

# **The Importance of Ritual in Freemasonry... and in Life**

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## The Importance of Ritual in Freemasonry... and in Life

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This original research paper discusses the origins and characteristics of ritual, the importance of the use of rituals within Freemasonry, and their relevance to everyday life.

In a previous presentation, I described myself as “a pretty good ritualist in the different Masonic organizations to which I have belonged.”<sup>i</sup> This should neither be surprising nor unusual for any Mason, given that the lessons of the Degrees that are conferred and the work performed in the Symbolic Lodge, in the Holy Royal Arch Chapter, and in the Commandery are best exemplified by the use of ritual in both the words spoken and the actions performed.

In degree work, rituals are used to provide the candidates with a sense of the solemnity of the conferral and to provide a structure by which the lessons imparted in the degrees are impressed upon the candidates’ minds.

In openings, closings, and procedural work, rituals provide a consistent structure that reminds the participants of the basis of their Lodge, Chapter, or Commandery.

In discussing the importance of ritual, we should first gain an understanding of the concept and origins of ritual.

So, we ask ourselves, what is ritual? A basic dictionary definition of ritual includes:

- a. A ceremony in which the actions and wording follow a prescribed form and order.
- b. The body of ceremonies or rites used in a place of worship or by an organization.
- c. A book of rites or ceremonial forms. [or]
- d. A set of actions that are conducted routinely in the same manner.<sup>ii</sup>

By this basic definition, we can infer that the degrees we confer and the statements we make in the meetings we open and close meet the requirements to be considered rituals.

Rituals are the methodology by which rites are performed. A more thorough description of rite was provided by our Masonic Brother Albert Mackey where he defined it thusly:

“The Latin word ritus, whence we get the English [word] rite signifies an approved usage or custom, or an external observance. ... As a Masonic term, its application is therefore apparent. It signifies a method of conferring Masonic light by a collection and distribution of degrees. It is, in other words, the method and order observed in the government of a Masonic system.”<sup>iii</sup>

Ritual has been with us far longer than the current Masonic usage. We must look back in recorded history to the Egyptian Mystery Schools for the genesis of not only ritual but for many of the tenets and practices of Freemasonry as we know it today. In his book, *The Illustrated History of Freemasonry*, Moses W. Redding writes,

“To establish the fact that the civilization of Egypt is the oldest known to history, and thereby reach the origin of the ancient societies of which Freemasonry is a descendant, it will be necessary to compare the dates of the first appearance of the nations of antiquity in the great drama of life. ... The advent of Egypt in history was, at least, as early as 4500 B.C.; [far earlier than that] of the Chaldea-Babylonia, [which was] not earlier than 3000 B.C.; [or] China, [circa] 2600 B.C. [or] India, [at] 2500 B.C.”<sup>iv</sup>

The use of ritual was essential to these ancient societies when elevating worthy candidates into the higher levels of their class structures. Worshipful Brother Victor Popow describes it thusly:

“In the ancient world ... the Lesser and Greater Mysteries were bestowed upon the candidates through secret language [and] 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 -- was 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, to a new sphere of existence, to a new dimension of awareness.”<sup>v</sup>

A new sphere of existence ... a new dimension of awareness... Are these not the goals we hope to achieve for our candidates and our Brethren?

As further support for the supposition that modern Freemasonry rituals had their origins in the

Egyptian Mystery Schools, Redding describes the following:

“The Ritual of the Mysteries was in the form of a tragic drama, representing the singular death of Osiris, the search for his body by Isis, and its discovery and resurrection to life and power. The attack by Typhon, the spirit of darkness, upon Osiris, who is slain, was enacted amid terrible scenes, during which the judgment of the dead and the punishments that the wicked suffered were represented as realities to the neophyte. Following this was the search for the body of Osiris, which was at last found ... after which the mutilated remains were interred amid exclamations of sorrow and despair.”<sup>vi</sup>

It does not require deep introspection or interpretation to find a level of commonality between the Osiris legend and that of Hiram Abif.

In yet another example of the correlation of the Egyptian Mystery Schools with the tenets of

Freemasonry, Redding also writes:

“Many who were initiated into the Mysteries entered the corporations of

architects and builders, who erected the temples and other splendid edifices designed for the worship of Deity; in short, from this class came the rulers, priests, and architects of Egypt.”<sup>vii</sup>

Historically, while the Egyptians may have been the progenitors of ritual, they were not alone in its practice. The Eleusinian Mysteries that were established in Greece circa 1800 B.C. closely paralleled the Egyptian Mystery Schools, substituting the name of Bacchus for Osiris and Rhea for Isis. The Eleusinian Mysteries were followed by the Gnostics, the Dionysian Mysteries, Mithraism, the Essenes, and the brethren of the Pythagorean College, all of which basically continued the content and rituals of the Mysteries, albeit with different names for the principal characters.

