

Ritual In Freemasonry

By Kenneth Aldridge

We again thank M. W Bro. Kenneth Aldridge PGM and GS Grand Lodge of Quebec for preparing a Short Talk Bulletin (See also 8-88 Ancient Symbolic Penalties). The Ritual is always a significant part of Freemasonry and those delivering it to the Candidate deserve special thanks. This STB not only talks about the importance of Ritual but the significant role played by those delivering it!

Probably nothing has so mystified Mason and non-Mason alike as the concept of Masonic Ritual. To some non-Masons it is an intriguing mystery deserving of a surreptitious search so as to discover the innermost secrets of Freemasonry.

The extent to which some non-Masonic witch hunters have gone to discover and reveal the true meaning of Masonic Ritual is worthy of a separate paper. For the purpose of this paper, however, suffice it to observe that Masonic Ritual has an uncommon fascination both within the Masonic Order and without.

Let us examine Ritual as we see it in Freemasonry. First let us determine the true purpose of Ritual. The most obvious point to be discovered in a study of any Ritual is that it is a teaching system by which a student may be taught and when the student has learned, the student may then become a teacher, always with a constant result as the objective.

Rituals are not the exclusive domain of Freemasonry. Any institution, whether religious, military, governmental, social or fraternal, may and does use forms of ritual to relate to former events; to maintain continuity with former times; to teach, but above all to unify. The overriding benefit of ritual is that it is a prescribed form of activity which at once unifies the participant and the observer. A religious liturgy is a suitable example of the unification of participant and observer. The participants and observers, being aware of the prescribed form, are unified in the activity from previous experiences with the written ritual. Ritual provides an intellectual link between participant and observer. In fact, our use of ritual is so intellectually involving that the only observer to Masonic Ritual is the candidate, since all others are either active or passive participants. Hence, ritual is, or ought to be, an unifying experience. I said ritual ought to be an unifying experience which must indicate there are times when it is not. When then might it not be unifying?

An occasion that comes readily to mind is when a person selected to perform some of the work demonstrates a disrespectful lack of preparation. In the pursuit of his allotted task the brother extemporizes to make his way through his assignment. The results are manifold. Firstly, the candidate has received something less than that for which he paid. The extemporized work may have conjured in the mind of the candidate a faulty perception of the lesson being taught.

These are minor examples of how incorrectly presented ritual deviates from its intent. In time the candidate will hopefully have sufficient exposure to correctly presented ritual that he will fully understand the essential message. Yet some of the desirable effects of ritual are lost. For example, lost for all time is the opportunity to make a proper first impression.

Equally important, we have not delivered to the candidate the very best degree to which he was entitled nor have we given to the candidate a rebate for a faulty degree.

Also lost is that sense of unity, or as I previously described, intellectual unification.

Extemporaneous ad libs, fabrications or any failure which is evidence of lack of preparation causes those following the work to become mentally separated from the work. Their thoughts move now to more mundane concerns. Some of those concerns might be wondering why more preparation was not exercised; we might be moved to think we could have done so much better; we might wonder why the presenter had not requested our assistance.

In some cases we might find some of the members making mental notes to take the erring ritualist to task. Whatever the change in mental attitude, it is clear that there has been a cleavage introduced between the presenter of the ritualistic work and those who have been following. The followers have been side tracked from the uplifting unifying ceremonies in which they were attuned, to mundane and lackluster negative thoughts.

Having said all this, let us keep in mind that ritual is a compilation of prescribed thoughts, words and actions. It is deserving of the most careful preparation and attention to detail. Any expeditious departures destroy the ritualistic journey we had embarked upon with all present and bring us into just another room with other people who also become aware of the lack of preparedness.

Obviously what I have been trying to outline is a superhuman effort in perfection. Without dwelling too long on the fact that we are all merely human and therefore do fall occasionally a little short of perfection, we must nonetheless never allow lack of preparation to be an excuse for human imperfection.

