



Why Ritual?
By
Oscar Patterson III, Ph.D.

A paper presented to
William A. Bessent III Council 363
Allied Masonic Degrees
Gainesville, FL
24 July 2015

Abstract

A great deal of human behavior can be explained in terms of ritual. Humans, dominated by feelings, are special, and embrace conceptual processes through symbols, language and ritual. In Freemasonry, our rituals or forms and ceremonies perform not only as formal, institutionalized exercises to transmit our traditions and to establish for the brethren the higher meanings of the signs, symbols and allegories, they also create an *esprit de corps* which is essential to institutional integrity. Ritual enables participants to order the world in an agreed upon manner. It enhances learning, reduces fear, and enables the participants to respond through actions as well as through words. It is essential to Freemasonry and is the single most important aspect of our observance of our Craft. It is what attracted learned men of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries to the Fraternity. It is, notes Joseph Campbell, “a scholarly attempt to reconstruct an order or initiation that [will] result in spiritual revelation.” Ritual provides members of society with a pathway to being a community.

Why Ritual?

“Perhaps you’re interested in how a man undresses. . . I have a method all my own. If you notice, the coat came first, then the tie, then the shirt. Now, ah, according to Hoyle, after that, the, uh, pants should be next. There’s where I’m different. . . I go for the shoes next. First the right, then the left.” Clark Gable to Claudette Colbert in “It Happen One Night,” 1934.

All humans and many animal species engage in ritualistic behavior from how we dress or undress to courting practices, how we greet each other, and, even, how we fight. A great deal of human behavior can be explained and comprehended in terms of ritual because ritual is an essential part of communication, meaning, and understanding. At the same time, all animals are dominated by feeling, especially humans, but human feeling is special. Human feeling embraces conceptual processes which involve symbols, language, and, through them, ritual.

At issue in any consideration of ritual is its role and purpose in society, and its place in our social institutions. Ritual, notes Durkheim, is the method whereby individuals are brought together to “strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member.”¹ Ritual shapes our perception of both the human and the divine as it serves a socializing function. The very structure of the ritual, notes Taylor, Robertson, Smith and Frazer, is intrinsic to how the ritual functions in society.² Rituals facilitate the means by which human beings live together in an orderly social relationship by maintaining the unity of the group. Ritual also transmits through generations the basic sentiments of a society thus serving to reduce

¹ Stephen Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 471.

² Henri Hurbert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* [1898], trans. W.D. Hall (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964), pp. 8, 9.

anxiety, distress, fear, doubt, and, even, sorrow.³ But Huxley notes that the modern world fails to ritualize effectively which leads to a high propensity toward flawed communication as well as a weakening of personal and social bonds.⁴ The question arises, then, how does ritual communicate.

Communicating Instruction by Symbols

Suzanne Langer notes that a symbol enables people to think about, understand, and react to something apart from its immediate presence.⁵ A symbol is “an instrumental thought.” We assign to the symbol meaning which results in an emotional response to the object. However, that meaning and response may differ and, even, change from society to society, age to age, and person to person. The swastika—a cross with four bent arms—is common to many ancient civilizations especially those of the Indus valley where it represents auspiciousness. The word “swastika” is literally translated as “to be good.” Consider how much that changed during the 20th century when the swastika was appropriated by the Nazi movement in Germany. The assigned meaning of the symbol and our emotional response to it underwent a radical and drastic reversal.

The meaning of symbols is transmitted through discourse with meaning being the complex relation among symbols, objects, and the person. In discourse, it is not the words alone that create meaning, but rather how the words are grouped together through grammatical structure that enables us to learn and transmit meaning. In this sense, language truly makes us human. In order for language to function successfully, however, there must be some level of shared meaning. We must agree upon “what we are talking about.” When we use the word

³ Robert A. Segal. “The Myth-Ritualist Theory of Religion”. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19, No. 2 (1980, pp. 173-185.

⁴ Julian Huxley ed. “A Discussion on Ritualization of Behavior in Animals and Man.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, series B, 251 (a966), pp. 247-525.

⁵ Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), p. 26.

“dog,” the listener creates a mental image of the object and that mental image may vary in details—a German shepherd in one person’s mind, a poodle in another’s. What is critical to communication, though, is shared meaning: that we agree upon the proposition—dog, a domestic animal with four legs, a tail, a head—not necessarily the details.

