

RITUAL...AND HOW TO DO IT

What is ritual? Is it just the words and actions used in Chapters for the opening and closing ceremonies and for the conferring of our degrees? Or is this just the starting point? Can the manner and form of *presentation* produce a greater effect than the mere recitation of memorized words?

Ritual presentation is, in large part, a matter of opinion and good taste. Therefore, as with all matters of opinion, it is rather easy to become emotional when speaking of specific interpretations or staging.

It is not the intent of this material to sell you on any one way of presenting ritual work. There are many good interpretations; there are many bad ones. Comparison, visitation and conversation will broaden the mind enough for anyone to gain an insight into making ritual work better

Why Good Ritual?

It may be true that a Chapter with good, or even great, ritual may not be good in another area. But experience has shown all of the best Chapters have good, not just average, or better than average, ritual. Usually good ritual is one of the first areas in which an active Chapter rises above the average.

Why is good ritual so often the source and cause of betterment in other areas? Maybe because it is a great morale booster for officers and members. Pride can be a power for good. Maybe because through ritual, the candidates and newer members turn on faster to Masonry. Maybe because, if the Chapter does ritual well, the members have to understand it better.

Two Big Hurdles.

Just memorizing the words in the ritual is the **first of two big hurdles** which most officers face. They may do everything else right, but still not get the words in the ritual right. Often this is because they don't know how to memorize. No one ever taught them.

Here's how.

First: understand what is being said in your part. What does your part mean?

Look up the meaning and pronunciation of the words about which you are uncertain or confused. You may have to consult specialized dictionaries or consult with some knowledgeable brother. But you CAN find every word in some authoritative source. You may want to pass along the results at your next rehearsal. If you weren't sure, chances are others are unsure also.

Second: learn the continuity of your part, that is, how it fits into the rest of the degree. Learn what is being said and in what order it is being said. Learn this so well you can describe it without using the exact words of the ritual. Don't fight the detail words from the very beginning or you will learn as a parrot learns and, in the degree, you will say them as a parrot would!

Third: AND NOT BEFORE, hammer the words into place in your memory, word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence.

Giving ritual from memory is the first big hurdle. This is basic. If you don't care enough to learn the work, why should the candidate care enough to learn his catechism . . . or come back at all?

Understand the words, then learn the meaning of your part, then memorize the ritual.

The **second big hurdle** is the one many officers miss completely.

When you know what you're going to say (you have it memorized) you have the tendency to say it faster than your mind would frame the thought in ordinary speech.

But the candidates and the newer members haven't yet gone through the three steps above. It takes several hearings just for them to begin to understand.

So SLOW DOWN IN YOUR DELIVERY. This is sometimes harder than memorizing. Slow everyone else down too. There's no fire. Why rush? Your words should be spoken slowly enough so they can be heard and understood by someone who has never heard them before

THEN SPEAK UP. Your words should be spoken loudly enough so they can be heard and understood by someone who has never heard them before (that's every candidate) and by someone who is sitting in the farthest seat in the room (even if that seat is empty.) Remember, it's trickier to catch all the words in a dramatic character part than it is in a straight, declamatory, ritual part. Use a sound system if needed.

The purpose of ritual is not just knowing the words and saying the words it is getting the ideas across to the candidates. That's the purpose of everything in ritual

After the work is memorized, consider some other things.

Deliver the work accurately from memory. That's the minimum requirement for holding office. If an officer won't learn his part, replace him!

Keep side liners in their seats and quiet. Yes, even during the opening and closing.

Make sure all officers take their work seriously. This is not the time for jokes.

Achieving uniformity in officer dress. It does not mean regimentation or a uniform. It does not mean every officer should match exactly (although that doesn't hurt.) But jeans, next to a suit, next to a sweater, next to a bow tie, next to a straight tie, next to no tie, does not produce a sharp impression.

Striving for precision in officer movements. Some may say the candidate is blindfolded anyway. But he's not blindfolded for the entire degree. Besides there are others (visitors, members, the officers themselves) in the room. The whole idea of degree improvement lies in doing things in a more impressive manner.

Critiquing each degree. Try to do this as soon after the Chapter closes as courtesy to the other members will permit the officers to be called aside. Critiquing doesn't mean just criticizing. It means:

- Point out the good parts first. Something is always good, even if it's an officer who ad-libbed his part instead of freezing when his memory failed him.
- Refer to improvements over the last performance. Again, something always goes better.
- Refer to the worst of the bad points (but not all of them.)
- Never use words like terrible, ugly, lousy, etc.

- Don't name names, unless it's a very chronic offender, and not too much of this. They know what went wrong too.
- Set one or two (never more) specific goals for the next performance. Follow through on them by reminders at the rehearsals and right before the next performance.
- Remember the purpose of the critique is to improve and inspire. No one is inspired by a whip or a club. Fear, anger and resentment will backfire.

Visiting other Chapters when they put on the degrees. If the host Chapter does a better job than your Chapter, then discuss their strong points after the degree, never during it. Even if they are not better overall, don't criticize. Instead still discuss their strong points among yourselves. Every Chapter has something to teach every other Chapter.

Remember, at all times, that when we have a live candidate, the objective is what I call the "Wow" factor. If the candidate doesn't leave the degree, especially the EA Degree, saying or thinking "Wow . . . that was great . . . really impressive . . . really well done." Then we haven't achieved our goal and we have diminished our chances of his becoming an active and participating member of the Chapter. The main officers could leave out a couple of sentences each and substitute a bunch of words, and so on, but if the performance is impressive, things are run smoothly, the brethren are smiling, friendly and seem to know what they are doing, then the objective will be achieved. Ritual perfection should remain the goal, but impressive performance and positively impressing the candidate is the most important goal.