

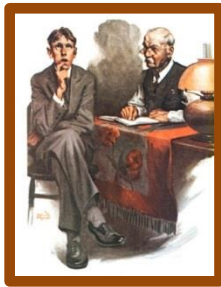
# The Criticality of our Individual Degrees and Catechisms

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Two of the most common suggestions I hear from very well intentioned brothers who want to update or modernize masonry is to provide one-day classes for the degrees and to either de-emphasize or eliminate the catechisms. Most all who suggest these ideas also say that it's important to keep the obligations, so every candidate should have to learn and recite their obligations, but the catechisms, they tell us, are out of date and have little or no value in today's society which is being

crushed by demands on our collective time. The theory is that a candidate's time is better spent quickly finishing his degrees (perhaps through a one day class) so he can start studying masonry at his own pace, according to his own lifestyle and available time.

I beg to differ. I not only believe that the full-form, individual degrees and catechisms are critical to unlocking the mysteries of masonry and that every candidate must, in all cases receive each degree, individually, in due and ancient form, but must also learn and recite the associated catechisms. While I hold this as a personal belief, I believe these two aspects of our ritual are critical to the continuation of our craft.

**QUESTION:** Is there a need or a role in our fraternity going forward for full-form, individual degrees and their related catechisms in today's masonry? Or have they become obsolete in their current form and in need of either shortening, combining, or dropping them completely? Can we make the degree process much shorter and much more efficient by designing new or modified methods to teach new masons?

**ANSWER:** The degrees are the allegory used to portray and share masonry and symbolism is the language of the craft. The full-form, individual degrees and the related catechisms are the primary tools to train the new mason's mind to think in terms of allegory and symbols and break the mason's dependence on writing and reading the written word. Through the individual degrees and associated catechisms, the new mason learns to interpret masonic allegory and to identify and understand masonic symbols - both being necessary for a mason to learn and internalize masonry and its fundamental principles, and then participate in masonic communications with other brothers of the craft.

**DISCUSSION:** Masonry likely emerged and evolved in a time before the written word, and then undoubtedly continued expanding through a period where only the rich and well-connected were allowed to go to school and were taught to read. Many believe we emerged from the ancient mystery schools in Egypt which were generally structured in a form similar to the very initiatic process we practice today.

The initiatic process employed among many ancient crafts generally consisted of ceremonies where a candidate was imbued with necessary knowledge according to defined increments (degrees) which built on pre-existing knowledge or preceding lessons. The goal of the ceremonies was to bring each new member of the particular craft to a common level of knowledge to understand their craft and interact as an equal among craft members.



The floor work of the degrees teach us the allegorical lessons and symbols of masonry while the catechisms teach us how to see, recognize, and understand those allegories and symbols, and then how to communicate that knowledge. In short, we learn masonry and its tenets through the degrees and catechisms in the same form our long-passed brothers shared masonry and their knowledge - using only their instructive tongues to communicate the lessons to receptive ears.

Masonry has never been intended to be taught through written language or text books - tools which in all likelihood did not exist at the birth of the craft. It has in all ages been passed from one generation to the next through its allegory and symbols. It is critical for masons to individually experience the floor work to see, live, and experience the allegory, and then to learn the catechisms which are tools that train the mind to translate our allegories into masonic symbols, making it possible for us to understand, communicate, and teach fundamental masonic principles in their true and original form.

Once properly instructed in the degrees and catechisms, the candidate's mind has been opened to think, conceive, and portray lessons allegorically, and to see, read, and understand the symbols of masonry as taught through the experiences of the degrees. But this education or training of the mind cannot happen if either the degrees or the catechisms are skipped or eliminated from the candidate's initiatic experience. If a candidate does not walk the floor during a degree, personally matching steps and actions to words and symbols, how is he then to understand the allegory such walking represents? If he does not learn the symbols attached to his own actions and movements through the instruction and recitation of catechisms, how then is he to know the heart and soul of masonry in its original, symbolic form? If candidates do not see or feel this cognitive value from their investment of their time and work, then perhaps my brother that is actually what is broken and perhaps it is that which we need to fix!

Can masonry be modernized? Perhaps. But in a time where our brothers are increasingly demanding to learn more of our masonic history and principles, we must continue to provide the essence and core of masonry itself through its original form, as intended by our ancestors and subsequently presented to all masons who have traveled masonic paths before us! Our brothers seek out the writings of the great masonic authors such as Pike, Mackey, and others, but can they truly grasp the ideas and interpretations by those writers if they have not both experienced and learned the essential lessons conveyed through degrees and catechisms? We must teach new masons how to think allegorically and to identify, relate, and apply masonic symbols as they study our masonic tenets and build their own masonic edifice.

Do we seek to become and be masons, continuing our craft and our ancestors' impressive traditions? Or do we seek to become a group of men who simply read and talk about how masons historically shared their craft? Masonry and all of its beauty and its secrets is contained in its full form within our allegories and symbols and it is up to us to seek them and to teach new masons how to learn and share them in historically due form if we are to propagate the craft and its beautiful principles into the future!

Travel on my worthy brothers!

BroBill