

ROLE OF RITUAL IN FREEMASONRY

In our individual lives it is appropriate that from time to time we should mentally distance ourselves from some of the well-established habits and every-day routine of our daily lives, and take an objective view of some of these routines. Sometimes when we do a truly objective analysis in our minds of some of these things, we may find that one or more of the things we do could possibly enhance our lives if they were done a little differently. This is true of the role ritual plays in the life of a Freemason.

Before we were admitted into Masonry, we did not know what was meant by the term "ritual". If you were very fortunate, during your ceremony of Initiation, you would not have received the impression that those performing the ceremony were in fact reciting something which was written down in a book. During the ceremony, after you were in a position to look around you and observe the W.M., or the Brother delegated by him, speaking to you in a friendly and fluent way, your attention would have become more focused on the meaning of what the speaker was saying, and you would not have got the impression that he was reading something to you from a book.

Unfortunately this is the ideal which is very seldom achieved. Speaking personally, my entire Masonic career has been chartered by the fact that I was one of the fortunate ones. The PM who delivered the final charge to me did it so effortlessly, and with such sincerity, that when he finished, it seemed to be etched in my mind. I thought he was giving me some fatherly advice after the ceremony had been concluded.

Before we consider the role of the Ritual in Freemasonry, let us think about what we are setting out to do when we initiate a candidate into our Order. We have satisfied ourselves that he is a suitable person to be admitted as a member of our ancient fraternity, and we want to impress upon him the honour we have conferred on him by accepting him into our midst, and to clearly impart to him the meaning of our ceremony, and what is required of him as a member of our Order. It is paramount that the Candidate fully understands everything he is being told during the ceremony.

This is where our Ritual comes in. It is the Masonic road map which enables the driver to transport the passenger from somewhere to some other place of which the passenger has only heard, but he does not really know

where he is going. However he has been assured that the place to which he is going is a good place to be. So it is essential that the driver not only knows how to read the map, but can explain to the passenger things that happen along the way during his journey. Nothing should be allowed to happen which would make the passenger apprehensive or uncomfortable which would tend to lessen his appreciation and understanding of those things to which he is exposed during his journey.

So in order to achieve the objective of making sure that our candidates fully understand and appreciate their ceremonies, it is essential that we impart the meaning of what is contained in the words of our ritual.

Our Ritual may be said to be in two parts, narrative and participatory. The narrative parts are informative and educational and explain traditional histories. The other parts involve the participation of the candidate. These would include the obligations, and the examinations by the Wardens

In delivering ritual in which the candidate is required to participate by repetition, it is essential that the words that the candidate is asked to repeat constitute a meaningful phrase or sentence. Delivering the words in a disjointed and staccato fashion does not convey the import of what is intended to be conveyed by the words. The smoothness of a ceremony, and its impact on the candidate, can be greatly improved if the deacon and the W.M. (or his delegate) choose the breaks in their sentences correctly. The ability of candidates to understand and repeat phrases, varies from candidate to candidate, and is often determined by how nervous or uncomfortable he is. For instance, if a candidate is not comfortable when kneeling to take an obligation, he will tend to be more concerned for his physical instability than with what he is being told.

When a W.M. or Deacon is learning his work, being able to memories the passages as they are written, is only the first part of preparing themselves to perform the ceremony. Having learned to recite the work as if delivering a monologue, he then has to decide on the size of the segments which he will present to the candidate for him to repeat. It is very rare for a candidate not to be able to repeat a sentence if it is delivered to him in a deliberate and unhurried way. For instance, when questioned by a warden, it is not too much to ask for a candidate to repeat after the deacon: "The grip or token of an EAM" in one sentence. This is a straightforward answer to the question and is better than saying "The grip or token (pause) . . . of an EAM" When

this short sentence is split, the candidate is repeating words - he repeats the first few words, then listens to hear what next he has to say, but the real import of the answer to the question was not immediately impacted on him. Similarly, "The first regular step in Masonry" as compared with; "The first regular step (pause) . . . in Masonry".

