

“THERE’S MORE TO RITUAL THAN A BOOK”

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‘The Beauties of true Godliness’: the word that stood out to me immediately more than any other, was ‘true’, implying that below the simple and superficial there was an inner meaning, a depth that needed to be explored in which could be found the genuine value, the real worth. Next came an examination of the word Godliness. In many references I examined, an interesting and surprising common denominator was the word ‘contentment’. ‘*True contentment*’ suggests to me a balance, an exploration that comes from seeking the hidden meaning and import and above all else, a satisfaction and an *understanding* that not only is found in the destination but also the journey.

Therefore, before finding what lies beneath, the basics have to be grasped and weighed; the analogy of learning to walk before running springs to mind.

In masonry, we introduce (in theory) the candidate to the basics of our gentle art and through a series of ceremonies and lectures, gradually move from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex ... that’s the theory anyhow, but the practice to the Masonically uneducated, is far from that straightforward, that simplistic.

So, the root of true contentment has many different facets of which knowledge is a constant. But hand-in-hand with that must come understanding and the structure that the new mason builds towards enlightenment is hewn from the quarry of ritual – ritual which must also have a foundation constructed from ‘understanding’ if those inner strengths are to be found and its resultant beauties revealed. And this is the starting point and basis of my lecture. During it I will touch on what I consider are several vital supporting issues that I feel, all add to the understanding of ritual and a masons place within it. I will explore the precursor to learning ritual, the contributory aspects, administrative practices we have developed and simple bad habits which must be addressed to ensure sustainable enjoyment, sustainable membership. Some may seem in isolation unrelated and may equally be judged in the greater picture of masonry as insignificant or obvious. However, I would contest that tackling them will contribute to that beauty masonry clearly possesses being accessible and discoverable to all; a beauty which is so often obscured from view because of a lack of understanding of our art and each other. I hope that I can demonstrate that in identifying the issues that surround, support and on occasion obscure the study and learning of ritual, I can illustrate that the issues are as many as are the solutions and that we can all contribute something towards it without having to change what we are, what we believe and most importantly, what we say in our ceremonies. The starting point is understanding that there is more to ritual than a book.

It was reported on the internet that, according to *Psychology Today*, by the time a child reaches the age of 18, the concept of "No, you can't!" has been reinforced 187,000 times, whereas the concept of "Yes, you can!" has been reinforced only about 25 - 30 times.

I believe that in masonry, we are on occasions guilty of wrapping ourselves up in far too much of that 'can't do' culture; a culture that is driven by a perverse mission to protect the ways we have always done things to the exclusion of all else. In this instance, approaching ritual in a manner that has in some quarters created a ritual about learning and delivering ritual and which is fuelled by a laudable fervour to preserve untouched like some ancient artefact, our ritual so that the beauties of it are not sullied by the hands of the workman. And therein is my stating point. It *has* to be handled, it *has* to be shaped, worked, drawn to its limits, to find the beauty beneath. Otherwise it remains nothing more than stale text, with no life, no purpose beyond the page, no understanding: no beauty.

There are a significant minority who have a mantra which is chanted with almost religious fervour concerning freemasonry and the ritual it contains. A mantra supported by a belief that allows ritual in their closed Masonic world to be learnt and practiced in only one way – that being the way it has always been done. A way that in my opinion makes the air in our lodge rooms (as well as the ritual) stale and stifled with anxiety and trepidation and where a new mason is not there to be made a better man, but simply to propagate a society, to continue the blood line.

And this is a damning indictment of some of our number. They are that fervent in their drive to get new men through the door, they are at times blind to the things that can turn them around to go right back out again.

