

RITUAL – IT'S IMPORTANCE AND MEANING

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Foreword

From time to time people need supplemental information that reminds or reinforces. In my own humble view it seemed important to submit this paper as increasingly the Freemasonic organization comes under pressure to ratify its ritual so as to make it more palatable for today's potential candidates. Additionally, Freemasons, be they associated with Craft Lodge, Scottish Rite or Royal Arch bodies have no comprehension of what ritual 'is,' or its possible function. The lack of understanding coupled with a desire to ratify, is most likely to precipitate change or an attempt to change the ritual in the name of fashion or utility, that is, if we don't consistently seek to educate and encourage knowledge. This is nothing new as previous Masonic authors have written that the Masonic revivalists of 1717 diluted and reformulated "The Old Freemasonry [which was] the exclusive patrimony of men of a philosophic turn of mind, people who "speculated;" but Inigo Jones diluted it; then in 1717 the newly founded Grand Lodge of London went further in that direction, simplifying its Ritual and extending its membership so as to include all sorts and conditions of men." Today, we find that one particular subordinate arm of Masonry seeks to divest itself of its roots, without which, would simply in time, become yet another service club. Would this action be occurring if all members had an intimate knowledge of the Craft and more specifically the ritual? I think not. Unfortunately, all too often, we find Masons performing like automatons; the majority blindly regurgitates the Work without being conscious of the value or meaning of the ritual they perform. On the one hand, to the materialist, the Work may seem pointless or vacant of any inherent 'value,' on the other, the philosophical or spiritually minded Mason may find the Work pregnant with meaning which appeals to the heart or the mind. It was not my intent to study the voluminous symbolic nature of Masonic ritual or the historical evolution of ritual, I leave that to the Masonic scholars and the 'authentic school,' this paper editorializes the need to understand the meaning of ritual itself. Over the years, many Masonic writers have lamented the loss of the secrets of Masonry; I'm not convinced they are lost, just purposely hidden, waiting to be probed and then 'discovered' by the enlightened Brother. Our Freemasonic ritual conveys important truths and is a rich and a valuable portion of every Mason's journey toward light. The value of exploring the universal nature of ritual and its relevance to our Craft is not so much what we learn, as what we become by exposure to it. A true evolutionary path, which cannot be understated.

"The light was in the world, and the World was made by it, and the world knew it not" John 1:10

Introduction

Ritual takes many forms, it may consist of simple routines which an individual submits to on a daily basis or it may be of more complex ceremony as in marriage, graduation from a civil or military organization or a rite of passage from a boy to manhood. Rituals to which I would like to speak concern the genuine and profound mysteries of Freemasonry and its effects on the psyche or consciousness of man. Just how important is symbolic Masonic ritual to the well being of the individual and to the Craft indeed to society itself? Why do we, as intelligent and rational people submit to arcane, and perhaps what some may view as out dated or obtuse actions? What significance if any do they hold? This issue of ritual, its meaning and importance is relevant today, perhaps more so than in the past. Our global society, ever expanding, becoming homogenous in nature and activity is more concerned with the acquisition of material and the temporal satiation of the five senses than the search for meaning and its own soul. I would submit that this moment in history is more important than any before as a society once divested of its soul, its roots, becomes dangerously unsustainable and has the potential to destroy itself through ignorance or imbalance. Freemasonry as a truly ancient institution must be the vanguard of ritual, enabling its members, providing them with a positive sense of worth and of value. Indeed Freemasonry, properly functioning, sustains its brethren and the society in which it operates.

Ritual and Meaning

In Western cultures we find technological advancements and the ever present material hunger of the consumer, cultivated and perpetuated by advertising and effective marketing, the normal pattern of our existence. As an organized society we seem to be displaced or unconnected to our spirit, the sense of who and what we are, why we are here and what we are supposed to 'be.' More and more we find young people unconnected to any particular positive spiritual, religious or social activity. Thus, young people feel alienated and disassociated with the rest of society. We find the rise of gangs and the violence permeated by them due perhaps to a lack of focus or direction and this desire to be part of a group is evidence of a natural inclination to feel part of a larger whole. Ritual is especially important for young people as it provides them with a sense of connection to a larger world, think of the macabre initiations of the urban youth of Los Angeles which demands a 'ritual' act of murder or similar violent act before privilege or membership might be granted. Important or profound activities, which may cause a person to transcend his or her former thinking or pattern of behavior and cause them to enter new planes of understanding, is miserably lacking in contemporary society. Carl Jung wrote "Modern man does not understand how much his 'rationalism' (which has destroyed his capacity to respond to numinous symbols and ideas) has put him at the mercy of the psychic 'underworld.' He has freed himself from 'superstition' (or so he believes), but in the process he has lost his spiritual values to a positively dangerous degree. His moral and spiritual tradition has disintegrated, and he is now paying the price for this breakup in world-wide disorientation and dissociation." Anthropologists have often described what happens to a primitive society when its spiritual values are exposed to the impact of modern civilization. Its people lose the meaning of their lives, their social organization disintegrates, and they themselves morally decay. We are now in the same condition. But we have never really understood what we have lost,

