



UGLE Oration

Experiencing Ritual

Index

An explanation of the enlightening experience created through ritual.

Summary

This presentation considers why ritual is used in Masonry and is highly personal to the Candidate.

Keywords:

Moral, Experiential, Initiation, Actions, Messages

Why Ritual is so important?

Let's face it; the one thing that really differentiates us from organisations such as Rotary, the Lions and the Round Table is our ritual. Much has been written about what is contained therein, but let us take a step back and consider why we use it and what relevance this rather old collection of little plays has for a contemporary membership.

Ritual is part of life and there is evidence that it was practised as far back as the Neanderthals when their dead were buried in the foetal position, surrounded by food offerings, tools and different types of flowers. Today, ritual spans all cultures whether it is the rites of passage into adulthood of the Maasai tribe in Africa, or the ahahuasca¹ shamanism as practiced by the Urarina tribe of the Upper Amazon.

But what is ritual? In a Masonic sense, it can be defined as a set of actions which contain certain moral lessons. These should enable the participants to glimpse their true and inner selves. Ritual is not ceremonial. A ceremony is a rite that confirms some form of role or status on its participants, such as a coronation, a victory parade or a graduation. Ritual is transformative. Effective ritual should reveal a transition and demonstrate clearly how the *after* differs from the *before*. It should tug at the heart, both positively and negatively and it should also have a shared resonance with all the participants.

Not everyone is a naturally good ritualist, in the commonly accepted meaning of the word. To some, it comes easily, but to most of us it can be something of a struggle. There is more to being a good ritualist than just getting all the words right. It is not about saying the *words*; it is about *meaning* what you say. It is important not only to memorise the words, but also to understand the messages they convey. We would all do well to spend more time trying to appreciate and make sense of the nuggets of wisdom the ritual contains. We will then become better ritualists not just by delivering it well in the Lodge, but by living its values outside the Lodge.

Superficially, one could consider that our ritual book contains a series of lessons or *information*, which is to be imparted to the Candidate. How is such information usually conveyed in other systems? For example, consider how a teacher assembles a course for his students in order to enable them to pass the examination at the end. He will read reference books and harvest the relevant information in the appropriate order, and then he will communicate this information through lectures and handouts. The students will make notes to help them learn it, and then they will use it to answer the questions in the examination. We all know that learning ritual is difficult and time-consuming. Given this, would it not be a good idea for an enlightened Brother to treat our ritual like school syllabus? He could read the relevant works of reference, extract the key messages and teachings, and, write them down in order to make a course that contained all the content. He could then deliver it to his Lodge, perhaps as a PowerPoint presentation, or even as distance learning online. Our Brethren could be simply told: '*be nice to everyone, be generous too, and, by the way, don't break any rules*'. How efficient! How simple! No more evenings spent immersed in the little blue book!

But Masonic ritual is not just about *learning* information, and this is one of the real Masonic secrets: ritual is experiential. It is something that cannot be described or expressed, just as you cannot learn to swim or ride a bicycle by reading a book, you have to experience it. It is a journey of the heart which changes your very core.

Initiation is the start of a journey which opens the door to the rites of passage that follow. Think back to your own feelings of apprehension and helplessness whilst standing blindfolded outside the door of the Lodge just before your Initiation. Can you remember that momentary burst of self-awareness and disagreeable awkwardness when you were asked to give to charity shortly afterwards? Consider the impact of this experience. Is it still etched in your memory? If it is, it is very likely that you will not only merely remember the messages, but that they will have an elevated status in your consciousness. If you had merely been told what to do, it would not have had anything like the same impact. The nature of the moral teachings of our ritual lends itself to be communicated in this way, as it strikes at our hearts.

Consider for a moment the feeling of sharing and Brotherhood which emerged as the ceremony of Initiation progressed. You were the lead character in a rather complex and choreographed drama, but you, this temporarily blind actor, did not have a script, and did not know what was coming in the next scene. Others were there to help you and lead you to the eventual restoration of light. What an impact that moment had, as your eyes strained to focus, and the clap echoed around the Lodge Room. Our ritual can therefore have a deep effect, not just on the Candidate, but on all those taking part, as there is an overwhelming sense of togetherness and change. You can take great satisfaction from a fine ceremony but, perhaps more importantly, participation brings its messages vividly to life for all those involved and binds them together, for this is the Mystic Tie.

The content of our ritual, which is built around the three Grand Masonic Principles of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth, is as current as ever, and has perhaps even more relevance in this age of intolerance. Ritual is central to Freemasonry and lifts it out of the mundane to something quite special. It gives us an experience that cannot be described, and its effect touches us at the very core of who we are in our quest to become better men, as anyone who has experienced it will know. Xun Zi, the Confucian philosopher elegantly summed this up as follows: *'A person should first be changed by a teacher's instructions, and guided by principles of ritual. Only then can he observe the rules of courtesy and humility, obey the conventions and rules of society, and achieve order.'*

Endnotes

¹ Pronounced 'aja-waska'

##END##

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (*in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself*)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary.

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (*in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand*).

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*.
Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

For further papers and other learning materials visit "Solomon" at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

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