

The First as Well as the Last Great Care of Masons  
The Decline of Masonic Ritual Proficiency in North American Lodges  
By Bro. Steve Humes

On any given day within the North American continent there is a Masonic Lodge conducting business. As Masons we all know that the first as well as the last great care of Masons is to see that the Lodge is duly tyled. This is our “watch word” our security blanket so to speak; our guarantee that what we do and say behind the Lodge door is of such quality and value that it stays separate from the uninitiated. Why? Take a good look around you. What are you doing or saying that needs to be safeguarded? Poor ritual work? Lack of memorization? Are we hiding something? I would say, in many cases, not all, we are misrepresenting ourselves and our Fraternity, living on past glories and achievements while wallowing in our present mediocrity. What have we done? How can this be? Our Fraternity is built on some of the most comprehensive checks and balances to ensure that this does not happen. Let’s look at these more closely.

The foundation of Freemasonry is built on ritual. Ritual is part of our life, it is how we make good men better. Ritual, our three morality plays in two acts each, is what separates us from every other fraternal organization. Opening and closing the Lodge is just one part of this time honored script. The ability to confer degrees within the Lodge relies upon the proficiency of the Lodge members. Each and every Master Mason is an overseer of the work. The work being the ritual. Our ritual is the foundation that brotherly love, relief and truth is built on. It is the duty of every Master Mason to see that the work is done correctly and competently. However, over the past one-hundred years we have

allowed the Fraternity to take the spotlight away from knowing and performing the ritual to just getting by as the need arises. Declining membership probably has a lot to do with how this started. The swelling of Lodge memberships after World War 2 made it very easy for Lodges to fill every chair with Brothers eager to learn, live, and recite the work. In fact, talking with many older members who like to reminisce about the “good old days when Masonry was hard” stated that it was not uncommon for the Master of a Lodge to hold an unlimited proficiency card. This was just something everyone set out to achieve. Election to a particular chair, or station was a just reward for putting the time into delivering quality ritual. As membership declined in the 1960s and 70s the need for proficient ritualists took a back seat to working on increasing membership. After all, we need as many members as we can get in order to keep the dues money coming in to maintain what we have.

Fast forward a few decades to the present and we find ourselves still fighting the membership battle, but with many unintended consequences. Lodges that cannot open or close without their cipher books open in front of each officer. Lodges that cannot read their ciphers proficiently. Lodges that cannot conduct any degree work with their current membership even though they boast over a hundred members. Many Grand Lodges have suggested putting together Degree Teams to address this issue, but I believe this only makes the problem worse. Qualified degree teams do ensure that the degree is performed well, even spectacular, but it creates a false sense that the Lodge is not responsible for knowing the work. How long will it be before we are worrying about how to fill the Degree Teams? How long will it be before we are watching the degree on video? Some of you gasp at the thought, but I would say we are already on our way.

How many Lodges have had to use the recorded CD or DVD to finish the lectures for the First and Third Degrees? What seems commonplace now is just the beginning of the total loss of live ritual in the Lodge. The sad fact is that many members don't have a problem with conferring degrees with an open cipher in one hand and the Candidate or Brother in the other hand. Eventually the only thing the Master will memorize is the obligation, and maybe the charge, but given time, this too will fall.

Our ritual steadily evolved to what we have today from very simple beginnings. Our earliest forms of the ritual were not standardized and the quality depended upon how much punch the Master drank before the lectures of the Degree. It is not my intent to provide a history lesson of ritual development, but I would encourage everyone to read W.:B.: Robert Davis' book entitled The Mason's Word for a better understanding of how our present ritual came to be. Additionally, every Mason should question and explore how, and why we do what we do. William Preston devoted much of his life to refining Masonic ritual, and our modern Stair Lecture is the result of his hard work. Who of us has not marveled at the teachings and beauty of a well delivered Stair Lecture? Do we really want to go back to wondering "what will the Master come up with tonight", or "I don't think I have heard that before"? As I stated earlier, my intent is not to deliver a history lesson on ritual development, but to show that we have not been very good stewards of what we have declared we would do. Declared what? What are you talking about? Remember those interrogatories propounded by the Senior Deacon on the night we were initiated? Yes, we, and I mean each of us declared upon our honor that we would among other things, "cheerfully conform to all the ancient and established usages and customs of the Fraternity". That means we are going to follow the rules. We all

declared that we have a desire for knowledge. That means we want to learn! If that is not enough, we even answer the question every time we open on the first degree, “what came you here to do”? So if we have declared that we would do these things, then why are we not doing them? I would give you one word “volunteer”. The Craft in North America is terrified of the word “volunteer”. Don’t hold Lodges to a high standard, “Brother Smith might stop making dinner, or participating in our pancake breakfast fundraiser”. If moving from one degree to another is too hard, or making our members memorize their parts is too difficult, they will not come back. We have used this word as a convenient scapegoat, no pun intended, for allowing our standards to fall. As a retired Army Senior Noncommissioned Officer, I often hear other retirees, many of whom are Freemasons, remark at how there are no standards in today’s Military anymore. “In my day, that would not pass for a push up” etc. However, these same Brothers are perfectly fine with the Fraternity they claim to hold dear let slip into mediocrity.

