

An Examination of the Use of Ritual in the Modern Masonic Lodge

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In 2006, The Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario published a brochure entitled "Freemasonry...is it for ME?" which can be accessed on their website. The brochure, which is targeted to the non-Mason interested in the Craft, outlines a history of the order; talks about the "aims" and "philosophy" of the fraternity; the expectations and requirements for new members; and also a substantial portion dedicated to an explanation of Masonic charity.¹

For all the information contained in this neatly presented 8.5"x11" page, the only portion that refers to our Ritual is located under the heading of "Personal Development" which reads as follows:

"Masonry offers the opportunity to make each man better through its teachings...learning portions of the Ritual and participating in the Degree stimulates the mind and...presents the opportunity to develop leadership and organizational skills, build self discipline through commitment, poise, and self confidence, and strengthen presentation and public speaking proficiencies."

R.W. the District Deputy Grand Master, Distinguished East, and my Brethren: today, I would like to speak about our Ritual, and more particularly, what we as Lodges in general should be striving towards in order to maintain the interest of our newest Masons. It is not my intention to address any specific content from The Work, but rather, my thoughts on the importance of how Ritual is taught, learned, understood, and presented.

Perhaps the phrase most often repeated when trying to define what Freemasonry is that the organization "takes good men, and makes them better". Taking this phrase at face value, we must then assume that there is no place in Freemasonry for bad men. Indeed, noted Masonic author H.L. Haywood stated:

"If it be asked why Masonry does not accept bad men in order to make them good, it replies that such is not its function, for it has a unique purpose of its own to carry out, and its demands are made in that view. The reformation of men is left to other agencies."²

Progressing naturally onwards, this should lead us to the following question: If Masonry's *raison d'être* is to make good men better, what, if anything, in our Masonic meetings accomplishes this task? Is the new member deriving important daily lessons by listening to what happened at the last regular meeting? Does the reading of the

¹ http://www.grandlodge.on.ca/Communications/2006_LRP_brochure.htm

² Haywood, H.L. 1923. *Symbolical Masonry*. New York, New York

accounts drive that Entered Apprentice to meaningful introspection? Is a debate over whether 2pm or 3pm is best time of the day for the next strawberry social enlightening the minds of our newest members? I present to you the traditional lodge meeting: “Bills, Minutes, and Boredom”³...is this the environment in which to grow the children of our fraternity?

Now, don't get me wrong...I have the highest respect for our Craft, and all of my brothers that enjoy going to their Lodge meeting each and every month. How a Lodge and its members run their meetings is entirely up to them to decide through the democratic process, and I don't think it is anyone's province, except for the Grand Lodge, to tell a Lodge how to conduct their affairs. I get a tremendous amount of enjoyment from visiting other Lodges, striking up new friendships, and rekindling old ones. But that said, there has been a well documented shift in the past number of years, where younger masons are striving to take back the craft for their own. Freemasonry, these Masons say, is, and always was intended to be an initiatory organization. In other words, the focus of any Lodge, and of the Craft in general must be on the candidate. We grow, and spread our influence by initiating good men into the craft. We guide them through the lessons of the three degrees of craft Masonry in order to give them the tools and knowledge to become better men, and we do this in an environment conducive to meditation, reflection and introspection. These better men, and now, Master Masons, go on to embrace the values of our fraternity, and in turn, are taught to help nurture and teach the initiate...and circle continues.

The new member is the life of the Craft, and his initiation is the first, and most important Masonic ceremony he will ever experience.

Ritual is defined as “A religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order.” As a Freemason, we cannot limit our definition of ritual to just that text and rubric contained within the book of The Work. Indeed, our Ritual forms the very foundation of our fraternity, and from it, all other things in our Craft emanate. Just as our Lodge rooms extend from the “surface of the Earth to it's centre, even as high as the heavens”, so too should our ritual encompass every word we say, and every action we take, whether it be in the lodge room, or in the world in general.