It is no surprise to me that one of the main things that I have personally found to have brought men into masonry is (reassuringly) the values that we embody and hold dear. In a greater society that is rapidly becoming devoid of 'honourable' value systems, men who have acknowledged that gaping void, that cultural chasm, that lack of beauty, look to freemasonry – perhaps not to fill it, but certainly to bridge it. I would ask you now to begin reflecting on your own experiences and I put it to you that for some who enter masonry, that chasm they tried so desperately to bridge can eventually become a schism in which they are caught in the middle. A major aspect that men do not appreciate beforehand but come to see as the fascinating basis of our very fabric, is the ritual we practice and which makes us what we are. That 'honourable' value system that defines and marks us out more than merely just any other charitable body, more than just any other fraternity and please god, more than just any other social gathering or club. Yes, our ritual defines us but if mishandled, it can be the very thing that alienates us – not so much from the world, but in the context of this presentation, from each other.

I like many (if not all) in Freemasonry, believe that our traditions are there to be maintained because they are an imperative constant and must represent the society and values that our members spring from. By consequence they are the fabric that provides that all-important sense of continuity, of lineage, of belonging. But more difficult is ensuring within our heritage that we have space and the free will to still evolve, to ensure that the 'how' rather the 'what' of our fraternity and in this instance, our ritual, are tuned into the needs of those within it and above all, the age in which we now live.

And this is a difficult balancing act that cannot just happen without our intervention.

I believe that 'Masonic evolution' does not mean changing anything that we do that is embodied in whatever ritual book is practiced. I would however suggest that an evolution needs to be allowed to take place involving the way that ritual and its learning is handled *outside* of our ceremonies.

There are very few people whom you can consider as 'natural' ritualists if such an animal truly exists. And this provides my next point: Men come into masonry not only learning ritual, but desperately needing guidance in learning how to learn. Add to that the pervasive atmosphere of ritual being learnt, delivered and understood one way – the corporate 'our way' of many lodges. It can then, I would suggest, be a very threatening and challenging place and for a body that considers itself a fraternity, a very lonely place.

Over the years in my own personal quest for that daily advancement, I have read many weighty, learned and well researched pieces on all aspects of our gentle art. But I believe – with the greatest of respects to the brilliant Masonic researchers who penned them – that the future of ritual lies not in what is said, or even the interpretation made of it in the plethora of academic papers around. There is a bigger much neglected stage before all of that which comprises how we support present and future masons in coming to terms with the *task* of understanding the basics and the *learning* of ritual – and it is no stroke of chance that I put the two words 'understanding' and 'learning' in that order.

Many are preoccupied in masonry with our own version of 'the 3 R's' ... ritual, rote and repetition and because of this we forget how we as adults learn. Yes, we may learn some things through repetition, but for many things in life repetition is more a function of psychomotor skills. The element of committing something to memory – particularly text – is far more involved and personal an issue and I would suggest includes many elements including understanding, familiarity, enjoyment, belonging, engagement and above all else, *support* if it is to be achieved effectively.

I do not want to begin a debate on the principles of Andragogy, but we have to begin to start switching on to how we can support all masons in their journey of learning, which is hand-in-

hand with the concept of *understanding*. In doing so, we can never lose sight that many men come into masonry having left their own education (or so they may believe) many years before. But with it, they also left behind the culture, the technique and that sense of commitment and planning that is required to learn. There is also that failure for many to acknowledge that we never stop learning and that the process is with us for life. Consequently, the 'can't do' mentality is on one level, an internalised conditioning aggravated by a fear of scaling that famous Masonic landmark called 'Mount Ritual'; a conquest that the more able and seasoned of us simply took for granted.

Perhaps the greatest element that the gifted few take for granted (and sadly forget) is their 'unconscious competence' to learn ritual. But have we ever thought as to why we lucky few fall into learning it so easily? Do we have a photographic memory? Are we more intelligent? Are we naturally gifted? Well for the odd one of us, that may well be the case. But it may also be that we approach the task in hand in a wholly different way and in doing so, a way that satisfies the requirements of us as adults to address and commit to memory, information – especially text. It is also just as possible that we do it in a manner that we have never appreciated, never consciously realised. Hopefully, my personal example may assist in illustrating this.

