



Provincial Grand Lodge of East Lancashire

The Future of Ritual

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The Future of Ritual

It is some years ago that Rev Neville Barker Cryer went on record in establishing that what really distinguished Freemasonry from any other sort of fraternal association was the centrality of ritual in its activities. To that conviction he holds as firmly as ever. Indeed in this paper he asserts, in what was almost the 60th year of his membership of the Craft, that if ritual is ever allowed to become regarded as optional or irrelevant then the demise of 'ancient and accepted Freemasonry' is within sight. I will present this paper as though I were Bro Cryer.

Making such a declaration, however, is not meant to imply an innate or inflexible conservatism. The Freemasonry of which ritual is so integral a component has clearly had to be able to accommodate and respond to change through three and half centuries in order to persist. Those who think that what we may regard as the solid presence of the Craft Institution is averse to adaptation only need to scan its history to be proved wrong. The events of 1717, 1751, the 1780s, 1813 to 1817, the 1830s, the 1850s and much else since are quite sufficient to prove that European and American Freemasonry at least have undergone necessary adaptations in order to meet the demands made by changing social and political circumstances. Our great Order has proved time and time again that whilst retaining its basic landmarks it can ride the stresses and strains that life in a real world can place upon it. We have survived exposure, calumny, prejudice, misrepresentation, religious and political intolerance, and degradation by our own members. We have learned to adapt in these fields. Can the same happen with ritual and if so, how?

Before I begin to tackle that important question, however, it may be as well if I deal with the question that some may be asking in their hearts - Is this something we really need to be bothered about? Are you not posing a problem that doesn't currently exist? Well, if that is how matters seem to you where you are in your lodge then I appreciate your puzzlement or surprise. It is not how I am hearing certain things as I have moved about my country and the world and it is certainly not how some Masons, whether preceptors or newly made Masons, are seeing it either. Let me illustrate.

I am currently an honorary member of the oldest lodge in York with a history that goes back to 1778. It has met constantly throughout that period once a month and in the last 3 years it has still been able to welcome 10 candidates, half of them under 40, into the Craft. Its future as a viable Masonic unit does therefore seem stronger than many lodges elsewhere. Yet speaking with one of the senior Past Masters only the other day he shared with me what is his present concern. "They seem to be very happy to have entered our fellowship", he said, "but several of them have queried why there seems to be such a pressure on them to come to rehearsal evenings and learn ritual. They quite like the ceremonies but they are not interested in taking part themselves. They much prefer the festive board and think that that is the really attractive part of the evening."

That is one aspect of the problem and it is a view that is not simply restricted to York. Nor is it the only issue. Whilst there are still many Masons who are prepared to tackle ritual learning there are rather more these days who either cannot or will not undertake the tasks that used to be borne by Worshipful Masters. Very much fewer are the men who can

discharge what is still required in the workings of Pennsylvania where the W.M. conducts not only the major part of the ceremony of each degree but then also carries out the explanation of the ceremony when the candidate is brought back after adjusting his dress. Even in that Grand Lodge moreover the post of W.M. is taken over by another P.M. if more than one degree is conducted in the course of an evening. Yet what is happening elsewhere is that there is more and more division of the work because learning by heart is less and less something with which brethren are familiar in their normal lives. To those in an Internet age such a skill is less and less required.

There is also something else. A brother in Derby recently presented me with a list of 38 'howlers' or mispronunciations that he had collected whilst visiting over a few months. 'Transistory' for 'transitory' and 'artificer' for 'artificer' are well known but 'mistresses and privileges' 'an asian and 'orrible institution', more 'orrible than the garter', 'the two great pillocks', the 'ravishing birds of the air', that 'safe and sacred suppository' and my latest, 'Exhalation' for 'exaltation' (which suggests hot air instead of understanding what we are saying), all begin to highlight the fact that the language which is used in the ritual does come from speech of a long time ago and can create difficulties for modern man unless it is explained beforehand. The whole issue of the intelligibility of what we are required to learn and say is another side to the problem.

Further, there is the whole matter of dress (why do I have to come in so dishevelled?), movement (why do we have to keep going round the room?), apparent repetition (why do we have to keep having the same ceremonies over and over again?), endless moralizing (why do we have to listen to these extra addresses or charges?), constant adjustment (why do we have to keep changing the signs we give?) and lack of action (why is there not more drama like we get in part of the 3^o?). When all these matters are added to the points made previously it will, I think, be agreed that we really do have something to address. Is it not time to consider further changes to the form and use of the ritual we employ?

In what follows I shall seek to address all these issues and make some suggestions about ways in which they might be dealt with. The ideas proposed are all based on what has been tried at some time or another in some part of Masonry but they will not appeal to everyone. What I have sought to do is to try and get some new thinking or movement started so that what are already present obstacles can be faced and challenged. We cannot allow some of these difficulties to fester further.