for our spiritual leaders unfortunately are more interested in protecting their institutions than in understanding the mystery that symbols present. In my opinion, faith does not exclude thought (which is man's strongest weapon), but unfortunately many believers seem to be so afraid of science (and- incidentally of psychology) that they turn a blind eye to the numinous psychic powers that forever control man's fate. We have stripped all things of their mystery' and numinosity, nothing is holy any longer." In the ancient world, in Persia, Egypt and Greece, the Lesser and Greater Mysteries were bestowed upon the candidates through secret language, rituals of initiation, passing and raising. Ritual was considered holy and the primary way that communication between humans and powers beyond immediate human existence- the transcendent were conducted. One did not approach the transcendental powers casually, but through careful preparation, purification, special clothing, ritual movements and gestures, speech, visual representations and group interaction. Initiates were passed into a world unlike anything formerly known, a new sphere of existence, to a new dimension of awareness. Greek drama is said to have had its origins in the initiation rites of Dionysus, Egypt's prototype for initiation was Osiris and the Persian mystery religions of Mithras had their own seven degrees of initiation.

It should be observed the word mystery might have two distinct meanings. There were the Mysteries of ancient times such as the Pythagorean, Orphic, Eleusian schools where ceremonies were conducted in secret and certain philosophical knowledge as well as signs of recognition were revealed to the candidate. There were also Mysteries of the ancient building trade guilds of the Middle Ages where trades people coveted their techniques and methods. With respect to our modern mysteries within the Craft we certainly do not pass along knowledge of projective geometry, proportional mathematics and the laws of irrational numbers to our new candidates, so much as information rooted in symbolism which pertains to philosophical morality- a custom which has its roots in ancient times. Though our modern mysteries may not be so transparent as some materialistic or rational Freemasons may prefer, ideas and symbols of far older streams of Hermetic philosophy are still evident. True ritual should provide the means by which an individual can grow and transcend his immediate environment. Ritual should be a positive experience, which reflects the harmony and unifying principles of nature and of the Great Architect. Ritual provides us with purpose and meaning in all that we think, speak and do.

In 1867, the great pioneer of Egyptology Lepsius wrote: "The Book of the Dead, or the collection of the texts relating to the resurrection, the judgment, and the life in the other world, was in its essential character a book of practical instruction. Its aim was to inform the individual, intent on his spiritual welfare, about what already on earth should be known and prepared by him for his death."

Aristotle once said, "those undergoing the mysteries (teloumenoi) should not 'learn' (mathein) but should 'be affected,' 'suffer', or 'experience' (pathein)." I am not suggesting that modern Freemasonry is a lineal descendant of those ancient Mysteries found in the numerous ancient Eastern or Western cultures but is inspired by them. The revivalists of 1717 built upon ancient myths, wove symbols and allegories derived from the symbolism of King Solomon's Temple.

The etymology of the Tibetan word for 'initiation' is 'conferral of power' and within "Tibetan tradition three assumptions are made with respect to initiation: 1) The hall or room where the initiation takes place is the 'pure realm;' 2) The Lama directing the initiation is the Primordial Buddha; 3) The initiates are receiving secret oral traditions." Indeed initiation as we see from descriptions from both Asian and Western tradition alludes not to knowledge but a particular state of grace. To be initiated is to be introduced, to receive what rational thought may not understand. One may be in state of grace and be though hourly unfamiliar with theology. It is to be united and linked with primeval or natural forces, thus to be religious in the proper sense of the word (religion Latin 'religare', meaning to rebind) is to be imbued with spirit.