A great deal of human behavior meets symbolic needs and these behaviors (speech for verbal symbolization and action for nonverbal symbolization) result in ritual. Ritual not only enhances the quality of meaning and facilitates our understanding of objects, events and people; it also serves to generate more penetrating questions about the meanings of the symbols involved.

The foundation of symbolic interaction (communication) is found in the work of George Herbert Mead primarily in his book *Mind Self and Society*.⁶ In order for humans to cooperate, they must first come to an agreed upon understanding of each other’s intentions. Symbol-using interaction serves that function. Humans are biological creatures possessing a brain capable of rational processing who, by mental processes, plan and rehearse their symbolic behavior so as to better prepare themselves for social interaction. And while Kenneth Burke is noted for his explanation of the use of dramatic metaphor in communication, he also noted how individuals present themselves to others through ritual and role-playing.⁷ Finally, Hugh Duncan stresses the importance of the symbol in transmitting meaning.⁸ He also stresses the roles people assume noting that “Social order is created and sustained in social dramas through intensive and frequent communal presentations.”⁹

⁶ George H. Meade. *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

⁷ Stephen W. Littlejohn. *Theories of Human Communication* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 68-72)

⁸ Hugh Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁹ Ibid, p. 60

Symbols function to synthesize the tone, character, and quality of human life giving it a moral and aesthetic style and mood. They provide a picture of how things should be. Symbols represent sets of acts; establish powerful and long-lasting moods and motivations; formulate conceptions in general; clothe perceptions with an aura of factuality; and establish moods and motivations that seem uniquely realistic.¹⁰

Symbols are used as vehicles for conception—meaning—and are abstractions fixed in perceptible form with concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings and beliefs. They are the key to understanding culture and cultural activity. A symbol is a plan for a house, not the actual house. It is the drawing, not the structure. Symbols provide templates for a process external to themselves but which lead to a definite form. In man, his genes do not speak to his ability to engage in the building trade, that needs a conception of what is to be built and that conception is done in symbolic form. Symbols are blueprints or textbooks not buildings. The proper manipulation of significant symbols gives them graphic power and enables man to attain his destiny.

In Freemasonry, symbols are intertransportable. They may mean different things at different times and on different levels. And while they do shape our ritual into a distinctive set of tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, and proneness, they give character to the flow of our activity and the quality of our experience. The legend is learned by heart, and the symbols and moods that the symbols induce range from melancholy to joy, from confidence to pity, from exalted to bland.

Communication, then, is a complex process that utilizes symbols to transmit meaning and to socialize the individual. A primary form of this transmission and socialization is ritual.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973, p.90).

Ritual

Originally, “ritual” referred to the Roman judicial concept of the proven or correct way to perform. It was also considered as that which was normal, natural, and true. Ritual functions by facilitating the human brain’s ability to focus on the question or object in such a way as to lead the individual and the group to a shared meaning that serves the best interest of those involved.

Our ancient brethren worked long and hard to develop and understand their Craft, and to perpetuate its history, knowledge and identity by initiating novices through a system of ever higher levels of knowledge (degrees) imparted through ritual. By the late Middle Ages, our ancient brethren had expanded their practices (ritual) by assigning to their working tools special moral and spiritual meaning, and by utilizing those symbols in their ritual. This enabled the brethren to conceive of something apart from the immediate or practical nature of the object. The symbols had become “instruments of thought” that required further study and contemplation to reach a full understanding of their meaning.

Ritual utilizes shared meanings to transmit to the audience and from generation to generation the concepts of the institution. It comes to us in at least six forms: formalism, traditionalism, invariance, sacred, and performance. It may further be categorized by genre: rite of passage, commemorative rites, rites of communion, rites of affliction, and rites of festival. Above all, ritual enhances meaning and understanding, and furthers learning. We first learn the basic principles—memorize the catechisms and degree work—and then we progress to the utilization of that information in our search for and attainment of higher, more significant knowledge.

In Freemasonry, our rituals or forms and ceremonies perform not only as formal, institutionalized exercises that create an *esprit de corps* as well as a shared experience and

language, but they also serve as the means to transmit our traditions and to establish for the brethren the higher meaning of the signs, symbols, allegories, and landmarks of our craft as well enabling them to grasp those special meanings. And while the functional aspect of the ritual is important—opening and closing of the Lodge, the conferral of Degrees, the installation of officers, the internment of the dead and should be uniform utilizing an agreed-upon language, symbolization and action--it is the meaning of the ritual that is paramount.

