

Ritual: Beyond Memorization to Meaning

As I approached my year in the East, I remembered when I was going through the degrees and was first told by my coach I would have to memorize the catechism for each degree and recite it in Lodge without mistake. No small undertaking with all of the other stresses I faced in our fast paced society. When I was then told that this had to be learned, without benefit of having it written down, but simply passed from the instructive tongue to the attentive ear, the task seemed insurmountable. Upon achieving it, although not without several missed words, I was overwhelmed with a misguided sense of real accomplishment.

Why do I say misguided? Because all I did was repeat what someone had told me, not unlike a child repeating the words of those around them. I choose this analogy to further demonstrate that upon entering this Fraternity, we are not unlike children. We come in without much Masonic knowledge and must learn from our more informed Brethren.

As more and more elements of ritual were tasked and committed to memory, I began to wonder if I would ever master it all. It was not until I took the time to think about what the words were trying to tell me that I began to understand the lessons that had been handed down mouth to ear by generations of Masons. Yes, I began to learn rather than simply to recite.

A Mason can, and should, learn something new each time he sits in Lodge. We call Masonry a progressive science because this learning process is continuous and should never stop. This is why Operative Masons took so much time moving through the apprenticeship process to become a craftsman or fellow, and then a master. This process ensured the apprentice went beyond rote learning to a deeper understanding. This is why, as speculative Masons, we progress slowly through each of the Craft degrees.

We soon realize, or should, that our Masonic education is not over with the completion of the Degree of Master Mason. Each visit to a Lodge should motivate us to search for a clearer understanding of what our ritual is trying to convey. This is precisely what Masonic education is all about, and the main focus of this talk.

The words of our ritual are beautiful and full of lessons, if we only take the time to listen and learn. Indeed, I have found that memorization was much less difficult, once I understood what the specific section of ritual was attempting to teach.

Let us take a look at a specific piece of ritual, one that is written down, but is no less important than that passed only from mouth to ear, the Master's Prayer at the raising of a candidate:

Thou, O God! knowest our downsitteing and our uprising, and understandest our thoughts afar off. This refers to the fact that the Supreme Architect of the Universe sees and knows all that his children do, think, and say – sometimes represented by a symbol, the All Seeing Eye.

Shield and defend us from the evil intentions of our enemies, and support us under the trials and afflictions we are destined to endure while traveling through this vale of tears. In our devotions

to deity, we humbly ask for God's support to help us through our daily trials and to protect us from those who would bring us harm.

Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He cometh forth as a flower and is cut down; he fleeth as a shadow and continueth not. This points to the fact that our time in the earthly realm is short in comparison to the promise of everlasting life, and that we will eventually cease to exist in our earthly form.

Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months is with Thee, Thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass, turn from him that he may rest, till he shall accomplish as a hireling his day.

We recognize that although our time is limited, each of us possesses the power to accomplish what God has intended for us. The question for us is whether we will use our talents for good or for evil.

For there is hope of a tree if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease. But man dieth and wasteth away; yea man giveth up the ghost and where is he? This phrase recognizes the mortality of our human form in comparison to other living things. The flesh is weak and will eventually "give up the ghost" and return to the earth. But has man ceased because of the death of the body? The spirit or soul survives, thus, the last part of the phrase "man giveth up the ghost."

As the waters fail from the Sea and the flood decayth and drieth up, so man lieth down, and riseth not up again till the heavens shall be no more. This phrase again defines the certainty of our mortality but recognizes the day when all will rise from the grave, and the distinction between our earthly and our heavenly existence will be no more.

Yet, O Lord! have compassion on the children of Thy creation, administer them comfort in the time of trouble, and save them with an everlasting salvation. The final phrase recognizes God as a caring and compassionate entity who provides us comfort when we need it, and will eventually save us and grant us everlasting life.

Nine Sentences, 214 words, yet if we spend the time necessary to understand the meaning behind them, they become easier to commit to memory and much more meaningful to the candidate, when delivered during the degree.

I suggest you study with equal care the meaning behind the words of the prayer that begins: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth..." which is heard near the beginning of the Degree of Master Mason. You will understand how it speaks to the human condition as we age, and it will then be much more meaningful to you than it can be gleaned by simply listening to the spoken words.

As an officer in my Lodge or as a visitor to another Lodge, I observe how frequently we sit on the sidelines and joke about, or openly correct, the performance of our Brothers, who are attempting to fulfill the obligations of their Offices. How precisely we remember the nuances of

the missing “s” or the substitution of “any” for “all” in the ritual, and forget how tongue-tied we ourselves can become when reciting portions of the ritual in front of our Brethren.

Let me be clear, I include myself as a guilty party, and I am making a concerted effort to correct this deficiency in myself. Why? In part, because it unnerves me when I am the one committing the error, and I find those corrections from the sidelines distracting, and rather than helpful, often causing more confusion. Also, because these interruptions and critical asides from the sidelines detract from the great lessons our ritual could teach us, if only we would pay attention, contemplate, and learn.

The next time you are attending your mother Lodge or as a visitor to another Lodge, take the time to really listen to the ritual. Rather than trying to identify the errors and omissions a Brother may make from nervousness or distraction, focus your attention on the underlying meaning of the words being spoken, and how you might apply them in your daily life.

If your Brother misses a phrase or substitutes an incorrect word, your mind will compensate. Because you have heard it recited so many times before, your mind will disregard the mistake and fill in the correction. This is the miracle of the mind.

Fighting the urge to openly correct the Brother is a Masonic act of kindness. To blurt out an unasked for prompt is not in keeping with your obligation to admonish a Brother of his error and aid a reformation “in the most friendly manner.” Your restraint is also in support of your own Masonic education. If you spend your time actively listening to the ritual and concentrating on its deeper meaning, rather than thinking about the minor mistakes of recitation, you will get so much more out the ritual.

So to conclude, I would ask that the next time you sit in Lodge, invest your time in really listening not just to the words of our ritual, but to its deeper meanings



‘The Winding Staircase – A path to improving yourself in Masonry’

By: Michael J. Caro, LEO, Tuckahoe Lodge No. 347 9-19

Adapted from the writings of: Wor. Marion G. Pine, Jr., Bayside Lodge No. 218