³ Porter, Cliff; Tresner, Jim. 2011. *The Secret Psychology of Freemasonry: Alchemy, Gnosis and the Science of the Craft*. Denver, Colorado

Degree work is but a part of Masonic Ritual, and it is by advancement through the Degrees that our initiates prove themselves. If we fail in delivering our Degree Work in a manner that is both interesting and comprehensible to both the candidate, and to others in the lodge, then we are failing in the use of what is arguably the most important tool we have to make "good men better". We all have the ability to distinguish good Degree Work from bad Degree work, but the tolerance for it varies widely from Mason to Mason. In its most basic sense, I feel that there are three keys to delivering good and effective degree work...and by effective, I mean successfully contributing to the education and enlightenment of the initiate. Those three keys are knowledge of The Work, understanding of The Work, and performance of The Work.

In order to deliver first class degree work, the Mason must first, very simply, memorize the ritual which he has undertaken to deliver. Our Book of The Work contains dozens of pieces of ritual, varying in length from a few lines, to multiple pages. I have found that the easiest way to memorize any piece of work is to break it down into smaller parts, memorize each piece individually, and then assemble them back together. The Charity Lecture in the first degree was the first long piece of work I memorized, and I did it in particularly the manner I just described.

Just as we demand word perfect ritual from our initiates, so must we as teachers of the Craft, strive for word perfect degree work. But memorization of the words is not enough. Understanding the lessons taught in the work is also necessary in the delivery of degree work. Any person can read information out of a textbook to a classroom of students, but only someone who understands it can actually teach it. Learning the lessons in our ritual is not a difficult task for most, for although the text of The Work sometimes uses ancient phraseology, the underlying lesson is often clear. In addition, we all have access to many resources which will help us in our own learning.

The final key to the effective delivery of degree work is in its performance. Just as actors are judged on how they deliver their lines to their respective audience, so must the ritualist be critiqued. His lines are The Work, and the audience is both the initiate and his fellow Masons assembled herein. The style and method of the performance must be such as to capture the attention and imagination of the candidate...the enunciation must be clear and concise, the pronunciation correct, the volume more than adequate. A Lodge is Just, Perfect and Regular...not justperfect, and regular.

(demonstration on level) NE Angle, then 1st degree Obligation

The words from my mouth may be perfect, my understanding of the lesson firmly in place, but without the ability to effectively perform the ritual, the impact will most

assuredly be lost on the candidate. As the working tools in the first degree teach us, knowledge of the ritual, grounded on the accuracy of the words, aided by the labour of performance, and promoted by the perseverance of practice will raise ignorance from despair, and the Mason in possession of all three of these keys may be considered a master of The Work.

But lets look beyond the black and white of The Work, where there is much more that adds to the experience of our Ritual, and likewise, to the impact that we can make on both our candidates, and ourselves. As an example, look around this room. Illuminated by 10 candles in total, the shadows that surround us add a sense of solemnity to this lodge room, which in turn, intimates the seriousness of the work being carried out within. Silence, and then a single voice alone penetrating the aural void, commanding the attention due his office. Periods of reflection, introspective music, crisp and clean floor work, the chain of union. These are some of the things that Templum Fidelis has incorporated into it's ritual, which in turn adds to the overall experience for everyone here. Those items form a collective exclamation mark on the meeting, and when combined all together, create an event which is greater than the sum of all of its individual parts combined.

This divine synergy created by this environment is not something that is elusive, indeed, any lodge which strives to work both to the printed word, and beyond the printed word, can succeed in adding so much more to their own ritual. Indeed, sometimes it is hard to pinpoint exactly what may make a Masonic meeting successful, because I have experienced nights where poor degree work has gone mostly unnoticed because there was something else going on that evening...something enchanting, mysterious, but hard to pinpoint. Likewise, I have seen near word perfect degree work that has left me unfulfilled, and wanting. What's interesting, and what speaks to the intensely personal nature of Freemasonry is that whatever I may feel at any given moment in a lodge room may be completely different than what Bro. McDonald or Bro. Hogeboom are feeling, for example.

