements in our society *and* learning how to think, and how others think in society. Having been a civil engineer, I am well aware of the importance of the engineer and the architect, which, in my view forms a grand marriage between science and art. Learning how others think is primarily through philosophy, fiction, art, music, spirituality and history. All subjects I have a great interest in. I believe those analysts, scientists or engineers who dismiss 'the arts' consigning them to being useless and without function may not realise that the world they are unknowingly creating is that of a dystopian black-and-white technocracy without meaning of life, vividly portrayed in the French 1965 film, [*Alphaville*](#).

Some common questions about Freemasonry

There are many common questions, some of them more difficult to answer, about Freemasonry, which I sometimes get asked on. Before I commence, it is worth remembering that Freemasonry has been around for a long time, and, naturally, there have been certain episodes or periods in time in Freemasonry which may not be characterised as being wholly savoury. But this same reasoning can be taken to any movement that has had such a long and illustrious history.

Is it a religion?

To recap from above, Freemasonry is certainly not a religion, and this reflects mainly on the fact that Freemasonry embraces all, or certainly most, religions. And this, of course, irks many religions, predominantly those of a monotheistic nature, because how could one be a devout follower of a religion and yet, tolerate other religions? Most social media threads I have encountered of those claiming Freemasonry to be evil and bad tend to be from fundamentalists or

evangelists of a monotheistic religion, with a smaller fraction of those who believe that Freemasonry is a Satanic cult destined for world power and glorification to a 'New Order'. They're usually the ones who've watched too many movies about the Illuminati!

Atheists, those who actively deny the existence of a higher power or being, are not particularly fond of the Freemasons either which is, I guess, wholly understandable considering that atheists are termed as being *stupid*, directly quoted in the first of the ancient charges for the Craft as laid out in the *Andersons Constitution* in 1723. However, there are other Freemasons lodges, those in Continental Europe who *do* allow atheists (and women). I won't elaborate on the history of how this has happened and why, but there is ample information out there on the Internet, plus a fascinating read by John Dickie book titled [*The Craft: How the Freemasons Made the Modern World*](#).

Is it a cult?

Neither is Freemasonry a cult. There are many definitions of what a cult is or isn't but if I elaborate on four principles of a cult.

First, a cult has a charismatic leader. Freemasonry has none. In fact, Freemasonry does not have a central body at all but a worldwide collection of Grand Lodges who need not take authority and cannot give authority to other Grand Lodges. In the United States alone, there are around a hundred or so Grand Lodges.

Second, a cult has a transcendent belief system. In Freemasonry, there is no ascribed transcendent belief system. The Great Architect of the Universe (often abbreviated GAOTU) is the general reference to a higher being or power and this may differ from person to person. Yes, Freemasonry teaches one to deal with death and that we should live and act accordingly to a set of principles and morals before we depart to the next abode, which, for some could be Heaven, to some, Nirvana, Valhalla, the Elysian Fields, or even back to the natural powers of the Universe. But Freemasonry does not ascribe to the notion that we are going to a better place and that others outside the fraternity won't get there.

Third, a cult has a system of control, often a system in which there is total control within the cult and questioning it is considered a violation. Freemasonry does have its rituals and ceremonies; however, I can assure you that Masons often question the practices of what happens in Freemasonry and they can be

very vocal about it. As mentioned earlier, many cults have a system of control in place in which it is often difficult to get *out* of it although usually extremely easy and fast to get admitted into it. It is the reverse in Freemasonry. If anything, it is getting increasingly difficult to get new people into Freemasonry because of its stance in not actively seeking new candidates, although that could change in the future. Getting kicked out of Freemasonry is more than possible once one starts being nasty to other Masons, start committing crimes or continually exhibit bad and deplorable behaviour in *and outside* of the Craft, and of course, if you refuse to renew your membership. And should one want to leave on their own volition, no problem either.

Fourth, a cult has a way of inflicting a way of thinking which excludes those of outside influences. In many cults, there is a slow and gradual process of ‘brainwashing’ those within the cult of accepting only those practices and beliefs that they preach. Remembering that Freemasonry was born out of a movement that pushes back against overpowering narratives, religious or political dogma, it seeks to promote enlightenment and free thinking.

If anything, Freemasonry can be considered to be a civil movement, much like the Scouts, Rotary or Lions Club.

Why aren’t women allowed?

Ah yes! The most common question is, without a doubt, is why aren’t women allowed, especially in this day and age of gender equality. And rightfully so. It is a reasonable and valid question. Sure, in [*co-Freemasonry*](#) and Continental Masonry, women *are* allowed but not in most regular lodges worldwide. Again, John Dickie’s excellent book, [*The Craft: How the Freemasons Made the Modern World*](#), explains much more in detail but I have a few observations on this matter.

