

Humor and the Masonic Speaker

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Humor is a mighty serious business. Professional comedians of stage, radio, television and films are notoriously unhappy. Most of them spend a considerable amount of time having their own ulcers treated. But they get the laughs from their audiences.

Humor almost defies definition. It is better felt than read. The Oxford Universal English Dictionary defines humor as "the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing." It is one of those heaven-sent gifts which releases strain and pent-up feelings; creates a sense of ease and pleantry; breaks down barriers and establishes a "common denominator." How important it is, then, that we should understand and use this vital aid in public speaking, and particularly in Masonic speaking.

Few aspects, if any, of public speaking pay more handsome dividends than the judicious use of humor. It will amply repay every Masonic Speaker if he takes the time to acquire the faculty by learning the principles and practicing the art, even although story-telling may not seem "in character" with his personality. Remember, eminently successful comedians, professional or amateur, don't conform to any standard pattern. Who knows? A Bob Hope may repose in your breast (we hope!).

The great virtue of humor is that it humanizes a speech, helps to condense it (through the device of using apt illustrations) and if well done, leaves a favorable and lasting impression. Recall any speech you have thoroughly enjoyed. Was it not one which had its full quota of choice humor? Yet are not more speeches at our Festive Board like Charlemagne's sword – long and flat? Let's be sure we see humor, as applied to Public Speaking – especially Masonic speaking – in clear perspective. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Speakers should indelibly impress on their minds the fact the prime purpose of introducing humor is to give the audience a speedy appreciation of the point which they intend to develop.

The humor value of jokes and anecdotes is very secondary. It is what follows that's important. We are concerned primarily with Masonic stories or, more correctly, stories suitable for Masonic occasions. It is well to remember, therefore, that in our ceremonies a quasi-religious atmosphere obtains with prayers to the Deity. For this to be followed with doubtful stories would be to debase the whole affair and render it to a hollow mockery. "Sexy" jokes have no place in Freemasonry, nor do narratives which even border on the risqué. Take as your touchstone the rule of the conscientious journalist, "When in doubt, leave it out."

The selection of a story will depend on –

- The type of individual
- His ability to relate it to the occasion
- The material which the speaker has available.

The story selected should coincide with the intellectual level, sympathy, experience and interest of the audience. Equally important is the need to have the material in keeping with the spirit of the occasion.

Religious stories are dangerous unless handled with considerable discretion. Men of many religions meet on common ground in the rich fellowship of Freemasonry. You may unintentionally hurt the feelings of some Brother of a different religious persuasion to your own – particularly a member of a minority group. But don't interpret this as a taboo on good, clean thrust-and-parry between representatives of different denominations, which is the very soul of the spirit of Freemasonry, especially at the Festive Board.

Locating the story for the occasion is unquestionably the most difficult task of all. Only the heaven-sent raconteur who has a life-time of yarn-spinning behind him, and is blessed with a high intellect, wide education, broad experience and a prodigious memory, can dovetail the appropriate story into his speech spontaneously.

The apt joke or quotation has generally to be manufactured. True, you may find the basic elements, the germ of the idea or, to use Masonic parlance, the rough ashlar. They will, however, require to be smoothed, squared and polished before they will be useful in your speech "architecture," and even then they must fit.

Ability to come to light with the correct story at the right time will depend on four things:

- Being constantly vigilant and ever on the lookout for the material.
- Carefully recording humorous matter or situations immediately after they are heard, read, viewed or experienced (a blunt pencil is better than a sharp memory). No matter how abbreviated the note, jot it down without delay, anywhere (even on the tablecloth or your

shirt sleeve). You can always get another good tablecloth or shirt, but possibly not a good new joke!

- Reviewing these rough notes at regular intervals, and classifying and crossindexing them.
- Refreshing your memory by reviewing your notebook regularly and endeavoring to "make a daily advancement."

As it is possible that you will be called upon some time or another to make speeches in the lodge or Masonic function, it is profitable to prepare a stock of material for such occasions.

Never tell a story which does not strike you as being extremely funny. Don't select your anecdotes because they got a laugh for the other fellow. Unless you enjoy a story – unless it strikes you as worthwhile telling – you will not "get it across" to the audience. The audience will mirror your mood. Here are some hints:

- Specialize in the kind of story you tell best. Unless you are at home with a dialect, give it a wide berth. Enlarge, improve and switch to the class with which you are most familiar (Hebrew, Irish, Scotch, Dad and Dave, etc.)
- Become an authority and learn the lingo of the type selected. Familiarize yourself with their expressions, their habits, their reactions, then when you tell the story it will be truly authentic. Your audience will be quick to sense (and applaud) those touches of realism.
- Never tell a story of which you do not approve. One that makes you feel uncomfortable or undignified. The story may have been a "wow" when told by a less sensitive narrator; but it will fall flat for you unless you give it your wholehearted endorsement.