As an actor, I know that it is fatal to begin committing any text to memory, unless it has been 'blocked'; in other words, I have to first learn what I am doing and when. I need that mental hook of knowing the story, the characters, my role in the story, the moves and directions I have and understanding what it all means *before* I can even attempt to begin learning it. The consequence of not doing it in such a manner is that I spend at least five times as long learning it and even when I have, it is not in my long term memory. Therefore, the moment I try to do more than sit in an arm chair, eyes closed, running through my part and everybody else's in my mind, I forget it. Does that sound familiar? It is not an inadequacy of being a mason, just a function of being a human being – and yes, you can be both!

And so what do we as masons do about this unfortunate phenomenon when baptising our new-born ritualist? Well, we send the poor chap away for a month – two if he is lucky – and then a week before, suddenly introduce him to the set, the other actors and the director ... well, usually several directors which now have the title 'Past Master'! And unless he is extremely gifted and can learn by rote without any understanding, we now have a man who has a number of other emotions swimming around his nervous system, not least of all anxiety, panic, vulnerability, fear, leaving little space for things like confidence, enjoyment, fun; the list for both extremes can and does run on. And add to that what I consider to be one of the greatest mysteries of masonry in modern times: that we expect a new mason to learn his ritual before he really understands a word of it. It is like giving somebody an instruction book

on how to drive a car, asking him to learn it and then not physically showing him a car or how it is driven until his test!

As adults we more easily connect learning what to say if we have to do something at the same time. The physical actions provide the contextual reinstatement, the running order, the prompt what to say next. A good example to use is the First Tools. It is in a way a gift to the learner as it provides the props, those items that provide that visual cue and continuity and when combined with adding physical demonstration, provide a natural platform for acting out the part and as such, make it easier to learn and then in the long term, revisit and perform time and time again with confidence.

But what invariably happens with our new mason on his first introduction to the floor? We send him off to learn his part in isolation and I have no doubt that sat in his car, in an armchair or lay in the bath he is word perfect as he mentally recounts his lines. And what do we then do? We abstract him from the context of how he committed it to memory and thrust him into a whole new context and add to it props, a live candidate and worst of all, an audience of experts!

But just imagine if we had talked him through the performance – props in hand – before one word was *learnt*? Not only would that fear of the unknown be addressed but he would have the mechanics of the what, where, when and why in his mind to associate the words with: context and in addition, understanding would then have been introduced. I know there will be a good number of you saying to yourselves, “but we already do this”. I would hazard to suggest that you are not representative.

So this word ‘understanding’ has, even at this early stage of my reflections on this subject, got a huge part to play. But like all in life, there are no ‘one-answer’ solutions to anything because there is, as in this instance, far more to it.

The other huge precursor before even thinking about allowing this man to attempt ritual is tied up in two simple questions: when was the last time he tried to learn anything and moreover as earlier alluded to, how does he as an adult learn?

We all have our own techniques and the psychologists and educationalists among you will know that all have our own supposed Learning Style. But which does our new mason use – if any? Is he even aware that there is more than one way of addressing the learning of his ‘Masonic libretto’, for that is what it really is?

And his libretto is immediately not physically conducive to the process of study is it? Think about it: we find the smallest book we can, cram it with the smallest text with the least spacing

of lines possible, print it on the thinnest paper and for good luck, abbreviate or remove key words that are in essence the focal point or trigger in the memory/recall process.

Think how you study academically, or how your children do: highlight pens and double spacing abound, emboldened text, colours, pictures and mind-maps pervade the desk top in this modern age so that we instantly have a plethora of media with the same message all satisfying the brain in its thirst to quench our varying learning styles. I did try and visualise at that point what a mind map of a lecture on the first degree tracing board would look like and my blood ran cold at the thought of something akin to a Masonic circuit board!

I have not at this stage even touched on the subject of homemade recordings of ritual. Many of us have stumbled into their use over the years and found the method of immense value in conditioning the mind. At this stage you may be again thinking to yourself, 'Yes, but that is pretty obvious stuff'; yes, obvious to you and I maybe, but not to the guy who does not even know as yet what he does not know and has possibly not had to even think about how to learn something for at least twenty years.

