

DEGREES AND DEGREES OF WORK

R.W. Bro. TOM ARAB, ARGUS LODGE No 133, GLNS

It's very difficult to come up with a topic when called upon to speak on Freemasonry. Oh there are many subjects at your disposal. But, when I'm speaking, there is often a nagging suspicion within me that the subject is dull, boring, has probably been covered many times in the past, and is therefore not very interesting to my listeners.

So a person spends a lot of time wondering about a topic that is common to us all. We have a lot in common due to the fact that we are all Freemasons. But one thing just as common to all of us, maybe more so than the fact that we are called Freemasons is that we all, everyone of us here, received the three most important degrees in all aspects of Masonry - E.G., F.C. and M.M. There is no doubt about it, everyone here one way or another has received these degrees.

So that, brothers, is the topic I chose to bore you with this evening, "Degrees and Degrees of Work". Actually, the topic should be something I said a few seconds ago, "One Way or Another". That's the key brothers, one way or another. We were not born Masons, we became Freemasons, through degrees, one way or another.

But, how did we receive these three degrees? What do we remember that was outstanding, other than the fact that we got it between the eyes and saw the light? Do we remember a funny story that was told by one of the orators after the degrees were finished? Do we remember the color or maybe costumes or that everyone was wearing a funny apron? What I am getting at brothers is the fact that unfortunately not too many of us were left with a remembrance of what we heard at the time of the degrees and the manner in which it was presented. Hence the topic - Degrees of Work - good or bad.

It would be great to have all of our degrees carried out in an unforgettable manner, wouldn't it? But that's been the goal of all Masonic lodges for many years and unfortunately, it will remain a dream for many years to come. But, we can all help towards the attainment of that goal in our own little ways.

We have the ability to memorize. some more than others. But we all have done memory work at one time or another, when we proved our degrees.

How well we proved up was entirely up to ourselves and the amount of preparation we did at the time.

And the same goes for putting on the degrees. We must prepare ourselves individually whether it's as a conductor, a prompter, a lecturer or an instructor.

We should always be thinking about the candidate, not of ourselves. That will look after itself, but of the impression that we are making upon the candidate. What is he hearing? What is he thinking? Do we have his attention? The only way that we can every hope to accomplish this is by working on our presentations. We could start with self discipline, force ourselves to practice, and after a while it would be an automatic effort.

WE should do this in two stages, memorize and then perfect. We memorize our part then we practice to perfect it. We should try not to make it sound as if it's being read. If we put some feeling into it, it can make all the difference. You have to be a bit of an actor sometimes to deliver this special feeling, and of course, this comes from practice. Sometimes we feel embarrassed to say certain words. We become self-conscious or feeling foolish and maybe being made fun of. But we have to strive to put this aside. As an example, take the apron presentation in the first degree. What can we do with it. It's really the first lecture that the candidate receives in Freemasonry without a hoodwink. It's the first he sees or hears other than the instructions at the altar. This could be a very long lasting impression on the individual. You know, we can take written words and make them sound as if they were our own. Or we can make them sound as if we are reading them. Now if we have to read the words (and by the way the only words that are permitted to be read in open lodge from this book are the words of the edict prior to the drama portion of the Third Degree). But if we are caught short and find at the last minute that for some reason or another a portion of the work has to be read, it still requires practice. At least read it over a few times. Mouth the words silently, try to give it some feeling. Impress the candidate with our feelings towards what we are teaching them even while we are learning it ourselves. And we are continually learning.

Okay! Let's have some on the job training.---Read Charge--- Now let's assume that you have been asked to make the apron presentation. Let's also assume that you have been given lots of notice before the time of the degree. First, you have to read it over a few times, quietly as well as out loud, until you understand the content of the charge. We sometimes think we understand it all because we received the degrees. But we don't. Think about it. Have you ever sat back and listened to a lecture or charge and after hearing a certain line or two,

think to yourself, "I didn't know that". We hear, but we don't hear. It's all in the presentation Brothers and as I said earlier, this makes the impression.