Ritual enables the participants to order the world that surrounds them in an agreed upon manner. It simplifies the chaos of events and communications by imposing thereon a coherent system that enables us to catalog, categorize, and understand experiences. Not only is seeing believing, doing is believing.

Humans also seek predictability in their lives in an unpredictable world. When you step on the gas pedal, you have the firm expectation that the vehicle will begin to move and, even, gain speed. When this does not happen, your expectation is not fulfilled—you are frustrated. The same is applicable to human communication. When we say “good morning” to another person, we anticipate that we will receive a similar greeting in return. When that does not happen, our expectations are defeated and, again, we become frustrated.

Human life is a series of choices in an unpredictable world, and the more choices that confront one the easier it is for that person to become stressed. Ritual fulfills a psychological function for humans as they go through their daily lives by addressing issues of choices. It is predictable and that predictability has a calming effect. It also serves the human psychic by enabling the individual to accurately predict what will happen next and, when it does happen, to feel a certain degree of ego fulfillment and self enhancement by having predicted correctly.

A majority of our fears can be dealt with through ritual. Young children, for example, engage in ritualistic verbal behavior such as saying certain words, prayers, or stories especially at

bedtime. This fulfills a child's need for routine and structure. A constructive ritual provides the same peace and order to daily routines. The difference between healthy rituals or routines and those that suggest a psychological malady is that a healthy ritual may be interrupted and resumed at pleasure without it losing its impact.

Normal routines and rituals have a calming effect on humans by reducing fear. For example, most humans fear loss—of parents, objects, and friends. We overcome this fear through the ritual of collecting be it photographs, rocks, dolls, coins, or baseball cards. A healthy ritual (or hobby) does not interfere with one's ability to function or take up too much time or space; it is a normal human activity utilized to deal with the uncertainty of existence.

Ritual enhances learning by connecting the inner emotional experience of the presenter to that of the audience through a systematized set of words, gestures and movements. This is accomplished through an understanding of how humans behave when responding to various emotional and real life situations, and transferring those observations to the structure of the ritualistic experience. These ritualistic gestures, movements and words must not, however, be stereotyped or melodramatic, but rather they should be performed in such a manner as to result in an emotional connectivity between the presenter and the audience.

Ritual also serves the interest of the performer. Humans respond to actions more than they do to words. Telling a child to do as you say, not as you do, is not going to produce the behavior you desire. Behavior (ritual) is a much stronger driving force than is simple verbal communication. In conjunction with this, when actions are coupled with words, the learning experience works faster and with better comprehension and retention.

Ritual further serves learning through observation and imitation. Experience is definitely a great and wonderful teacher, but you cannot experience everything yourself. You can,

however, observe the actions of others engaged in a ritualistic experience and through that observation learn and imitate.

Psychologists sometime refer to ritual as a form of repetitive behavior engaged in by persons to neutralize or prevent anxiety and to help the human address that which is new, strange and different. At the same time, more importantly in Freemasonry, ritual contains content and centrality. It is both a form of communication and a means for both outward communication and inward reflection. Rituals are to be both performed and contemplated. To perform any ritual at its most impressive and instructional manner, especially on of a Masonic nature, we should understand the symbolization involved and be able to interpret it utilizing our physical and oral skills (ritual).

The performance and content of the ritual may vary, as it does between Masonic Jurisdictions and, even, Lodges, but that does not reduce the impact or intensity of the ritualistic experience, the centrality of ritual to our Craft, or the ability of those rituals and symbols to link us together through a common belief system and a shared communication experience.

We do spiritual ceremonies or ritual because they comfort us; because they possess innate power; because they are engaging; because they are familiar; because they teach; because they illustrate; because they reduce anxiety; because they enhance performance; because they require personal involvement; because they make us part of a community; because we receive physical and psychological benefits; and because they have a direct influence upon what comes after as well as our interpretation of what came before.

Ritual provides us with a safe place, free from the worries of daily life. It is an anchor line—a cable's length. It provides us a link to a sound foundation. For some of us, notes Elizabeth Gilbert in *Eat, Pray, Love*, it helps us fix our own broken down emotional system.