Masonic Ritual

The Encyclopedia of Freemasonry states: "Ritual. The mode of opening and dosing a Lodge, of conferring the degrees, of installation, and other duties, constitute a system of ceremonies, which are called the Ritual. Much of this ritual is esoteric, and, not being permitted to be committed to writing, is communicated only by oral instruction." Knowledge of ancient rituals in as much as Freemasonic rites are written can be possessed by those who seek to learn its 'secrets.' There is much that is contained within these rituals but to an outside observer it certainly would not be understood as one who has experienced it. Its modes of symbols, words and allusions to sacred geometry, cosmology, living and dying or renewal.

I recall a particular Bro. Barry Jones who spoke at a Masonic Educational Workshop and who recounted his visit to Germany and his experience of Freemasonic initiation there. He explained portions of their work which culminated in the initiate being asked to look into the V.S.L and there being a mirror placed upon it, the candidate seeing himself, was given explanation that all the secrets were to be found within himself. How does Freemasonry make a good man better? I would venture to say through one avenue, its ritual, which is a pathway to inner growth, to self-knowledge. "God said let there be light" and we find in our degrees that phrase which presupposes the expansion of the light of consciousness. Carl Jung in lending explanation to the archetypes of initiation comments those rites of initiation "relate to particular phases in the life of an individual, or of a group, and unless they are properly understood and translated into a new way of life, the moment can pass. Initiation is, essentially, a process that begins with a rite of submission (when we enter the Craft in our E.A degree-author's note), followed by a period of containment (the F.C degree-author's note), and then by a further note of liberation (M.M.-author's note). In this way every individual can reconcile the conflicting elements of his personality, he can strike a balance that makes him truly human, and truly the master of himself."

Some disturbing trends in Freemasonry today which we find concerning our ritual are 'all the way in one day' exercises which puts a large group of people through the three (or more) degrees! Another is the deliberate intent of a certain Masonic body (a North American phenomenon) to capture members from directly off the street in order to directly attack

the problem of diminishing membership. Another concern is the need or relevance of memory work. There are efforts to ratify the Work, to simplify or delete aspects of it. All of these issues are a result of one thing, ignorance, on the part of Masons who have no idea at the essence of what the Craft is and what its ritual represents. Ritual must never be subservient to money or membership numbers. Ritual must never be changed in order to accommodate people who will never try to understand or appreciate its philosophical intent. Masonic ritual must be probed and understood from a psychological and historical point of view in order to understand or appreciate its vast dimensions and great depths. To be sure many of our members have not only a lack of understanding as to what ritual is but they lack proper training to make degree work the empowering transformational experience that it should be. We have heard of the style of Continental or South American Masonry in which a candidate passes through one degree per year, the standards being very high, the education of a Mason very detailed and relevant to his becoming a Master Mason. Some Freemasons today comment upon the need to make entry more difficult and more challenging, thus elevating the standard. Prof. David Stevenson- in his *Origins of Freemasonry* writes, "craft, religious order or fraternity almost invariably included some element of ordeal (suffering fear, ridicule, or humiliation), and themes of death and rebirth were common. The functions of the ordeal were mixed. By making the transition from one to another difficult it stressed how important the change was, and increased the value of the status sought: the harder it is to gain entry to a group, the more desirable it becomes. Moreover, those who had to suffer to gain entry were more likely to be strongly committed to the group they had joined than they would otherwise have been." And further we find, "The fact that all had in a group had to undergo the same type of initiation served to create a strong bond between them." It is very interesting to find the emphasis on memorization as a communication method being as important and pervasive today as it was in the remote past. Memorization as a vehicle or characteristic of ritual as one of the seven liberal arts and sciences can be recognized as a technique being used to improve the capacity of one's memory. In ancient Greece the application of the art of memory was found to be of "particular value to orators and lawyers in memorizing long speeches, but was also seen as being of much wider application in the ages before printing, and indeed before widespread and cheap availability of a medium on which to write; a capacious and well organized memory was regarded as central to education and culture." To memorize a speech a student created in his mind a complex building with all manner of rooms furnished with images and symbols in fixed locations. He would then move through each room in a sequential manner in turn moving through a particularly crafted speech. "In the ancient world the art of memory was classified as an aspect of Rhetoric but Cicero- himself an advocate of the art- classified memory as one of the three parts of the virtue of Prudence (the others being intelligence and foresight). In the long term this had great significance for the art of memory, for the virtues defined by Cicero (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance) became accepted in the Middle Ages as the four cardinal virtues (and having fashionable prominence in operative and/or speculative Masonry- author's note). Thus in time the art of memory, identified with prudence, came to be regarded as an aspect of ethics. The work of St. Augustine added further significance to memory, for he regarded it as one of the three parts of the soul (the others being understanding and will), and taught that through exploring the memory men could find a memory image of God embedded in their own souls. What had begun as utilitarian technique for improving the memory had come to be seen as being of importance in religion not just as a valuable method of imprinting religious truths on the mind, but also as something that in itself had moral value and would lead to a knowledge of God." The man who is generally recognized as having the honour of being the creator of modern Freemasonry is William Schaw (1550-1602), appointed Master of Works by King James VI of Scotland, Schaw in his second code of statutes suggested that "all Masons be trained in the art of memory and be regularly tested in it." The art of memory was widespread throughout Renaissance Europe and no doubt influenced the later development of speculative Freemasonry. It is curious that echoes of this practice, though the technique itself may be forgotten, still remain, as the few members who exhibit the ability to deliver long ritual passages are recognized and coveted. Today, Freemasons do not question the ritual content of the three degrees itself so much as the delivery method- the actual need for memorization itself. This is a modern cultural development, and will no doubt continue to be debated as an issue in an age where the volume of information exponentially grows and time constraints abound.