Because we are human we must also examine the human side of a well prepared ritualist. What, if any, is the difference between an error caused by nerves, distractions, excitement, emotion and those caused by lack of preparation? To the observer the difference is readily apparent and the result is significantly different. Errors by a well prepared ritualist awaken feelings of understanding and compassion. When an honest error occurs either by stress or distraction, the thought process of the observers and participants are positive thoughts whereby the central

concern is one of wondering how to help rather than rebuke. The orientation of the concerns has a completely different thrust. Lack of preparation evokes critical negative thoughts, thoughts of chastisement or castigation. Errors which are evinced as due to stress evoke positive supportive thoughts. Surely then, in full cognizance of our human imperfections, we should so prepare ourselves that when we err it will never be due to lack of preparation.

It may be said then that ritual as we know it and use it has an inherent ability to exploit our human foibles to promote brotherhood or destroy it. We can come to this conclusion here without even discussing any specific working – be it the Ancient York Rite ritual or the Emulation ritual. What we have outlined is that generic term RITUAL, regardless of the form it takes or the specific words, actions or symbols used in its presentation.

That leads some of our votaries to state that the specifics in a ritual are not as important as the thoughts we are trying to portray. It is precisely that impression that leads to the lack of preparedness I have been trying to highlight. Of course, the words as set down are important. It matters not one whit if the words, actions, etc. are different under different workings or rites. It does matter that the words, actions, etc. contained within a specific ritual be adhered to as closely as humanly possible. We already know the Masonic legends are essentially the same within all regular ~rand Lodges and regular Masonic workings. It follows then that while our ritual may not be the same as other rituals, our lodge, whichever lodge it may be, has been authorized to use a specific form of ritual and none other. It is that specific ritual that binds us into a brotherhood with all others that have preceded us in that lodge as well as those who will follow us. On that premise we conclude that OUR ritual is deserving of the very best and near perfect rendition any one of us is called upon to perform.

It may therefore be said correctly that reasonable, rational Masons find that Masonic Rituals are an important link in the brotherhood process. We must nonetheless understand that quite the opposite effect may result when Masonic Ritual is treated as the end all and be all of Freemasonry. When we allow our perception of Freemasonry to be centered on the ritual rather than on the lessons taught by the ritual, we misread its essential characteristic. Far too often we find what we might term "Ritual Vultures". These are Masons whose only purpose is to go to Masonic meetings, whether in their lodge or elsewhere, for the sole pleasure of pointing out the errors of others. Sometimes it is necessary for these birds of prey to strain every fibre of their being to find a fault. Yet find fault they do! Faults which are essentially of no consequence and which are recognized by all as caused by a momentary distraction.

Our birds of prey do one of two things:

a) To show their superior knowledge they immediately provide an audible correction for all to hear and so distract the brother doing the work, as well as the candidate. The lodge room is suddenly filled with all manner of dissimilar and uninspiring thoughts; or

b) the bird of prey enters into a state of excitement – he can hardly contain his pleasure that he will shortly have the opportunity to destroy any feeling of accomplishment enjoyed by the brother who performed the work.

A sad case of ritual becoming more important than the lessons the ritual presents.

To summarize, let us understand that Masonic Ritual is an important element of our craft and one deserving of flawless presentation. Let us also understand, however, that we are all capable of error. When we are compelled to draw attention to some apparent departure from the proper form the occasion should be used as a vehicle to promote brotherhood. This means that, except for corrections made in rehearsals, all other corrections should be done in private and in a supportive manner so that the erring brother senses a feeling of kind assistance rather than unyielding criticism.

Let us accept the fact that Masonic Ritual should never be used as a means to embarrass anyone. Masonic Ritual is an excellent method to develop poise and composure when addressing groups. One who has overcome the tensions of rendering a portion of ritual where every word is known by most listeners has the ability to speak at ease to a group of listeners who do not know what words are to be used.

Even if it is necessary for a brother to be prompted on each word, for valid reasons other than lack of preparation, he should be able to experience the marvelous feeling of support flowing to him as he makes his way through the part as all others have done before him. Help the ritualist grow in poise, composure and intellect, then surround him with fraternal love and affection for he will then be your brother. Such is an integral part of Masonic Ritual.

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