Redding sums up his analysis of the origin of the rituals of the Mysteries in this way:

“While the Mysteries embraced the arts and sciences, yet the great central idea of them all was the unity of God and the immortality of the soul. Aspirations for purity and a higher life are everywhere manifest in their history. In all the mysteries regeneration was represented; an assassination took place, followed by a search for the body, its recovery, and resurrection.”<sup>viii</sup>

So, why do we employ the use of ritual as our method of teaching the tenets and concepts of Freemasonry? What purpose is served by the use of ritual that is both formulaic and repeated at every opening and closing and in every degree being conferred?

To discuss this, I extracted the following excerpts from a Short Talk Bulletin written by Most Worshipful Brother Kenneth

Aldridge, Past Grand Master and Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Quebec. He wrote...

“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.”<sup>ix</sup>

This paradigm seems very similar to what I have heard expressed in the field of medicine, where medical students become proficient in techniques based on “see one, do one, teach one.”<sup>x</sup> Once one has become proficient in performing a task (e.g., a ritual), one must transcend the ability to do it perfectly, to the ability to teach others how to do it just as perfectly.

Worshipful Brother Aldridge continues ...

“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, and above all to unify. The overriding benefit of ritual is that it is a prescribed form of activity that at once unifies the participant and the observer.

Ritual provides an intellectual link between participant and observer. In fact, our use of ritual is so intellectually involved 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, a unifying experience.”<sup>xi</sup>

Aldridge later goes on to describe what he means by saying “ought to be,” where he wrote:

“I said ritual ought to be a 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.”<sup>xii</sup>

All of us have been there ... no matter how often we rehearse as a group, no matter how much we practice when we're alone, sometimes the words just won't come out right. Sometimes, because we have learned so much ritual in different Masonic bodies in the past, we “mix up” the wording by adding or substituting parts of other rituals into what we should be saying in that particular passage. Sometimes we think we know the correct words but they don't match the ritual wording. These are basic human mistakes, but in any case, it damages the unifying aspect of the ritual being performed and the Candidate who is experiencing the ritual is led astray.

Similarly, in the monthly meetings where the same script is followed by each officer during each opening and closing, a lack of preparation is the basic cause where unification is lost. Brethren appointed to specific stations have the responsibility to learn their parts so that they can repeat them accurately according to ritual without resorting to a ritual book or “crib sheet.” This should not be an arduous task for any particular Brother.

Lack of preparation also leads to those who are trying to be helpful, who by verbally correcting the speaker in the middle of his ritual statement create a distraction to the flow of the ritual.

There are non-Masonic passages that we never misspeak even though some of them are longer than our ritual work. For example, the Pledge of Allegiance has 31 words; the Lord's Prayer has 70 words, yet because we have heard them and said them innumerable times in our life, we never make a mistake.

Compare those examples to the Opening ritual of a Royal Arch Chapter. Of the many ritual statements made by the officers, only two of those statements exceed the length of the Pledge and none come near the length of the Lord's Prayer, so we must assume that learning the individual ritual statements can be accomplished with dedicated practice and repetition.

When we are elected or appointed as a Lodge, Chapter, or Commandery Officer, it is incumbent on that Brother, Companion, or Sir Knight to study, learn and take pride in the perfection of his execution in both words and movements. This can only be accomplished by constant practice in and out of the Lodge, Chapter, or Commandery, and by attending monthly District Ritual School meetings.

How much better at ritual would we be if each of us spent just an hour each week practicing our assigned ritual statements, using whatever reference we have to guide us? I believe allocating that practice time would not only lead to the mastery of our assigned work but also lead to a greater sense of pride in being an accomplished ritualist, becoming what was originally termed a “Bright Mason.”<sup>xiii</sup>

In further support of the need to practice, let me quote our current Virginia Grand Chapter District 3 Lecturer, Right Excellent Companion J. Richard Rawls, where he wrote:

“Hopefully, you have a goal of eventually advancing to the East and leading your respective York Rite Body. To do this, and to do it well, you need to know all of the parts of every chair in each York Rite Body [that you hope to lead]. You need to be prepared for that evening when your Lodge, Chapter, or Commandery has vacancies in the chairs. [Companion Rawles makes] the following suggestions:

- 1) Attend practices as much as possible;
- 2) Don't be satisfied with only learning the chair you occupy;
- 3) Get with more informed Brethren and ask questions;
- 4) Always be looking ahead several chairs and learn those parts;
- 5) Be willing to challenge yourself by moving up when needed;
- 6) [and if you have] the [ritual] book, OPEN IT! STUDY IT!