Ritual gives shape and order as well as identity and direction to our lives. Much religious ritual is oriented to the calendar and enables us to celebrate and acknowledge the passage of time. Other religious ritual, communion, for example, links us to our past and, since it is done with other people, makes us part of a larger community. The power of ritual is also linked to the number of participants and, as with a wedding or funeral, celebrates life events common to all humanity.

Ritual is not meaningless repetition. Each time a ritual is performed, we discover something new. Each time we participate, we hear a new word, discover a new physical movement, or experience a fresh emotional response. And ritual, like a good play or drama, is cathartic: it provides us with an emotional release (sometimes strong). But ritual is not, as some describe it, “mumbo-Jumbo.” It engages us physiologically and psychologically because it enables us to utilize space and time to express ourselves and demonstrate our involvement in the process. It can, however, lose its power if too protracted or too esoteric.

Power, engagement, familiarity and comfort

Ritual is not easy. It requires dedication, thoughtfulness, and concentration. When engaged in ritual, we are able to shut out the intrusions of daily life and focus on internal rather than external matters. The clear intent is to make us fully aware of the moment and mindful of the situation.

A perfectly performed ritual is similar, in emotional response, to a perfectly performed musical composition. The sour note, the misplaced beat, the break in rhythm draws attention away from the intended goal. The perfectly performed composition moves us to transcend the mundane and respond at an emotional and intellectual level. Ritual works in an identical manner: the closer to perfection, the greater the impact of the ceremony.

In some ancient societies, the power of ritual was inherent to its perfection. It was deemed essential to the well-being of the people and the favorable reaction of their gods. In Aztec culture, the exact performance of certain ritual practices, especially that of the drummer, was considered essential to success in warfare. The failure of the drummer to perform exactly led to swift and sure punishment because it was perceived to predict defeat. In a similar manner, imperfection in the performance of ritual was considered as a direct factor when the rains did not come on time or came too forcefully; when the animals necessary to survival disappeared; or when the illness did not abate after treatment by the priest or shaman. Even in the Christian faith, the failure to perform a ritual correctly—a marriage ceremony, for example—is perceived by some as rendering the outcome invalid.

Ritual is most comfortable when we have mastered it. The mastery of ritual is directly related to our personal concept of accomplishment and well-being. We strive for perfection, though we settle for excellence or less. We are not perfect creatures, but when we perform ritual in a proper manner and are fully confident in our performance, our level of comfort increases. This level of comfort is transmitted to other participants as well as to spectators and becomes an expression of the power of the performance. When great actors appear on stage, their confidence in their performance contributes to the willing suspension of disbelief and enables the audience to participate in the dramatic event to the fullest extent. So it is with ritual, the more confident the ritualist, the more compelling the ritual.

Ritual is familiar and that familiarity adds to its comfort level. Ritual is predictable whereas the world around us is chaotic. When an individual leaves for work in the morning there is an unpredictable aspect to both the journey and all possible future events which may be discomfoting. With ritual, we know what is coming. It isn't a surprise. It doesn't change and,

while change may be the one constant in life, it is disconcerting. Through ritual we neutralize anxiety.

Ritual is a map that enables us to react to tragedy and exhilaration not blindly but intelligently. It is a mass pilgrimage, a corroborative effort, whereby symbolic models—activities coupled with words—establish and further a devotional mood produced through the continual re-enactment by the participants of some great and important event. Human responses are, though, extreme in their generality, diffuseness, and variability, and the pattern of those responses is predominately cultural rather than genetic. Masonic ritual is cross cultural and this serves to unify man. Man, however, makes himself, for better or worse, man.

Engaging, teaching, personal involvement

Ritual requires us to participate either directly as an actor or indirectly as an observer. In both roles we are engaged in the event. As in sports, both the player and the spectator participate in the game and, in turn, in the win or loss. For both the participant and the observer of ritual, there is a type of mystical inspiration. It is a shared experience. The level of involvement determines the degree to which the observer partakes of the experience.

