

ANOTHER WORD ON RITUAL

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During a recent board of general purpose, a Brother posed the question why we continue to use language that makes our memory work so difficult. Memory work for many is the bane of their involvement in Freemasonry. Individuals may very well not attend lodge in fear of being coerced into taking part in ritual or simply not participate in the Craft as they do not have the ability, skills or inclination to spend hours cramming to memory material so as to meet the present little test of a good Lodge Brother.

George Oliver in the "The Discrepancies of Freemasonry" addresses our Brothers question and our present single-mindedness on memory by suggesting that an ignorant man, with a retentive memory, will often surpass the soundest and ripest scholar.

Mackay says that in Freemasonry there must be a realization that our usages and ceremonies are "subject to extensive variations" and "are not the sum and substance" of Freemasonry. He suggests the totality of our legends "is not to establish historical fact but to convey philosophical doctrines". He affirms the most important of these doctrines is the "immortality of the soul". The rest of the legend may stimulate the Brothers curiosity as an antiquarian inquiry but the Brother who is prepared is content with the doctrine. Mackay submits that our symbols are simply visible signs and our lectures audible representations of our doctrine

Albert Pike an ardent critic of the "schisms and disputes for power in Masonry, and of jealousy and dissensions between Masonic Rites" asserts that Freemasonry is "morality founded in faith and taught by symbols" with its "purpose being to benefit mankind physically, socially, and spiritually; by helping men to cultivate freedom, friendship and character". It teaches "the reality of God, the moral law, and the hope of immortality"

These three scholars and creators are advocates of the moral imperative as being the purpose of Freemasonry. It follows the Ritual in Freemasonry should focus on primarily preparing the Brethren to understand the philosophical doctrine and to embed our doctrines within their beliefs. Secondly to this our ritual should give Brethren an understanding of our physical and social benefit to mankind and only as a vehicle for the primary doctrinal preparation of the Brethren should we be concerned about how our Ritual is performed.

The solution that Oliver suggested in teaching the philosophical pillars of Freemasonry is not to eliminate memory work. Rather, an approach which would simplify the language so it is easier for a Brother to memorize and present. Not to change the lesson, the story or the intent but to put these into language that is comprehensible to the presenter and the candidate. Even an iconic Shakespearian group such as Bard on the Beach stimulate interest by taking the Bards plays and setting them in contemporary speech.

Using Oliver's solution;

1. Where there is more than one word in a sentence which means the same thing eliminate the unnecessary words.

2. Replace words that are no longer utilized in our vocabulary with words that we do use and which have the same meaning.
3. Where there are run on and multiple sentences expressing the same thought reduce the phrase to one or two complete sentences which express the thought.
4. Where there are run on sentences expressing different thoughts make each thought into a complete sentence.
5. Make the language personal where appropriate.

Ritual is important as it passes on the foundations of Freemasonry but the process or performance of ritual should not dominate meaning. To add to our Brothers Question Is our present obsession with memory work turning our ritual into the domain of the parrot mason where the words are simply spoken to get through the text?

Our scholars are suggesting it is the meaning that is paramount. Whether we subscribe to Oliver's solution or the more stringent memory process presently advocated in the Craft, for the lessons to be realized by the candidate requires preparation, delivery and enjoyment.

Preparation

1. Understand the meaning of what you are about to say. It is not just the words that represent meaning but meaning is a composite of the cultural context of the story. What is happening in the story and when was it set? What were the norms and values of the era in which you are relating?
2. Who was this person you are about to play? What do they mean to you? Are they saying things you yourself believe in? If not, it will be very hard to convince those who are listening what you are presenting is meaningful.
3. Empty your mind to memorize. There are many different methods of memorization and you may have your own technique. Look at all the different ways you can present your meaning.

Delivery

1. No Fear- We get concerned with parroting the words and from this we derive apprehension about the delivery. To deal with this anxiety prepare well. When you are about to participate in the degree concentrate on your role. For the evening of the degree that is all that matters. Enjoy the spotlight.
2. Beware of Overacting or Mechanical Acting-To portray the meaning appropriately be sincere in your emotion and belief while playing the part. You have probably experienced similar emotions to those you are speaking of. Tap into these memories. What was it like to feel this way?
3. Live the part and be creative- Our degrees are presented in make believe. For the few minutes that you participate in the degree be the person you represent.
4. Empathize-understand the complexities, contradictions, agony and bliss of the person behind the part you are playing. Add them to the way you portray the person.

5. Degrees are not work they are the way we impart to our Brothers the culture, beliefs, understanding, and love of Freemasonry. Convey the enjoyment of being a Freemason.

Enjoy and have fun

1. It's about the Team-Do not prepare or deliver your part in isolation. The success of the degree will be directly proportional to how much you support your Brothers in preparing the degree and how much pleasure you and the degree team had in getting ready. Get to know the other parts in the degree. Rehearse individually and with other members of the degree team before the entire team is together for the degree rehearsal.

2. For a few moments step outside your life and identity and live the life of another. Not only is it enlightening it is fun.