For my demonstration a few minutes ago, I purposely used a piece of ritual from the first degree to emphasize one of my earlier comments, which was that the Ceremony of Initiation is the most important ceremony that a Mason will ever experience. This is not an understatement, and I would surmise that the moment that you were restored to the blessing of material light while kneeling at the altar is a moment that you vividly

remember to this day. As all degree work is important, and the first degree immensely so, the degree team composed by the Worshipful Master of the lodge must be comprised of master workman, each of which in possession of the three keys I mentioned earlier for the piece of ritual they are performing. The Worshipful Master is the coach of the degree team, and the respective Deacon is the quarterback of the ceremony.

Henry Ford said “Whether you think you can or you can’t, you’re probably right.” It is not the place of the member of the lodge to determine if they are qualified to perform a specific piece of degree work. That responsibility falls firmly on the shoulders of the man sitting in the Chair of King Solomon.

When putting together a degree team, the Worshipful Master must treat it like it is the Superbowl. His lineup must consist of the best person slotted in for each piece of work. This isn’t a wedding where the bride and groom need to worry about upsetting someone’s feelings if they are placed at a table too far away from the head table. No quarter should be given for the history or perceived customs of the Lodge (oh, Bro. Bob always does the secret work in the first), or gimmicks such as third cousins twice removed from another jurisdiction doing a piece of the work because he is related to the candidate (unless of course he has proven competency in the work to be done). The Worshipful Master must have the fortitude to stand up to the establishment, and do what’s best for the initiate. Remember, and I cannot stress this enough, the Ceremony of Initiation is the most important ceremony a Mason will ever be exposed to. A well executed, and proficiently completed degree will catch the initiate’s attention, and give them a goal to strive towards for their own work, be it memorization or ritual. We are, to some extent, a product of our environment. Just as baby Issac’s journey to describing the Three Laws of Motion, and baby Albert’s journey to discovering the theory of General Relativity were each likely influenced by each of their first experiences in science, so too can an initiate’s first experience in Freemasonry lead them either to the exalted office of Grand Master, or out the door after three meetings.

As I have previously mentioned, degree work, which is a subset of our ritual, is our most important tool in the education of our members. Without effective degree work early in the initiate’s journey, the probability of retaining that Mason through all three degrees drops considerably. As I look here at the northeast corner of the Lodge, I am proud that in the young life of this lodge, we have retained 100% of our initiates, and I say without doubt that this is can be attributed to the ritual of Freemasonry in general, and this Lodge in particular. These four brothers were exposed to our ritual from before the moment they signed their application. They had the opportunity to observe the humanistic actions of their eventual sponsors, and from there, their exposure to our

ritual continued through the investigation process, leading up to their initiation, and their first exposure to degree work.

We all, every one in this room, not only want what's best for our craft, but we also want to get the best out of the craft. In this paper, I have tried to describe what I think are the important elements in our ritual which allow us to achieve that important Masonic goal...to create the experience that will take a good man and make him better. As in science, where we must take the right combination of individual components, and through experimentation, achieve a desired goal, so it is in Freemasonry. We start with the constants – the book of The Work, the tome within which our written ritual resides – the Worshipful Master, the quarterback of our lodge – and our physical environment, the Lodge room. To that, we add the variables – our ritualists, whom deliver the degree work under the guidance and instruction of the Worshipful Master – the esoteric components, which are unique to every lodge – and a pinch of that something special, which none of us can ever really put our fingers on. In the end, when we reach our ultimate goal and the ritual is conveyed just as it should be, all of the physical contrivances that go into creating the atmosphere disappear, the egos of the men giving and receiving The Work melt, and the presence of something outside of our physical selves is shared. Magic happens.