There are a number of motives for engaging in ritual: eustress (positive stress), escape, entertainment, group affiliation, self-esteem and, even, peer pressure as well as family needs. In ancient times we lived in relatively small groups or tribes. The leaders—performers of ritual—were representative of “the people” and the performance of ritual was perceived to be directly related to future events. In the modern world, ritual enables the observer and participant to feel a deep emotional response in a protected, safe environment in which there may be no real-world consequences. It gives us something that we can value without requiring from most of us an overt physical or mental action.

Ritual serves a distinct teaching function. In Masonry we learn the signs, symbols, allegories, tokens, and the meaning of the Craft through various degrees and Lodge rituals. This learning is enriched by our physical performance during those rituals. Learning utilizing a single sense—hearing—is possible, but it is enriched when pictures and action are added to the words. As a young surveyor, the author memorized the various geometrical theorems and trigonometric functions. But he did not fully understand them until he went into the field with a survey crew and made practical application of that information. That practical application—that doing—enhanced and completed the learning experience as well as the understanding of the mathematical equations. Ritual functions in a similar manner.

Community and Renewal

Ritual is an organized communication performance within a shared experience. It is repeated on a regular basis. It is familiar and routine. Ritual is important because it provides for a renewal of our shared or common experiences and gives legitimacy to what we are doing. In a very real way, ritual makes us free men while enabling us to interact with others.

Ritual helps us remember, renew and refresh. Repeated tasks help us do our jobs; engage with family, friends, community, and strangers; and participate more fully in a social setting. Ritual is storytelling at its most sincere, austere, and complete. Consider the rituals of the three degrees of Freemasonry as an example. They tell a complete story—the allegory of the building of King Solomon’s temple and Hiram Abiff. They refresh for us the meaning of power and personal strength as they orient the newcomer to our organization while they reaffirm for all the meaning of their involvement. Further, our ritual introduces and refreshes our sense of group identity as it teaches us the courtesies and obligations of our Craft. It also teaches us the culture of the organization by enabling us to “learn the ropes” through a series of performances. Although this may be accomplished by direct instruction, engagement in ritual enables us to

interpret the event in terms of the organizational perspective—to be part of the group. Ritual, therefore, contributes directly to understanding the cultural meaning of our Craft.

Ritual utilizes symbolic acts which involve speech and language as well as various methods of nonverbal symbolization. All of these play a direct part in the human response we call “life”: the better the ritual, the better the response and, in turn, the better the quality of meaning, understanding, and life.

Solemnity of Ritual and Degree Work in the Lodge

Joseph Campbell notes that ritual is meant to convey an inner reality though it is now, for many, merely form. Society without ritual, he suggests, lacks the method to introduce the young into the tribe. Children, in order to function rationally in society need to be twice born notes Campbell.¹¹ Masonic ritual serves that exact function.

Ritual or degree work in the Lodge is an essential element of Freemasonry. It takes the man from the outside world—the profane—and transforms him into a Brother, a Freemason. Ritual is designed to impact directly on the inner life of the candidates and brothers. It is not an empty, meaningless ceremony and should not be treated as such.

Thus there is no place for mirth in our ritual. There is evidence in ancient records and charges of some level of frivolity in Masonic Lodges, but by the early 1700s and the establishment of modern Freemasonry, that type of behavior is specifically addressed and prohibited. Tricks, jokes, gestures, even side-line whispering are strongly discouraged. The focal point of all of our work is the *Holy Bible* and, as such, it deserves our respect as it serves to temper our actions.

¹¹ Joseph Campbell. *The Power of Myth*. Anchor Books, 1991, pp. 30-37.

Along with the issue of frivolity or mirth during ritual arises the issue of applause. Nothing that a Brother does during the ritual merits applause. The Candidate has come to us of his own free will and accord and we, in turn, are welcoming him into our fellowship with a specific time assigned at the end of the Communication for more personal expression. The same admonition applies to applause for the ritual and degree team. There is ample opportunity within the Closing for the team to be properly recognized for work well done.

To engage in applause during ritual or exemplification destroys the illusion (willing suspension of disbelief) and significantly reduces the impact of the event on all involved, especially those at its focus—the candidates or Brothers. Our degrees are an allegory of good and evil, of life itself. Death is prominent throughout the Third Degree and specifically referenced in the First Degree. Applause in our ritual is no more appropriate than would be applause during a religious service or a funeral. Ritual is intended to speak directly to the inner life of the candidate. All outward incursions impede that intent. Should levity, mirth, or even applause interrupt or disturb the fellowship and working of our ritual, its intent is destroyed and those involved “simply miss the point.”

