

Smoke and Mirrors

For many of us the phrase *smoke and mirrors* connotes the use of slight of hand or flim-flam misdirection creating a seemingly impossible result. We are not going down that path today. Rather we are going to peer into how smoke and mirrors relate to our Masonic lives.

In pre-historic times someone discovered that meat could be cooked using fire. Later in time it is my supposition that smoke was discovered to preserve meat that was cooked over a very slow fire. That must have been a brave, very hungry and possibly adventurous soul that first ate singed meat and later tried meat that had been darkened by smoke. Well it worked and the culinary path was begun for modern man. Cooking is but one use for smoke in the literal sense. Somewhere along the time line our intrepid prehistoric forebearers found that different sources of smoke produced effects other than preserving foods. Imagine the vast amount of experimenting it took to discover that some smokes were good for the body, such as sagebrush which is used by native Americans. Or the herb thyme that has been used by the French in more modern time to fumigate hospital rooms in order to disinfect the room. Okay maybe they were just trying to expel the foul vapors and spirits since the connection between germs and disease was yet to come. Finally (for this paper) smoke has been used for spirituality in both ancient and modern times. Cedar, sagebrush, myrrh, copal and frankincense are a few that come to mind.

Incense is nothing more than smoke that carries a specific fragrance profile. In many sacred ceremonies incense or specific smokes are used for a variety of reasons. One older reason might well be to mask the uh, fragrance of many unwashed bodies and clothing in a closed-up room. After all, not all cultures promoted taking a bath more than a couple of times a year, if even then. Generally, incense is attributed to have properties of eliciting a particular response by breathing the smoke and fragrance it carries. Sometimes this may well be due to nothing more than the fact the item being burned carried a hallucinogenic compound with it. Other beliefs are that certain smokes can dispel negative energy and even repel malevolent spirits, smudging is one such contemporary practice. No small number of practitioners of meditation will use incense to help relax the mind

and bring about a more peaceful state. Now let us imagine ourselves taking a walk about our neighborhood. Wafting in on the breeze is the detected the scent of charcoal being started. Now our minds begin to wonder what is going for be cooked over that fire? Will it be the humble hamburger or just maybe a well marinated rack of ribs that are going to bathe for hours in fragrant wood smoke? Is your mouth starting to water yet? Mine is! That just proves yet again Pavlov's theory, that gentlemen is known as association. Instead of a bell sound smelling charcoal smoke caused us to think of food and our bodies took over from there. We in this lodge room have been participating in the ancient ritual of clearing our minds of the superfluties of our lives by closing our eyes and experiencing the relaxing association of incense smoke.

Now let us look at mirrors for a while. When I speak of mirrors my mind goes to the image reflected from the shiny surface. We as Masons are taught by use of symbols and allegory. Those symbols and allegorical teachings are meant to cause us to reflect on our actions. So, Masonry uses the mirror of allegory to help us to better keep our actions in bounds and be upright. But how does smoke and mirrors relate the any point yet made it this presentation? They do not, yet.

For a moment please close your eyes and allow your memory to take you into the lodge that is your home lodge. Use the image formed from a deep inhalation of the air in our lodge. Is that a pleasant image or one that is somewhat distasteful? Perhaps even unpleasant? Our senses form subconscious images and impressions, and few are as subtle as smell. During my entered apprentice and fellowcraft days during meetings my home lodge was perfumed by yeast dough rising and cinnamon rolls being baked by one of our senior members. Those were pleasant associations. Now however my lodge smells vaguely of must, mildew and dust.

So now try to imagine how the latter situation might affect a prospective member or a new brother who does not have that buffer of good associations to fall back upon. We in the craft have enough trouble keeping new brothers and even getting fresh interest without creating a subconscious negative first impression. Bake some bread for the meal, light a candle or some incense to freshen up the building. Or maybe just let some fresh air in before the meetings. After all we want to get the man beyond the middle set of winding stairs.

Fraternally,

Clifford Hill II