In my opinion, there are certainly differences between men and women in terms of behaviour, and many in our research communities have made some reasonable explanations as to why. Naturally, there are exceptions to the rule of course. I once was asked by a woman who said to me, shouldn’t this issue be addressed [of women being accepted]? I replied that if it was, would she join to which she replied that it wouldn’t be her ‘cup of tea’ being dressed up in a silly apron and doing ortho-perambulations around a chequered floor. She had a point. The same principle can be applied to the hi-fi world, a world I was deep in many years ago in a part-time career when studying to be an engineer. During

those years in attending roadshows, hi-fi expos or, in general, dealing with customers hunting for hi-fi, *very* few women took *any* interest in hi-fi, most of them not understanding what all the fuss is about. I don't know why, but that's how it is. Toys for the boys. Another typical example is in the world of engineering. How many female students were in my engineering class? A paltry five or so out of around fifty. Despite novel enticing ways by university bodies to attract women into engineering schools today, men still greatly outnumber women in engineering schools.

Women *do* have groups and interests which are predominantly composed of women and, likewise, so do men. According to Dickie, there was a school of thought in the old days that women were less inclined to keep secrets and men were inclined not to be able to keep themselves to their breeches, if you know what I mean. Old-fashioned maybe, but there could have been an element of truth in it. I do believe that when men and women are together, they behave differently than when they are not. Some men tend to show more effrontery and bravado in the presence of women than when not. Some exhibit shyness and caution when in the presence of women. Be that as it may, it can cause awkwardness given the rituals performed and the bonds formed, but ultimately, many friendships between Freemasons' wives are created much like when I create friendships with parents of other children in my son's Scouts group.

There are men's groups. There are women's groups. And there are mixed groups. Most men and women don't particularly see this as a problem but, perhaps, the smaller minority of women's justice groups maintain that men's groups shouldn't exist because they are often perceived as bastions of power excluding women. In any case, most of those in this very same minority wouldn't want to join anyway. Some women are quite comfortable with the fact that their menfolk going to the lodge are doing something reasonably useful rather than plying down drink after drink at the local boozier. Women, in general, are far more sensible in this way than men. Men and women want to have their own space at times, and, like the 'man-cave' in which men have a place to retire for a little solace, women often have their own 'me-time' as well.

Is Freemasonry racist?

The question of whether Freemasonry is racist or not has been asked many times as well. In my experience here in Australia, I have not encountered any form of racism as I have seen a diverse mix of people from all cultures, races,

and backgrounds. But there is a lingering thought I had on this, and it's because of what I heard about Freemasonry in some parts of the United States.

After reading various historical material on Freemasonry, I surmise that during the early days, exclusion of races did happen in Freemasonry. In the United States, a new branch of Freemasonry materialised in the late 1700s called [Prince Hall Freemasonry](#) which, as I understand it, was formed by the black community in response to racial segregation in Freemason lodges. It is still strong today, but I find it somewhat troubling that instances of racism are still in existence in some regular grand lodges, particularly in the Deep South, where coloured people are sometimes discouraged from joining. My thoughts are if we have an equal society, Prince Hall Freemasonry shouldn't really exist, but it does and there may be other more complicated reasons as to why it does. Supremacy, whether it is based on race, religion or culture will always sadly exist but anyone who denies that non-white racism and non-white supremacy exists need only look up [Louis Farrakhan](#) and his [Nation of Islam](#), who, in recent years got entangled in the nefarious Scientology cult.

As for some of the historical figures who published some of the most important works of Freemasonry and of those Freemasons who are now accused of being racist because of their involvement with slaves, is an interesting topic. Take Thomas Jefferson and Albert Pike, for example. In the spirit of racial equity which has been at the forefront of social and political circles in recent years, these two characters, for some, have committed the cardinal sin of being racist for one reason or another. Thomas Jefferson did, indeed, own slaves and Albert Pike was a Confederate general, hardly symbolic of racial equality; however, and this is the paradox, they both contributed enormously to the principles of equality which is embedded in the tenets of Freemasonry. No doubt that these principles, which have influenced the formation of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights, have contributed to making the nation a more equal place than what it was before. It is unfortunate that some of the movements that we have experienced in more recent years aim to disavow and alter the history of the United States such as the [1619 Project](#), the curious notion that the United States was founded on slavery alone.

The tenets of equality are quite clear in Freemasonry as demonstrated and alluded to by the workman's tool, the level, but in reality, as in most things in life, inequality will always exist in some shape or another.

How easy is it to join?

When someone becomes interested or has a curiosity in Freemasonry, the question often arises if it is easy to join. Earlier in this piece, I describe my own experience but in general, it is not a difficult process. However, it is a little lengthy and this is only to ensure that anyone joining really has an interest in doing so rather than through a knee-jerk reaction. The joining process is always at a comfortable pace for both the prospective candidate and for those who are getting to know that person. Will that person be a good fit for that particular lodge for example? In Freemasonry, lodges can be wide and varied with respect to those who are members of them. There are so-called specialist lodges which might have an affinity with some other interest, sport or hobby. For example, lodges of musicians, football fans supporting their favourite club, and even motorcycle fraternities. Again, the series, [*Inside the Freemasons*](#), has some interesting episodes on specialist lodges.