There is much in our ritual that can be found as having connection to the ancient mysteries of remote cultures and also potent psychological meaning. For example, we find the winding staircase of the second degree as a symbol for the raising of one's consciousness. Moving upward, whether it be an image of a staircase or a symbol such as Jacob's Ladder, or symbolism relating to climbing a mountain to the pinnacle, signifies that Freemasonry is a progressive science, and our rituals and symbols serve this end. The rite of circumambulating around the altar connects modern Freemasonry with the ancient mysteries in which formal procession, which alluded to the course of the sun from east to west, was made with the right side of the body next to the altar. Circumambulation was from the west to the north, to the east, south, west and then north again. Such ceremonies of circumambulation were common in ancient Greece, Rome, among the Druids and the Hindus.

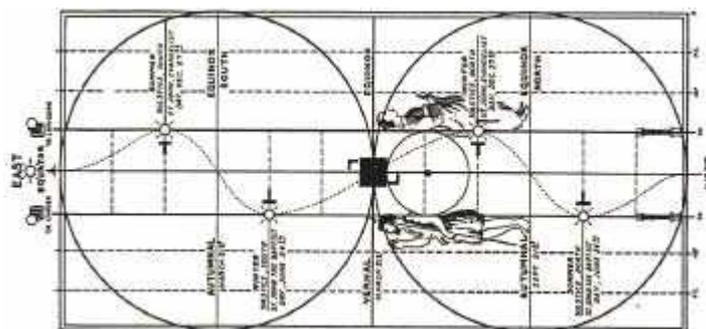


Illustration from Beyond the Pillars. "The floor of the symbolic Lodge, presented as an astronomical symbol, showing a part of the apparent course of the sun around the earth."

In the ancient Mithraic Mysteries, which stretched from Asia Minor through Central and Southern Europe to as far west as England, we find the symbolic pictorial representations of stars and constellations. The figures which accompany the tauroctony (the central figure Mithras portrayed killing the bull) are the snake, bull, scorpion, dog, raven, lion and a cup which academics have recently viewed as having parallels in groups of constellations which are visible at certain times of the year. "The Bull is paralleled by Taurus, the scorpion by Scorpius, the dog by Canis Minor, the snake by Hydra, the raven by Corvus, the lion by Leo, and the cup by Crater; in addition, the star Spica the wheat ear (the brightest star in Virgo) parallels the ears of wheat which are often shown in the tauroctony growing out of the tip of the bull's tail." The sun, the moon, the Zodiac, the planets convey images of the cosmos and played a central role in Mithraic ritual. Observe the Freemasonic ritual of today that inculcates symbolically "Astronomy is that divine art by which we are taught to read the wisdom, strength and beauty of the Almighty Creator in those sacred pages, the celestial hemisphere." A principle component of Masonic ritual involves discourse upon one of the seven liberal arts and sciences, astronomy. The lecture of the F.C. degree eloquently states the need for the candidate to be cognizant of "the phenomena arising from the annual revolution and the diurnal rotation of the earth round its own axis." To be sure the delivery of the lecture ensures the need for the adherents of Masonry to recognize the important and rudimentary astronomic concepts as in the former ritual of ancient times. Ritual brings the candidate to the realization that he is part of a vast intricate web of nature and its Creator. As a cautionary note, candidates who are not necessarily motivated by learning all the details of the lecture or fail to pay respectful attention will not gain anything out of the rituals either emotionally or intellectually.