When a candidate is asked to repeat - "at my Initiation" as a phrase, it means nothing. But if he is told to repeat - "at my Initiation I was taught to be cautious", he has said something which has meaning and directly relates to what follows (English working).

While GL has given us the ritual that we must use, they have left it flexible as to where we should pause in delivering it. It is therefore imperative that, before we deliver any part of the ritual in an actual ceremony, we learn exactly what the words are intended to convey. The import of the ceremonial is paramount. Sometimes the sound of words can trip off the tongue in a familiar and smooth sounding fashion which can fail to convey, or even distort, what the words are intended to mean.

I will give one example: in the MM obligation we usually hear - "answer and obey ,,, all lawful signs and summonses . . . sent to me by a MMN []". This sounds fine but how do you send a sign? The correct delivery is "answer and obey all lawful signs, and summonses sent to me by a MM []."

The inclusion or omission of a comma can materially alter the import of what is said. The nuances of expression and pausing will do the same thing. There is a part of the Exhortation in the 3rd Degree which comes to mind. The difference is more noticeable in the English ritual, but is also applicable to our ritual of the GLOCPO. It involves treating a series of words either as a qualifying clause, or as a sentence in itself. In the 3rd Degree which I received, I was told in essence that in order to exercise the active principles of universal beneficence and charity, that I would be best able to do this when I was experiencing distress, was by extending solace to others in their distress. The wording in the Ritual was as follows; "It instructed you, in the active principles of universal beneficence and charity, to seek the solace of your 'own' distress by extending relief and consolation to your fellow creatures in the hour of 'their' affliction.

This was before the Emulation Lodge of Improvement had issued any printed ritual for Emulation workers. When they did issue a printed ritual,

they omitted the comma which now changes the import of what I received in my degree without changing a single word. They now split that part of the Exhortation into two separate and distinct parts. The candidate is now instructed in the active principles of universal beneficence and charity as a separate item, and to seek the solace of his own distress by extending relief and consolation to your fellow creatures as another item. So in delivering the corresponding part in our Canadian ritual, if the brother delivering it pauses after "you", and treats the words "in the proper exercise of universal beneficence and charity", as a clause, he will convey a different meaning as to if he did not pause after 'you'. This is a fine point in the delivery of ritual and illustrates the importance for the brother delivering the ritual to understand the meaning of what he is telling the candidate. This is the only way he will be able to impart that meaning to the candidate.

Earlier on I said that ideally a candidate should not get the impression that what was being said to him was from a book, and that you would have been fortunate if that was how it was for you when you got your first degree. I was one of those fortunate ones who had an excellent 1st Degree. When I subsequently learned that what the PM had said to me was written down, and he had not just been speaking to me from his own knowledge and experience, it started me on a continuing study and appreciation of Masonic ritual, and a personal conception as to how it should be delivered. My love affair with ritual embraces rituals from three different Masonic jurisdictions. The difference in wording between all these rituals only serve to point out that there are no basic differences in Masonry, but these differences in fact facilitate a better understanding of our ceremonies by explaining them differently.

An excellent example of how we can use different symbolic explanations of things we do in our degrees may be taken from the ritual used in some Scottish lodges. In our English and Canadian rituals in the 2nd Degree we give much the same symbolism to the winding stair, and we relate this to FCs going into the middle chamber to receive their wages. However nothing is said about the actual winding of the stair. The Scottish ritual uses the same TB to illustrate their symbolism, but the symbolism is different from ours. As this is a very beautiful symbolism, I would like to quote it at length.

"In this tracing board, we find symbolically the further progress you made in our science. Here is depicted the entrance to KS's T., which in Masonic

allegory, is the world purified by the Shekinah, or Divine Presence. The world of the profane is out with the temple, the world of the initiated lies within its sacred walls. Thus the apprentice, having passed within the porch, and having been born into the world of Masonic light, has begun his Masonic life.