In specializing in one or two dialects you are not so limited as might at first appear. Many good stories may be switched from one dialect to another without loss of point.

Jokes run in cycles. There are few basically new ones. The danger of building your speech around a joke is that jokes travel with astounding rapidity. The woods are full of amateur speakers waiting with ghoulish glee to pounce upon a good story immediately it shows its head above the white linen of the festive table. The inevitable happens – the speaker who precedes you tells your joke. Therefore, as a general practice you will find it wise to avoid jokes and substitute anecdotes. A joke is a direct exchange of words between two individuals.

An anecdote is a short narrative of an entertaining character; a terse pithy account of some happening (usually personal or biographical).

Jokes are in their correct setting on a stage in the capable hands of two experienced actors. There is rarely enough "body" in them to make the effort worthwhile. Jokes are "patter" between two individuals. "A", known in theatrical circles as the "Feeder", and "B", the "gagster" who responds with wise-cracking answers.

Practically all jokes read better than they relate. They are too "quick" for platform use. There is no opportunity to build up the element of suspense, which is one of the most successful factors in story telling.

If you must use jokes, then a little trick which will materially help you is to turn your head on one side when speaking the words attributed to one character. When it is time for another character to speak, turn your head in the opposite direction. The audience soon "catches on"; begins to associate the eastward glance with the one character and the westward with the other. This is a stunt well-known and practiced by ventriloquists.

Anecdotes, unlike jokes, do not conform to any fixed pattern. They may be "woven" in many ways according to the speaker's style – generally he is fortified by personal experience of the incident.

Personal faux pas, incidents heard on planes, sayings of children, "howlers" heard on the radio, all of these everyday experiences make suitable anecdotes.

One of the most common mistakes is that of lifting a story bodily from the printed page and speaking it word for word. As indicated previously, a story should always be revised and made more appropriate for the occasion. Work in local names and identities. Impersonate the characters, judiciously intersperse with familiar phraseology (e.g., from the Lodge Ritual).

An audience loves the speaker who "tells one on himself." Never, however, under any circumstances, tell an anecdote in which you are the hero.

Speakers should indelibly impress on their minds the fact that the prime purpose of introducing a joke or anecdote is to give the audience a speedy appreciation of the point which he intends to develop. In other words, jokes and anecdotes are a means to an end. Their entertainment or humor value is very secondary. It is what follows that's important. Adopt the technique of the boxer and always follow up an opening speedily and effectively.

The matter of "timing" is one of the things which distinguishes the professional from the novice. Again and again the novice will "crowd his laughs," that is, he will keep right on talking at a point when a laugh may logically be expected. This smothers the demonstration and has a depressing effect on the audience. Laughter breeds laughter. The speaker pauses significantly at a likely spot. A few alert individuals titter appreciatively, the group "catch the point" and delighted with their ability to see what it is all about, howl with glee. There is born a rousing ovation where, in less skillful hands, the demonstration might never have risen to audible proportion.

Once your material is selected and you have made the necessary transitions from the printed form, the next step is to learn your story. Rehearse the tale again and again until you are very certain that you can relate it with the most telling effect.

Know the precise point at which the story will be introduced. Drift into your story quietly. Be well under way with your story before the listeners realize you are relating an anecdote.

Avoid such hackneyed introductions as "That reminds me. I must tell you a funny yarn." (The audience may have different ideas.) Glide gracefully into the tale.

Every Lodge organization, club, etc., has its "Stars" and "Notorious" members. Generally, it is competent to use one of them as your "Aunt Sally." They'll generally relish it – particularly if you have forewarned them of what you propose to say, and have obtained their approval (or know them so intimately that you know they can "take it").

- Tell only those stories which strike you as being really funny and will not embarrass you or your audience.
- Make your selection thoughtfully for each occasion.
- Master the story to every detail.
- Know just how and where you are going to tell it.
- Tell your story without a hackneyed introduction.
- Build up the element of suspense as you go along, without making the story involved and tedious.
- Adhere to these rules, have plenty of practice, and you will "lay them in the aisles . "

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