This great respect and attention at ritual being a vehicle for discovery, be it to concepts of cosmology, the rotations of the planets and the cycles of the cosmos, to the changing of the seasons, had tremendous significance to the initiated who acted in harmony with the universe. Indeed the structures or the sites of sacred places the world over- be they the Neolithic structures of Stonehenge, England or Newgrange, Ireland; the Nazca lines of Peru; the Egyptian Pyramids of Giza or the Temple at Karnak; the Temple of Athena; the Temple complexes of the Aztecs; the Cambodian Temples of Angkor; or those of the Hindus, all were constructed with deliberation and reverence employing practical knowledge of materials, knowledge of astronomy and geography (sacred geography) and imbued with knowledge respecting the sacred principles of geometry (the use of the Golden Section for example). That man, his actions or his constructions, the world and the universe about him must all harmonize with the Great Architect and His universe, is an extremely ancient idea and finds expression through the Hermetic maxim "As above so below." Ritual always has been and must continue to be the 'road map' by which universal knowledge and philosophy revolutionizes man's spirit. This is ritual's importance and this is its vital meaning.

We find within the third degree allusion to death and renewal. Parallel to the Masonic rituals, the ancient institutions of Persia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, the Lesser and Greater Mysteries instructed neophytes in the great cycles of time and the natural world as taught through astrology (synonymous with astronomy) and philosophy. Perhaps ritual may also serve psychological function as we may find reference to psychological death to which St Paul spoke of when he remarked that "I die daily," indeed a process of 'dying to oneself.' Perhaps this may be thought of as an allusion to dying to the sensory world, a world of empty temporality and the gradual cognitive growth of a larger dimension in which one plays an intricate part. Rebirth must be preceded by a symbolic death, the drama of death initiates growth and renewal, again a very ancient ritual enacted today in our Craft. Though the concept of death may contain far less esoteric or psychological intent as Masonic scholar Bernard E. Jones writes: "What more natural than the young mason should die to his apprentice hood and rise a master? What more appropriate to symbolize this than the legend of Hiram? Let it be remembered how many legends we possess of apprentices losing their lives immediately after executing their masterpieces. There are stories of the 'Prentice Pillar' of Rosslyn Chapel, of the apprentice window of Rouen, of the apprentice bracket of Gloucester Cathedral, of the apprentice minaret of the Mosque at Damietta, and others. The truth behind those legends, is probably that the apprentice did 'die' as an apprentice immediately after executing his masterpiece. In each case, says Speth, it was the masterpiece that entitled him to promotion."

Conclusion

I tend to think that when most of us enter the Craft we respectfully submit to the demands of membership and its unusual ritual without immediately reflecting upon its meaning. Few ever make the effort to realize the historical and philosophical dimensions of Masonic ritual or what it may impart to an individual. I submit that this is most dangerous, especially when desire to change ritual, caused by our fast paced culture to make it easier to memorize or deliver more 'effectively' may harm the essence of what the ritual is- Freemasonry's heart, mind and spirit. One must shudder at the prospect of brethren who have no conception of the immense breadth and depth of ritual, its meaning within the context of its deep connections to the ancient mysteries of centuries past, to the several streams of Hermetic philosophy, how could these people be allowed to, in their blind ignorance, change portions, words, gestures, steps of this or that ritual or degree? This is not to say that our Work may not be changed or enhanced but it must be done consciously respecting what was and has been.

It is said that ancient York Rite ritual done properly reveals curious floor patterns, which demonstrate Hebrew letters and hence have connection with Kabbalistic philosophy. I won't comment either way about such things, but it certainly demonstrates to me that our Work, its words, or perhaps every movement (floor patterns) are fashioned with profound richness and intent. Our ritual then, like the great cathedrals of old, erected by reason, with purpose, and clear utility, is

by virtue of design meant to connect us to some quality deep within ourselves. We are the vanguards of sacred knowledge and we must submit to caring for our ritual in the midst of a world that is increasingly disconnected with the past, disrespectful and cynical of such rites, materialistic and rife with religious fundamentalism. Our symbolic ritual is a legacy handed to us from our ancient past to be carried into our future without change and without deletion with strict and caring observance.

“That which constitutes the essence of heaven, earth, air and water, and that which embraces the life of man, as well as that which the fiery God creates In the whole world: I, Philosophia, bear all In my breast”

Albrecht Durer, Nuremberg, 1502

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