Decorum

Decorum refers to the proper or appropriate style for a presentation or ritual. It is a proper or right social behavior fitting to the situation. It is a standard of behavior as well as an adherence to proper procedure. It includes not only correct or proper behavior but also a certain level of dignity in both speech and dress. Decorum is essential for the proper performance of ritual.

In Freemasonry, proper decorum is not something to be determined by the individual Brother according to his own tastes. It manifests itself by showing respect for the Craft and it is a courtesy to the Brethren. The Regius Manuscript or poem, which dates from the late 14th

century, as well as succeeding constitutions and charges required those who were “made a Mason” to pay due respect to the Craft through their proper behavior and appropriate dress.

How a person dresses is a significant factor in the establishment of first impressions. It is the right of the individual to dress and live as he pleases so long as he does not infringe on the rights of others. Freemasonry, however, is a collective effort and, like a sports team, standards of dress are not inappropriate. Based on the photographic record present in most modern Lodges, Brethren in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries exercised a high standard of dress in the Lodge—Sunday best, if you will. During Masonic ritual, especially degree work, the overall experience is enhanced when an elevated standard of dress is maintained. The general rule, outside the United States, is that a dark suit, white shirt, and appropriate tie are required. Attendance at Lodge should be as special as attendance at a wedding or a church service. Why dress differently for Lodge than you would to attend your house of worship? The question a Mason should ask himself is this: “In terms of showing reverence and respect for the Craft, is that my best, and is that what my best should be?”¹²

We should also consider that appropriate dress “sets the stage” and strengthens the ritualistic experience as it solemnizes and honors the experience. Consider a priest at Mass: would the service have the same impact if he wasn’t wearing liturgical vestments? Military chaplains, even in combat zones, strive to maintain some level of appropriate, liturgical dress to formalize and solemnize the ritual. The author often observed chaplains, Catholic and Episcopal, in chasuble and stole standing on muddy firebases in Vietnam bringing comfort to soldiers. And those same priests always wore a stole, muddy at time, when giving Last Rites during a firefight. Part of the comfort offered came from the soldier recognizing the priest by the clothes

¹²Andrew Hammer. *Observing the Craft: The Pursuit of Excellence in Masonic Labor and Observance*. Mindhive Books, 2012, p. 85.

(vestments) he wore. Those vestments are what set him slightly outside the profane and the reality of the moment. Appropriate attire, especially for degree teams, can accomplish the same.

Essential to proper decorum in the Lodge is the minimization of whispering or talking on the side lines. The focus should be on the work (ritual) and the degree candidate. Verbal, even non-verbal, interjection serves only to disrupt and disturb the intent of the ritual. The same goes for prompting. Even the greatest, most professional theatres have a designated prompter. So should our Lodges. And it should be that prompter alone who assists with the ritual and then only upon request prearranged through specific predetermined signals. Extraneous or multiple prompts serve only to reduce the importance and impact of degree work and ritual.

Pacing, Repetition, Memorization, Practice and Focus

Great musical compositions have much in common, but especially rhythm or pacing. It is rhythm that enhances the emotional response as is suggested in the lecture for the Fellow Craft Degree. Rhythm can impact directly upon human psychology and, through a pattern of regular or irregular beats, make for either a strong or weak response. Rhythm is the pattern of the flow of both sound and action in ritual. The proper use of rhythm serves to enhance the ritualistic experience as it enables the brain to more fully comprehend the situation through a pattern of regular stresses. It also serves to facilitate memorization.

Ritual is, by its nature, repetitive. Repetition is the most intuitive learning technique and is documented in both Chinese and Egyptian records dating to 3,000 B.C or before. It requires us to do the same thing several times in the same way. In teaching, an ancient maxim is to say and/or do the same thing three times and so it is with our ritual. This repetition not only provides for better retention but it also marks those parts of our work which are to be remembered. Repetition enables us to efficiently store information and guides to action in our memory. Repetition strengthens skill at both the conscious and subconscious level. And when a skill has

been set through repetition—riding a bike—it is possible to quickly recover that skill at a later date.