By now, many of you are mad. “Who is this guy?” How dare he criticize this glorious Fraternity? He has not been around long enough to criticize Freemasonry. Who am I? I am one of those “volunteers” who wants to be challenged and engaged with quality ritual. I want to know why we do what we do, what our words and movements mean. However, what I have realized is that as our ritual proficiency declines, so does what we have to offer. I can do everything any Lodge in North America does without being a Freemason. Fundraising, Cancer screenings, Community outreach, we do not have a copyright on these activities. In fact, many civic organizations do it much better than we ever could hope to achieve. What they don’t have is our ritual. It is our ritual that separates us from every other Civic and Social group, and we are letting it slip

away. So how do we stop the decay? We need to operate, and operate quickly. This does not start at the Grand Lodge level, this starts at the ground floor. Freemasons need to recognize this deficiency and make a concerted effort to improve. Grand Lodges must support this effort, not with just an edict, but District and Area Deputies helping Lodges and keeping them on track, evaluating performance and providing feedback, both good and bad. Your new Masons learn from the established members. If you don't care, neither will they, and that definitely should be an offense against the Body of Masonry.

Lodges that do not care enough to put forth an effort to at least be able to open and close without the use of their ciphers should be shuttered. Lodges that refuse to work on their ritual proficiency or make an attempt to learn at least one part for the conferral of a degree should not be offered assistance. Lodges who, for whatever reason allow members to confer degrees with an open cipher should be suspended from taking in, or advancing any members. Lodges that continue to cultivate a poor attitude will assimilate new members into this mentality. Poor leadership, lack of mentorship by respected members, and sloppy work will create more mediocre members. As Freemasons, we value the concepts of charity, hope, faith, brotherly love, truth, and morality. Many in the Fraternity feel that if they do not help other lodges by performing degree work for them they are not fulfilling their obligations to the craft. However, if we continue to allow Lodges that refuse to learn the work to initiate and advance candidates and Brothers, we are only adding to the problem. We should not allow the tenets of our institution to be used against us by anyone inside, or outside the Fraternity, even if they are a Grand Lodge Officer.

Eventually the Craft in North America, if allowed to continue down this path will split and form distinctive, but separate groups. One group will stay loyal to the state Grand Lodge and continue with business as usual, the other will hold a higher standard, resist assisting Lodges that refuse to help themselves improve, and ultimately deny membership transfers from Lodges deemed not to standard. Sounds crazy? Maybe, but look back at our history with the division of the Ancients and the Moderns. All it will take is for the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE) to grant recognition to one of these break away Lodges and members will gravitate toward the Lodge that suits their individual needs. One side, or the other will see growth, the other, certain decline. Consider the steady rise of the Traditional Observance Lodge, European Concept Lodge, and in some cases Affinity Lodges. These members have already, whether they know it or not, decided that they do not want to promote poor standards. Given enough time and the expected decline of mainstream Masonry and these Lodges will be the foundation for the split with their respective State Grand Lodges. One of the unintended consequences of this could be that in order to attract members back, the Grand Lodge offers easier, cheaper, and shinier Masonry. The same formula that started this problem in the first place. Take your degrees in a day, get a hat, t-shirt, and gym bag with paid membership. Don't worry, we take all forms of payment.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century finds the Craft dealing with new problems and issues that our Forefathers could never imagine. Some are even questioning if the Craft is still relevant today. I would say that anyone even suggesting the relevance of Masonry today knows nothing about the Craft, and is probably part of the continued decline. Masonry is as relevant today as it was in the 1700s, but it all starts with what we take for granted, the

ritual. Freemasonry is, and will always be a fraternity first. Our members want to be challenged, respected, and held to a higher standard. We don't need our members to memorize for the sake of memorization, we need them to know it, live it, and be able to deliver it, and really mean what they say. This is how we make good men better and in turn society as a whole benefits from Freemasonry.

As a last thought, let's take a look at the plight of the American Honeybee. One of our treasured symbols, the beehive, that emblem of industry. Look what we can accomplish when we work together. The Honeybee, like Freemasonry is quietly disappearing. For the bees, it is the overuse of pesticides that are causing the decline. For Freemasonry, it is the poison of complacency and mediocrity. Unfortunately, if we can't stop this continued decline, the Honeybee, and Freemasonry will end up as a small exhibit in the corner of the Smithsonian, a footnote in American history.

## References

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