Has the time come, for example, for a steady review of what it is that we are seeking to do by using the ritual we have and then trying to see whether what we currently say or do is meeting that objective? When the Union of two Grand Lodges took place in England in 1813 there had to be just such a review in order to decide what was to be at least the core of English and Welsh lodge ritual for the foreseeable future. The Irish Grand Lodge went through a similar process at much the same time. In England the outcome was a form called 'Sussex' or 'Emulation' though the method of transmitting that revised form only by word of mouth and memory led inevitably to a number of variations according to the strength of local traditions or the types of ritual book that were adopted as the 19th century progressed. In Ireland one form was laid down and applied strictly, as it still is, by appointed officers who visit lodges in turn.

Generally speaking the new rituals were much shorter than what had taken place before, they modernised some of the language, eliminated any significant emphasis on one religious allegiance, removed the requirement to deliver explanatory lectures, reduced or removed the use and explanation of the tracing board, and separated the dining function of the lodge from the ceremonies. What was aimed at was truer universal membership, greater dignity and management of the degree ritual and better control of what happened at the festive board. That is still generally where we are now. But does the content of our ceremonies still reflect new elements in our current situation? Are we taking account of a generally different educational system? Is the social make-up of our candidates different? What about the whole ethnic issue? To present an adequate response to this question would require another whole lecture.

Is it, however, not a matter of content but of wording? If it has become a matter of concern to the Christian churches to review and replace much of their 16th to 18th century ritual language with the best of more up to date prose what is it that prevents us doing the same? Not of course that something has not previously been attempted because Logic working in England was created by those who found some of the earlier phrasing to be both confusing and inaccurate for a later generation. Just how far such efforts are effective or worthwhile is a matter of personal judgement and I have to state that in my experience the use of Logic or some similar form of ritual is only rarely encountered.

What does seem to me to be an alternative to 'rocking the boat' or 'shaking the foundations', by proposing or attempting to modernise the ritual, is to take definite steps to explain the words that are used especially where they are not words in common use. If ever there was a task that could be done usefully on Rehearsal evenings, or what are oddly called Lodges of Instruction, it would be the spending some minutes each time on words that have been used that evening and which could be better learnt or spoken by being better understood. Alternatively there needs to be the occasional talk in open lodge in which such matters are clarified. My own lecture, "Why do we say and do that?" in my book, 'I Just Didn't Know That', was just such a talk given for the benefit of newly initiated brethren who had just taken the first degree. I have to tell you that when that was first given a young solicitor came over to me and said, "If that is what it all means and there is more to come I am really interested".

I cannot forebear at this point to make a further reference to the usual practice in much of North America where, after the main part of a ceremony is over the candidate is brought back to the lodge room, now fully dressed and more relaxed, and has the features of the ceremony through which he has passed explained to him. No longer does such a new initiate wonder why he came in a somewhat dishevelled state and with a slipshod foot and a blindfold, why there was prayer, why he processed round the room, why he was proved and tested after making an obligation and what the signs, tokens, words and apron all mean. When you see all this ritual so plainly explained as part of the ceremony you wonder at the reason why such a practice was dropped at the Union of our Grand Lodges, or at least from those lodges that had previously practiced such a custom. If it was on the grounds of time then I would have to say that it is time well spent and time, which we have for nearly 200 years, wasted. For those who find ritual mystifying and thence perhaps less useful we either have to explain it or improve its presentation.

That leads me on to another suggestion. The very fact that those who will in future become our candidates are used to increasingly well-produced and sophisticated drama, whether in films, T.V. plays, theatre or public spectacle, might perhaps pose the question whether the way we conduct our ritual is dramatic enough for the future? When one again considers the 'obstacle race' that some North American candidates have to cover in order to reach the obligation pedestal, the procession with rose petals strewn in front of the 2^o candidate in the London Pilgerloge and the lowering of the candidate into a real grave with the Brethren walking and singing round it at Slingsby in Lincolnshire or Barnstaple in Devon, England, one is bound to ask whether the starkness of Emulation ritual is any longer the best medium for most Masons. To see the candidate reminded of his obligation by the slamming of a desk lid at Bristol, or the newly installed Master warned to behave himself by a fully dressed cook/chef brandishing a saucepan at Rawtenstall in Lancashire may seem to some the unwelcome antics of a bygone age, but those who progress to the Rose Croix, the Red Cross and the Knights Templar orders are only too well aware of a heightened sense of awe and awareness as they share in something more dramatic and visually meaningful. The intermediate degrees of the Rose Croix, in the presentation of which for 10 years I was an honoured participant, are constantly well attended and create real interest. The same degrees conferred in America at the end of the week before Easter, with full theatrical accessories, are, if you ever have a chance to witness them, a wonder to behold.