Part of the home interview in the joining process is an informal chat as to why you wish to join. Freemasonry is not about securing power, or obtaining a network of business connections, being able to get off without getting a speeding fine, or in general, being better than other people. It is about a yearning of being a better person, as cliché as that sounds, being part of a charitable community and, certainly for me, to spread my friendship ties to others. There is a mystical and esoteric side of Freemasonry which attracts many, but there is nothing wrong about admitting this. After all, Freemasonry would be utterly boring without the rituals, ceremonies and symbolism. It is some of these characteristics which distinguish it from other fraternities.

Will Freemasonry take up too much of my time?

The final question here is whether Freemasonry takes up too much time. The answer is simple. It is up to the individual. One can ascend to becoming a Master Mason without doing any ritual at all and, honestly, I do not have any issue with this. Learning ritual is not for everyone, and for some, it is incredibly hard to do, especially for those whose Mother Tongue is not English. I personally like doing it, but it is not for everyone.

Lodges in Australia normally meet up, at the most, ten times a year. Some lodges meet up only four, five or six times a year depending on numbers. Some members may only turn up occasionally, and although lodges encourage members to attend regularly, nobody is forced to do so. The only thing you do

at a minimum is turn up looking smart, attend the lodge meetings and join in the festive board if you wish to do so later.

However, Freemasonry is a near limitless font of information and learning, and should one want to progress further and truly understand the meaning of Freemasonry, there is much to absorb. Also, once becoming a Master Mason and then wanting to progress through the 'chairs' up to Master of the Lodge, it is required to do various amounts of homework on ritual depending on the position of the lodge.

In short, one does not have to commit much time but if one has some extra time to get more out of Freemasonry, then this is certainly encouraged. However, always remember that Freemasonry stresses that family comes first. The last thing that Freemasonry would want to do is to break up or stress out a family.

Why did I write this piece?

This is probably the longest article I've written to date (reminder to keep these shorter in future!) and I hope the reader took something away from this and, maybe, learned a little from the experience of one who, not long ago, joined the Craft.

I was unsure whether I should write such a piece because there seems to be some level of stigma attached to whether one should divulge that they are a Freemason or not. In previous generations, certainly in Britain during the latter half of the twentieth century, Freemasons were generally quiet because of political or professional reasons. At one point, to become a policeman, politician or other civil servant, one would have to profess in not being a Freemason. In fact, Jack Straw (England's former home secretary) back in the late 90s, stated that all judges must declare if one is a Freemason or not, but ten years later, he rescinded this policy on grounds that zero evidence emerged that Freemasonry was complicit in the workings of the machine. Moreover, the move was held to be discriminatory in terms of human rights.

Apart from debunking theories of Freemasonry being a corrupt organisation comprising of wealthy and influential figures who have nothing better to do than to formulate plans to run and control the world, there is another reason why I wrote this. Our membership is dying.

Being reduced in numbers is not unique to Freemasonry by any means. In general, most community-led groups are diminishing in membership size. Perhaps, it is the sign of the times. We are better connected by Internet, sometimes too much so. We have more distractions at our beck and call at home. We don't have enough time any more, although I don't buy into this argument as I once wrote in one of my first articles back in 2016, [Has the Internet Really Brought Us Any Closer Together?](#) Membership count within community groups, in general, is spiralling downwards.

In Freemasonry, the effects are obvious and pronounced. I read a study that for every two initiates in the order, three leave the order, probably by passing away. As with other community groups, the average age of the members is getting older. Should one want to become an officer in a lodge, after becoming a Master Mason, there might have been many others in the queue vying to get a position on the 'ladder'. Nowadays, many Freemasons are members of multiple lodges circulating around just to keep up the numbers. Lodges with too few members may merge with other lodges. Some lodges hand in their Warrant and cease being a lodge anymore. Many officer positions in a lodge below the rank of Worshipful Master, or Master of the Lodge, are held by Past Masters because there isn't the number or appetite for those positions to be filled in by new Master Masons. For example, it is not uncommon these days for a Master of a particular lodge to be, for example, any number of more junior positions in another lodge. Moreover, these days, there are many Masters of lodges who have, again and again, been made Master again, often in consecutive years. In South Australia alone, there used to be in excess of 12,000 Freemasons but that number has dwindled to 1,500 during 2021.

There will always be those who suggest that Freemasonry is a dark, corrupt and nebulous society. But this is a myth perpetuated by the onslaught of social media bytes and our entertainment industry. Freemasonry provides a wide spectrum of beneficial reasons for being what it is. It gives much in the way of charity, gives sense and purpose to many, provides soft skills in areas of communication and behaviour, and, of course, gets us out in the open world and to make new friends.

For those interested in joining Freemasonry, I can think of no better a time. Freemasonry cannot afford to be as selective as it once was and those that do join will find that, as long as we do not lose too many of our lodges, there are

plenty of opportunities to fill in various roles in the lodge and in Freemasonry in general.

Has Freemasonry met my expectations?

It has and more.