So assume we have read it over a sufficient number of times and we understand the content. Then of course we memorize it in our own individual way. Once this is done, we work on it. WE try to perfect it.

WE give it the proper speed and personalization.

Even though we are not supposed to make changes in the work book, I sometimes do. But I like to think that the changes are for the better.

Sometimes there is a word or two that we can't pronounce correctly or we have trouble retaining it and we stumble over them or we grope for words.

Try replacing the words with ones that have the same meaning but are easier for you to retain. Sometimes you have to ad lib a couple of lines, but not too many, if any, notice because you understand the story and are able to tell part of it in your own way. It's like telling a funny story, you may not tell it as it was told to you but you get the point across to your listeners. The most important thing is the feeling you are passing on to the candidate.

So now brothers, let's try the apron presentation from memory, a little personalizing and some feeling. ---Give Charge--- Alright, which was more impressive? The one we read or the one we memorized? You can only add to or take away bits and pieces of Masonic work and still deliver the same meaning by working on it. Prepare yourself, practice. And the same applies to all the degree work whether the part is big or small. Do it well and to do that with the feeling needed to impress the words upon the candidate, it takes preparation.

I would like to think that in the example I just used in the form of the apron presentation, that I gave it some feeling, that I held the attention of the recipient, that it was a bit personalized by adding the word brother a few extra times. But most of all Brothers, I would like to think that the new Brother will remember the words and think about their meaning. You can tell if you have his attention by his face. Watch his eyes. Be sure and direct your words to him. Don't continually look at the floor or to his left or his right. Look at him. Hold his or their attention. It's easier when there are two or more candidates as you can look from one to the other and you don't become too self conscious.

I had five Brothers once. I had all but one looking at me. I paid particular attention to him by directing my words to him, but I couldn't hold him. He would sneak a glance at me, then quickly away as if he had done something wrong. I

thought that I had lost him but afterwards he told me how much he was impressed with what he had heard. Even then, he couldn't look at me. That was his nature. So don't feel bad if it happens. You never know.

What other important ingredients do we need to make a successful degree? The Master of the Lodge calls for a practice. We surprise him and show up. It's called supporting your Master. We come prepared for the practice. And by the way, we should practice our individual work outside the lodge as well as in it. You know, we memorize something over and over and, boy, we have it down pat. We go to lodge to do the work and when we start to say the same words out loud, zap! it's gone. Say your work out loud several times outside lodge hours.

How about prompting? You're giving your work and you're stuck for a word. In many cases this happens. The prompter is there is one, and there should be, whispers the word, "A" or "IN" or "THE". He whispers. You didn't hear him and then someone else gives you a word? Usually the wrong one also in a whisper. By then you're really mixed up. But that's nothing. Think about the candidate, he's hoodwinked and doesn't know that this is memory work. So then Brothers, just what is his impression of the mumbled whispers?

Brothers, if you are the prompters, speak up loud and clear. Don't be afraid. Give the lecturer several words to get him back on the right track. As an example, the Master is giving the first degree obligation.

At the altar he gets to the part in paragraph two - Furthermore I promise and swear that I will not write, indite, print, paint, etc., and he says "Furthermore I do promise and wear that I" and he forgets, which happens no matter how prepared you are, and after a long pause the prompter whispers "will". Instead he should say loud and clear, "that I will not write, indite." Give him a good start. There should also be an understanding between the prompter and the degree team. Don't prompt too soon. Some lecturers have their own pace. They pause for effect not because they forget and if you prompt too quickly or before they say something like "light" or "word", it may throw them way off..

Also Brothers, it's important to let the Master know in plenty of time if possible that you will be unable to attend a degree in which you have a part. Give him a chance to find a replacement and give that replacement a fair chance to work on his "Degree---and his Degree of Work".