"At the very entrance to the temple, we note two pillars, adorned with network, which, from the closeness of its meshes, indicates unity; the lily-work, whose whiteness is emblematic of purity; and with the pomegranates, the exuberance of whose seeds, denotes fertility. We thus learn that in all human affairs, strength and stability are only to be obtained by unity of purpose, purity of heart and fertility of mind.

"These two pillars likewise illustrate a great lesson, which applies equally to the natural and to the moral worlds, namely the equilibrium of the opposites. In nature almost everything has its meaning expounded and its value accentuated by having something with which to contrast it. Thus were there no darkness we would have no conception of the value of light. If there were no lofty peaks, there would be no deep valleys, and all the earth would be on one level, void of interest and beauty. So too in the moral or spiritual world, we find the same principle of balance compensation. Thus the ferocity of hate is counterpoised by the tenderness of love. Hope tunes anew the broken notes of despair, while the twin pillars of birth and death flank the stage of life trodden by rich and poor alike.

"The fellow craft now finds stretching in front of him a winding stair, which teaches him that his Masonic labours have begun, and that he is setting forth on the journey of life with the great task of self-improvement before him. The faithful performance of that task involves the development of all his intellectual faculties, together with the moral and spiritual elevation of his character. Such, however, is only attained by toil and difficulty, which are symbolized by the winding of the stair.

"You will note that the winding stair is made up of three flights, consisting of three, five and seven steps; fifteen all told. The bottom flight represents mind, as the basis of all creation in nature and art. The second flight is emblematic of matter, as being the medium through which mind communicates with mind. The third typifies form, as the manifestation of mind on matter. "The winding stair has likewise a dual interpretation, divine and human.

Thus three steps of the first flight represent the divine wisdom, power and goodness and also the human reason, will and emotion. The five steps of the second flight are the five natural forms of matter, fire, water, earth, air and ether. They are also the five human senses wherewith these are perceived, namely feeling hearing, seeing, tasting and smelling. The seven steps of the last flight are the manifestations of the divine mind in the seven forms of life, lichen, vegetable, reptile, fish, bird, beast and man.

They also represent the seven liberal arts and sciences with which a knowledge of these manifestations is comprehended, the mathematical, physical and moral sciences and the arts of rhetoric, painting, music and architecture. The great lesson here depicted is to use all reason, will and emotion, all sense and matter, all art and science, as steps by which to ascend to the sanctuary of truth.

"The fifteen steps comprising the winding stair likewise have a significance for us in as much as the numerical value of the Hebrew characters for the name of the Deity is fifteen, so that the winding stair represents T.G.G.O.T.U. Himself. Thus in life, when wearied by toil and confronted with difficulties, we may feel that we rest upon, and are sustained by the Divine Presence.

"The winding of the stair also teaches us that the end of our labours is not in sight. Strengthened by faith and sustained by hope, we press onwards to the unseen goal. That for which we strive is hidden from us, until we prove our worthiness to receive it.

"Having ascended the winding stair, the fellow of craft passes into the middle chamber to receive his reward. The reward, greater than that of corn, or oil, or wine, or specie, consists of that revelation of divine truth, to which his progress has entitled him. Whilst in the middle chamber, his attention is arrested by certain characters, usually depicted in a fellow craft lodge by the letter G, which alludes to God, T.G.G.O.T.U. to whom we must all submit and whom we ought most cheerfully to obey."

When the foregoing is properly delivered it lends real meaning to the 2nd Degree to the Scottish Mason receiving that Degree. It also calls for a greater degree of skill in delivering ritual by the brother who does this part to ensure that the beautiful English and the import thereof is adequately imparted.

The object of this lecture is to alert brethren to the importance of the ritual, and to stimulate them to a deeper understanding of what our ritual is really about.

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