Perhaps the greatest barrier he will face in his quest to find the beauty in himself and in his Masonry is the lack of peers in lodge on the same rung of the Masonic ladder. He no longer has the facility of watching several new masons all progress through their ceremonies in their early years. Similarly, with the process of 'visiting' becoming less and less in many areas, the opportunity to see such ceremonies performed and thereby, allow that educative facility of observation, reflection and comparison to take place, he is further disadvantaged. And this really is an important aspect of our fraternity that falling numbers and mortality have produced. Having seen a ceremony performed several times within your own lodge may not teach you the words but again, it provides that context and understanding. How often have you seen others or even found yourself knowing what to say, but not when to say it? The words are committed to memory, but not the *sequence* in which they occur. A sequence that comes not just from the experience of performing it but vitally, watching others do so. There is also the subconscious element of watching others perform their *own* ritual that varies from *yours*.

I have recently utilised this with young masons to give them a focal point for observing ritual. By getting them to identify the differences with their own ritual and equally, how the performance and perambulations differ to it, they unknowingly begin that process of mentally mapping out their own ceremony and that all important sequence of events. They focus on the differences and thereby highlight the key events in their own, thus beginning the process of assimilation. They now have a mental sketch map that provides, if not the index, then certainly the chapters in the book, the scenes in their libretto for their own process of memorisation. It might not (and invariably does not) teach them the words, but I would

suggest it makes the task many times easier. For instance, how many times have you or have you heard others pause in a ceremony say, "What comes next?" The point is they know; the problem is they do not know the sequence or the story well enough, proved by the fact that when you give them a word, they are off again. The simple stroke of genius we then stumbled into was making the time afterwards to simply chat about what had taken place. Not a lecture, just an exchange of opinions, of interpretations, of observations on what had taken place; a chance to understand – a chance to bask in the beauty.

The final disadvantage in the process of (how I term it) 'ritualisation' is the loss over recent years of those older masons who not only knew their ritual, but also knew what it meant. Those storytellers who brought it alive, who engaged men in conversation over dinner with examples and illustrations, who debated and defined Masonic etiquette, structure and most of all, stories. These were the men who could not only give an account of (say) King Solomon, but could give the man a life beyond the page and in doing so, bring that page to life. Men who could tell the story of his life and death and in doing so unconsciously begin that process of education. And when combined with having seen the ceremony done several times, they again provided that most important element off all in learning our Masonic libretto: contextual understanding.

For to use the most simple of analogies, 'context' is the picture on the box of the jigsaw. In other words if it was to be put into a simple process it would be like taking a new mason through the following stages:

- This is the story,
- These are the characters,
- This is their relationship,
- This is what they do
- This is what you do in it
- This is how we tell it
- This is why we tell it
- This is what it means
- This is the message of the story (and then no sooner),
- This is what you say (and finally)
- This is how you say it

It is therefore interesting to note in this Masonic process map that we have not yet referred to the need to open a ritual book and learn it! We are not just interested in the skeleton; we are interested in the whole body.

It is also interesting to reflect on how masonry was practised less than a few hundred years ago with that simple process of the 'Right Worshipful' sat at the table in lodge, surrounded by

his brethren, running a catechistic Masonic question and answer session to not only test knowledge but reinforce and remind each of them of the fundamental features of their ritual. Features that when known and understood would, I imagine, have assisted so much in learning their respective parts, their respective ritual. And bearing that in mind, we still have lodges who when they do not have a ceremony, are content to open and close and throw in the reading of the odd by-law for good measure to pad out an evening. They forget that aspect of our ritual that refers to (for example) moralising on working tools. God forbid we actually have a dialogue in a lodge meeting outside of an agenda involving the content and meaning of our ritual and which is not memorised! A dialogue that could constitute that alien concept termed a conversation or worse, a debate. Can you imagine a WM saying in lodge "I am going to put aside the summons for a moment and call off whilst we have a discussion about the relevance of ritual in standards of life and work in the 21st century"? I can guarantee you would be in danger of being bowled over by the tumble weed!

The last component of my earlier list after 'this is what you say', was 'this is how you say it'. I would suggest that this is just as important to what is learnt and again, is more than what is in the book.