And finally, be proud of your Ritual work. Keep in mind that it is our obligation to do the best we can.”<sup>xiv</sup>

There is an old saying: “Practice makes perfect,” but that saying is incomplete. It should read: “Perfect practice makes perfect.” Once we have practiced perfectly and are confident of knowing what to say and what to do in our ritual, we can begin to understand why we say what we say and why we do what we do while attending meetings in the various Masonic bodies.

There is another and perhaps most compelling aspect, however, to the importance of ritual perfection. The ritual work we do in the Lodge, Chapter, and Commandery are but practical exercises in how we are to live our lives

outside of those Masonic bodies. This requirement is taught from the very beginning of one's involvement in Freemasonry. Consider this quote from Right Worshipful Brother Michael W. Walker, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Ireland, regarding the responsibilities of a Freemason, where he admonished the Brethren that:

“...the foundation of Freemasonry is ‘the practice of every social and moral virtue.’ He is exhorted to learn how to discharge his duty to his God, his neighbor, and himself, to be an exemplary citizen and that, as an individual, he should practice every domestic as well as public virtue and maintain those truly masonic characteristics, benevolence, and brotherly love.”<sup>xv</sup>

Thus, by achieving perfection in ritual inside Masonic meetings, we are being taught the importance of perfection of those foundational characteristics in our daily lives when outside Masonic venues. We are being taught that perfection in ritual equates less to how to open and close a meeting than it does to how we fulfill our Masonic and moral duties when out in the general public.

If we learn to consistently apply Masonic teachings and precepts to our daily lives, we will earn a room in that House not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens, as exemplified in prayer in the Royal Ark Mariner Degree:

“So with Thy blessing in this ark below may we so order all our thoughts and acts, then when Thy call, O Great Commander, comes, we'll find a bless'd asylum and refuge in heaven on high.”<sup>xvi</sup>

So mote it be.

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- <sup>i</sup> Landerkin, James C. An Appreciation of the Royal Arch Chapter Opening Ritual and its Meaning. (2019). Retrieved March 20, 2020, from <https://virginiaroyalarch.org/education/>
- <sup>ii</sup> ritual. (n.d.) American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition. (2011). Retrieved March 18, 2020, from <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/ritual>
- <sup>iii</sup> Mackey. Albert G. An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, New and Revised Edition, Volume II, The Masonic History Company, New York and London, 1920, p. 686.
- <sup>iv</sup> Redding, Moses W. The Illustrated History of Free Masonry, Volume I, Redding & Company, 1900, p. 19.
- <sup>v</sup> Popow, Victor G. Ritual – Its Importance and Meaning. (2014) The Masonic Trowel.com. Retrieved March 28, 2020, from [http://www.themasonictrowel.com/Articles/degrees/Ceremonies/ritual\\_its\\_importance\\_and\\_meaning.htm](http://www.themasonictrowel.com/Articles/degrees/Ceremonies/ritual_its_importance_and_meaning.htm)
- <sup>vi</sup> Redding, op cit., pp 24-25.
- <sup>vii</sup> Redding, op cit., p. 26.
- <sup>viii</sup> Redding, op cit., p.34
- <sup>ix</sup> Aldridge, Kenneth, Ritual in Freemasonry. (1997) Masonic World.com. Retrieved March 28, 2020, from [https://www.masonicworld.com/education/articles/Ritual In Freemasonry.htm](https://www.masonicworld.com/education/articles/Ritual%20In%20Freemasonry.htm)
- <sup>x</sup> Fix, Kelda McMullen, See One, Do One, Teach One. (2017) Retrieved August 9, 2020, from <https://blog.umhb.edu/see-one-do-one-teach-one/>
- <sup>xi</sup> Aldridge, op. cit.
- <sup>xii</sup> Aldridge, op. cit.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Brownell, J. H., The American Tyler-keystone: Devoted to Freemasonry and Its Concordant Others. (1899). United States: p.163, defines a “Bright Mason” as one who is able to repeat fully and accurately the lectures of each degree, and who has so mastered the ritual as to be able to administer all the ceremonies of Masonry correctly.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Rawls, Richard J. York Rite Masonry “Open Your Book”. Retrieved April 2, 2020, from <https://VirginiaRoyalArch.org/Education>.
- <sup>xv</sup> Walker, Michael W., Freemasonry in Society – Today and Tomorrow, Some Personal Musings. Retrieved April 4, 2020, from <https://www.freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/walker.html>
- <sup>xvi</sup> The Grand Council of the Allied Masonic Degrees of the United States of America, Ritual No. 1, Edition 2a, 2015, pp. 14-15.
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