Without in any way wanting to suggest that we become obsessed or over-engaged with presentation I am bound to say that we need to ask ourselves whether for the future we do need to use lights, props, music and symbolism even more effectively than is often the case at present. To hear the chants and hymns used in the first degree in parts of West Yorkshire, the 12 chants used in the Royal Arch in Newcastle on Tyne, and the singing of 'Hail Masonry Divine' at an Installation in York, are all points of effective presentation that have certainly made an oldie like me think again about the solemnity of what we are doing. Whether the pendulum ought to swing again in favour of light in the East, displaying the emblems of mortality, more participatory music than less, and more objects laid out on the lodge floor - as we still do in Chapter - are other factors worth consideration. We stress visual aids in education today so why not use the same techniques with all that we possess?

We must not, of course, in thinking about explanation and presentation forget that all this requires brethren to deliver it. That raises again the whole problem mentioned earlier about a growing doubt as to how much ritual, if any, brethren in the future are going to be willing to undertake.

We already have encouragement to split up the work, e.g. the giving of charges, the tracing board explanations, the tools, the 3^o history and the Royal Arch lectures. What is clear from my researches for writing my new book on Old York Masonry is that there were certain Passed Masters in the 18th century who were recognised and appointed to discharge the Lectures or explanation of the history and symbolatry lying behind the ceremonies performed. In the North of England this developed into travelling teams of such P.Ms called Harodim, who would visit a centre at which Masons would assemble to receive this further instruction in the five degrees of Craft, Royal Arch and Knights Templar. In the 19th century a similar practice was adopted in the same area of England to instruct Mark Masons in the meaning of the ancient forms and practices of that degree.

What that leads me to wonder is whether, if we really are going to be faced with a significant number of 'reluctant' ritualists, whether in each lodge there should be a small core who will maintain the work by delivering the ritual in a meaningful way or even a local team who will come in and enrich the private lodge's work by undertaking this part of the evening. In Northumberland something very similar has already been introduced for lodges where the numbers at present are reduced and where there is a temporary lack of P.Ms who can present all the work. Of course this is a suggestion that may trouble those who take a pride in maintaining their own lodge's work but I am not talking about what might be all right for the present but what might be facing some lodges in the near future.

What we could also think about is the re-designing of ritual books so that what was said above about Instruction lodges or talks could be supplemented by having explanations of words or ceremonial with the text laid out in our manuals. This in itself would not be the whole answer because we are seeing a growth in the number of non-reading Masons and to them such enhanced books would obviously be less help.

What I have tried to do in this lecture is to begin to face up to a situation that seems to be present already in some parts of our great Society. If the problems I have outlined are not present in your situation then be thankful but even where all might seem at present to be happily arranged it does us no harm to ask ourselves whether there are ways of further helping our members with their use of this core of our Order. For others the problems are already beginning and it behoves us to try and offer help and suggestions where this is the case.

There are three more observations that I must make before I close. The first is that in whatever we do to adapt sensibly to our contemporary situation we ought never to lose sight of the esoteric content of what we are doing. In admitting candidates into any degree or Order we are not just formally entering them on the books. We are meant in a real sense to be affecting their lives and the way that they will henceforth both see and carry out those lives. They are entering into new levels of relationship with their 'brethren', with the ancient Society they enter and the world in which they still live and work. How that happens is a 'mystery' but that it happens is a 'privilege'. Ritual is the means by which that takes place. We must not so change and trivialize our ritual that it is merely an odd form of 'abracadabra'.

The second observation has to be, therefore, that in the end of the day the most fundamental requirement for true ritual has to be the maintenance of sincerity and a genuineness of meaning in its delivery. As a clergyman I have to tell you that the one great danger in my profession is undue familiarity with ritual texts. Once you imagine that all that matters is getting through the set words of the appointed ritual, and not meaning or conveying the meaning of what you say, then much, if not all, of what you are saying might as well be mumbo-jumbo. It does indeed become what the 16th century Reformers called 'hocus pocus' from a badly spoken 'hoc est corpus meus'. Revising the ritual may help to make it more meaningful but its delivery is paramount.

The third observation has to be another question - how do we most usefully and sensibly debate or advance this whole matter? How do we keep in touch with those who need help

and discover what helps most? How do we ensure that what we may do to meet difficulties does not transgress the understanding of Masonry that we share with all other regular Masonic bodies, like other Grand Lodges, but equally how can we best benefit by learning from them where they may have the same problems? Is it not interesting to reflect that early in the experience of the Australian Grand Lodges it was thought that in order to preserve the quality of ritual used at Lodge Installations it was preferable to have a State team do that ceremony than leave it to the private lodge brethren? This, however, is but the start of a discussion on this important topic. Other minds need to engage with 'the future of ritual'. I simply rest my case.

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