The majority of rote learning is based on repetition. And while repetition alone does not lead directly to understanding, it is the first step. We memorized the letters of the alphabet and then used them to form words and sentences to express our thoughts. We memorized the “rules of the road” in order to pass the driving test and then formalize that learning through practice. In the military, one memorizes the functions of his weapon so that, when in combat, he does not have to “think,” but is able to instinctively lock, load, fire and reload. Memorization facilitates the human experience by removing the necessity to think about and analyze each individual step or function.

“Practice makes perfect” goes the old saying. It is definitely true. Professional golfers hit thousands of balls each week on the range to perfect their game. Professional football quarterbacks through thousands of passes, often at moving targets, to strengthen their arms and to hone their delivery. Masonic ritual requires the same type of practice, probably not as intense or extensive, but never-the-less it is essential to the proper performance of ritual and the ritualistic experience.

Finally, focus is essential to successful ritual. A great actor is able to focus his attention on his performance thus shutting out the audience and their responses. Most great actors tell us that, once on stage, they don’t see the audience. The same happens for great athletes, they are able to focus on the game and their performance, thus excluding from their perception distracting, outside events and people. Think about the basketball player who is about to shoot a free throw. He prepares to shoot facing the spectators, some of whom may be hostile to his intent. His successful performance depends upon his ability to focus. Proper performance of

Masonic ritual requires no less. We should focus on the ritual, on our work, on the candidate, and on our experience thus shutting out external events.

Teaching Ritual

Ritual is often perceived as incredibly difficult, but it can be taught whether it be the public rituals of church and state, or the private rituals of families and fraternities. And since ritual makes people feel their group solidarity, it is best taught to groups. Yet, it must be taught with a level of mind-body interdependence unusual to most education settings. You cannot teach ritual sitting down nor can you necessarily teach ritual from books. Originally, ritual was exclusively oral and physical, and it is still very much so.

In ritual, action holds the most important place. Details are important with repetition and redundancy essential. Ritual is for the five senses. It is a way of articulating ideas that enables us to connect content and action as it deepens understanding. When ritual is properly taught, it permits the members of the group to pass their traditions to future generations because it requires a significant level of rehearsal of those doctrines thus aiding memory and motivating participation.

A Parable

A wise ruler of a very large empire erected a magnificent palace of immeasurable dimensions and extraordinary architecture. He gathered around him assistants qualified to produce the work and provided them with the high-quality instruments to pursue their labors. This magnificent structure, though not of ordinary construction, was pleasing to the eye and served its purpose. It was durable and functional—it inculcated the mysteries of the kingdom to its subjects. From outside it was perplexing, but from within it was full of light, knowledge, and coherence.

There were those in the country, especially wise men skilled in architecture, who were offended by its very structure. It had few windows and it wasn't easy to gain entrance. The doors did not seem well placed and the gates were guarded. These learned men could not grasp that each apartment received its light, as did the whole, not from without but from above. They could not comprehend that those summoned to the palace went of their own free will and that the entrance provided them with the surest route to their objective.

Accordingly, these wise men explained the words, symbols, and architecture as they saw them according to their preconceived ideas of the plan. They paid no heed to those who worked within the palace and had neither the time nor the inclination to discuss with them the plan, even denouncing those who supported the edifice as despoilers of the palace itself.

One terrible night, the watchman called "Fire! Fire!" and everyone leapt from their beds scurrying through the darkness squabbling with each other about how best to save the edifice. Each said that they had the proper plan to save the palace, based on their experience and expertise. But none sought to find a bucket of water to throw on the reported flames. If there had, in fact, been a fire, the palace would have lain in ruins at dawn, but watchman was wrong. He had mistaken the northern lights for a conflagration and the flowing interior light confused the experts. What each quibbler failed to acknowledge or accept was that the great and wise ruler had built his magnificent palace on a sound foundation based on ancient plans given him by his ancestors and that it was infused with interior not exterior light.

True Freemasonry strives to promote brotherly love and affection, and it exemplifies these attributes through its ritual. Masonry provides light through ritual which represents the spirit as well as the letter of the Craft's beliefs. It ceaselessly strives to promote human brotherhood and is inevitably put at risk when social, political, and religious divisions are permitted to intrude.

Freemasonry is not dogmatic and through figurative language endeavors to illustrate and amplify that which is self-evident. Freemasonry has its riddles and paradoxes, and often seems to use ellipsis and aposiopesis to deny the casual viewer a definitive statement or definition. Our ritual fills those ellipsis and aposiopesis not with words but through action with meaning.