For as an observer, I have seen so many people struggle over the years due to poor structure and length of phrasing. That inability through simple ignorance of not knowing (and never having been told) what makes a sensible length of phrase to commit to memory and more importantly, to ask another to repeat. An issue that is addressed by merely deconstructing the text in a manner which is cognisant of making sense of the text both verbally and mentally or as George Bernard Shaw wrote in *Pygmalion*, '... observing the rhythm of the native woodnotes wild'!

We all know the value of ritual delivered with a sense of purpose, emphasis, character, conviction and dare I say, passion. It colours the text, invigorates the sentiment and gives it a sense of ownership and engagement: it brings it off the page and breathes life into it. But to the deliverer, it also provides a sense of context and meaning, a natural structure and memorable rhythm that makes the learning of it not just easier but far more enjoyable. The 'acting out' of our Masonic ritual gives it a whole new structure that makes it flow, not just for the deliverer but also the observer. Ritual which is animated not just verbally, but even physically makes for absorbing listening and is far more readily absorbed by all concerned, including the person learning it. Although I speak to the converted, how often are many just happy to accept recall and repetition? That getting words in the correct order as well as possible with as few prompts is deemed success; is deemed to constitute the basis of masonry and sadly, held up as an example of its beauty?

Before we have even addressed the spiritual benefits of being a mason, we can then discover the ritual learnt and delivered as a living, breathing text that has the immediate capability of

making a good man a better man by truly supporting his development, his confidence, his performance as a mason and a man.

I am minded at this point that we can also take a good deal of guidance from those who study art. As one friend of mine who was at war with the pretensions of art professionals once said: “If you want to really get under the skin of a work of art, disregard the history of the artist, the school he worked in the manner of, his intent, his style, his influences. Before you do all else and above all else, just stand there for as long as is necessary and simply enjoy the experience of ‘looking and liking’ and let it wash over you, because without that first important step, the ones you take after it are of no use.” Therefore, without context there is no cognition. Without confidence there is undoubtedly confusion.

Without getting into the wholly different yet intrinsically linked topic of recruitment and retention of masons, I would go as far as to suggest that after mortality, one of the other great influences on the loss masons is a fear of ritual and all that it brings with it such as a lack of engagement, a lack of belonging and a lack of worth in remaining. A fear rooted in an absence of support, guidance and knowledge of *how* to learn. A fear of failure and ‘can’t do’.

I would suggest that lodges need to start looking at their own skills in this area because I believe that fundamentally linked to learning ritual and understanding it, is *how* it is learnt and therefore, how we all need to act as enablers in that process. In that sense, the office of Mentor takes on a huge and dynamic responsibility. And that also means the development of processes that don’t just naively rely on a false belief that the three degrees are in themselves a progressive, structured programme of learning and development – if only any education was that easy! And in any case, let us be truly honest: we cannot ever say that Masonic ritual in its current format was considered when written from the perspective of how on earth you learn it!

I feel we need a grass-root change in our own personal perspectives. The development of practices based on the best aspects of lodges of instruction but which contain masons (all of whom are mentors) who can hold a ritual book in one hand, but then say to a new member “This is what we say and how we say it, but before we even open it, I want to tell you about the stories it contains.” Again, context and understanding are evident but also, that mini-mentor is engendering a sense of worth and belonging, of valuing and being valued ... of ‘can do’.

And in all of this we cannot forget the brother designated to prompt the orator. This much maligned and taken for granted role. Returning to my theatre analogy for a moment I can assure you that there is more to being a prompt than having a copy of the script and shouting out the odd word when it is deemed urgently necessary!

The art of prompting is just that, an art. An ability to know the text as *well as the deliverer* and equally, to know how this particular deliverer has phrased it. In knowing the phrasing, we anticipate the way the deliverer has coloured it, those natural highs and lows created by (hopefully!) bringing the text to life. Then adding to this the skill of choosing a word or phrase, the pitch and strength of voice, the optimum place to sit or stand, agreed signals or looks that allow for the prompt to be as unobtrusive as possible and allow the enjoyment to be constant for all concerned.

So stepping back from my halcyon world, what is *our* reality of prompting?