Conclusion

The Lodge is to Freemasonry what the church edifice is to religion. No conclusions should be drawn from the external prosperity and the inner trappings of a church building as to the faith of its members. Sometimes the two do not go together. It is the internal, not the external which has enabled Freemasonry to survive and prosper for more than 400 years.

Ritual is the single most important aspect of our observance of the Craft. Human history has been enriched through the extensive use of ritual by all societies. Ritual appeals to us because it provides us with a window into our shared culture. It is central to both religious and secular society because it generates an emotional response and because it is understandable. It is a physical manifestation of an internal, emotional experience.

Ritual appeals to us because it is experiential and analytical. It engulfs the total person, transporting him into another mode of existence. It has persuasive, even mystical power, and is filled with extraordinary personalities. It enables us to do what we are thinking about, and at the same time, reflect more fully upon the experience. Masonic ritual enables us to understand our symbols and history, and while it may be “scary” to some and misunderstood by others, proper performance and appreciation of our ritual serves to facilitate full development of the Symbolic Lodge and the Brotherhood. It was our ritual that attracted great and learned men to Freemasonry in the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries and it serves the same purpose today.

In 1986 and 1987 Bill Moyers interviewed Joseph Campbell for the PBS series *The Power of Myth*. Part of their discussion focuses on the Great Seal of the United States. Moyers

asked Campbell “Aren’t a lot of these Masonic Symbols?” Campbell replied “They are Masonic signs.” What followed is here noted. Moyers: “What explains the relationship between these symbols and the Masons, and the fact that so many of these founding fathers belonged to the Masonic order?” Campbell: “*This [Masonry] is a scholarly attempt to reconstruct an order of initiation that would result in spiritual revelation*” (emphasis by author). Moyers: “So when these men talked about the eye of God being reason, they were saying that the ground of our being as a society, as a culture, as a people, derives from the fundamental nature of the universe?” Campbell: “That’s what this first pyramid says. This is the pyramid of the world, and this is the pyramid of our society, and they are of the order. This is God’s creation, and this is our society.”¹³

Earlier in the same interview, Campbell states “If you want to find out what it means to have a society without rituals, read the *New York Times*. . . destructive and violent acts by young people who don’t know how to behave in a civilized society.” Moyers responds “Society has provided them no rituals by which they become members . . . of the community.”¹⁴ Freemasonry provides ritual and thus a firm foundation for our society as it transmits our values and customs through a succession of ages.

Ultimately, man can adapt himself to anything, but he cannot deal with chaos. Ritual is not chaos. Therefore one of the most important assets of Freemasonry is the symbolic ritual that orients our nature on earth and directs us in what we are doing. Ritual enables us to explain and demonstrate things which cry out for explanation. It is the foundation not only of our Craft but of our very existence.

¹³ Joseph Campbell. *The Power of Myth*. Anchor Books, 1991, p. 38.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 9.

Bibliography

- Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Allison, H.E. (1966). *Lessing and the Enlightenment: His Philosophy of Religion and its Relation to Eighteenth Century Thought*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: MSU Press.
- Bell, C. (1997). *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Bell, C. (1992). *Ritual Theory: Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bell, C. (2007). *Teaching Ritual*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, J. with Moyers, B. (1988). *The Power of Myth*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Cassirer, E. (1923). *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing.
- Cua, A. (2005). *Human Nature, Ritual and History: Studies in Xanxi and Chinese Philosophy*. New York: The Catholic University Press.
- Fischer, B. and Fox, T. (2005). *A Companion to the Works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*. New York: Woodbridge Press.
- Gertz, Clifford (1973). *The Interpretations of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Gertz*. New

York: Basic Books.

Hammer, Andrew (2010). *Observing the Craft: The Pursuit of Excellence in Masonic Labor and Observance*. Mindhive Books.com.

Hayakawa, S.I. (1952) *Language as Thought and Action*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Koltko-Rivera, M. E. (2007) *Freemasonry: An Introduction*. New York: Penguin Group.

Langer, Susanne. (1942) *Philosophy in a New Key*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

___ (1982) *Mind: An Essay on Human Feelings*. 3 Vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.