Well, the reality is invariably the nearest available brother who is unfortunate enough to make eye contact with the DC to be 'the chosen one' and have the ritual thrust into their hand. Add to this the abundance of well meaning friends on the sidelines who constantly chip-in with their own understanding of what has been forgotten and what needs immediate and audible correction lest the world end and it be unrecognised by all present that they also knew the ritual in hand and knew it better.

We all smile when we talk of 'the tutting classes' in lodge, but we still allow them to carry on what is a wounding, demeaning and highly destructive practice. It may not be the only factor, but it must be a significant component for those new masons who have passed through 'can do' and 'can't do' and now are well and truly ensconced in 'don't want to do'.

Is this really how we show support? Is this really how we nurture? Is this really providing the context for our new mason at the time they need it? Is it actually demonstrating that masonry when it comes to ritual is a 'yes you can' culture? Masonry is a fine example of the adage that suggests the destination is of no consequence, as it is the journey that makes the man. What type of journey are we putting this mason through? Because many of us have had to weather the storm of similar journeys, does that mean we have to allow all who follow to experience such a rough and unforgiving sea? A Masonic right of passage? A Darwinian survival of the strongest? To use a hated management metaphor, 'wake up and smell the coffee' 'cos they ain't surviving.

Could it be possible that the side effect of approaching the learning of ritual in the manner I have alluded to would be Freemasons who can go out into the world and when asked what Masonry is, verbalise the principles and tenets embodied in our ritual without having to look in a book? Speak of it in the common everyday language of the man in the street and his family because that is how it was explained to them in its learning? And not just what this Fraternity is, but also **why** it is and most important of all, what it **means** in today's world? New masons who can make the sometimes foggy world of speculative allegory live in the 21st century?

When you spend your formative life as a mason not knowing the questions never mind the answers, then never understanding the questions and answers and worst of all, being too intimidated to ask, I would hazard a guess that many never have that hoodwink removed.

But isn't the greatest satisfaction we can ever obtain achieved by having a new mason smile and say, "So that is what it means, that is why we do it. Now I understand"?

And that, I would suggest, is the point when learning really begins ... and it should have taken place before one word was committed to memory. And how refreshing it would be for him to find himself surrounded by men that are constantly questioning his understanding, providing contra-interpretations and even being as revolutionary as to ask the question concerning ritual and its hidden meaning, "What do you think?"

So where does that takes us? It may be that I expect too much, a Masonic Utopia. A place where new masons are presented with a freemasonry populated with men that know what they are a part of and understand a good deal of the basics of the narratives and stories that all combine to weave a Masonic fabric of fable and fact, of allegory and actuality. A Freemasonry that provides a gradual introduction to its ritual and it's precepts in *all* contexts where freemasons meet – be it lodge or luncheon. A freemasonry where members immerse the newest masons in support, guidance, nurture and understanding of what ritual is. A freemasonry where the learning of ritual is not the rite of passage but the illustration of it. A freemasonry that is cognisant of how adults learn and therefore enables them to live, enjoy and understand it *in context* before a word is even attempted to be committed to memory.

If you enjoy a thing, you want to experience it again. If you fear it, you try your hardest not to! Challenge a man and give him new experiences and a dimension to his life and you fire his imagination and desire to quench that hunger for knowledge, self improvement and service; all the things that our ritual can do. Abandon a man to his own devices to understand and learn because it is expected of him and you thereby instil in him fear, confusion, apathy and disillusion; again all the things that ritual can do.

But can you see the great myth that is then propagated? Ritual takes the blame for something that rightly should rest with the masons who hide behind it. There is nothing wrong with our ritual because it defines who and what we are. There is something wrong with those who fail to see and appreciate that.

Freemasonry in respect of ritual needs to do very little to achieve the status of a 'can do' culture. It just takes the will to allow it and the confidence to remove that hoodwink that many still wear about how we should learn it.

And the first step in learning how to learn is to simply show the newest mason the lid on the jigsaw box and allow him to appreciate the bigger picture and savour its beauty ... before we tip the pieces in his lap!