

LEARNING OF RITUAL

THE LEARNING AND DELIVERY OF RITUAL

This short talk bulletin is a paper presented last year before the Masters' and Past Masters' Lodge no. 30 (research) in Christchurch, New Zealand, by V. W. Brother A. R. Chambers, Past Grand Lecturer of the Grand Lodge of New Zealand, and editor of The Transactions of the Lodge, who graciously consented to its publication as a Short Talk Bulletin for the benefit of his American Brethren.

From the date of my entry into the Craft I have had a great respect for a voluntary institution such as ours, which can call forth the amazing aggregate of effort which is put into learning the many lengthy and in some cases quite involved charges in the ritual. With more experience in the Craft I came to understand the appeal and demand it makes on its members. Above everything else, I have a real admiration for the Brethren who have mastered the ritual at a period in their lives when they might justifiably have considered all such learning was behind them. I know well what it has cost some of them in time and sheer hard work. We can all think of Brethren who have come back to such effort many years after they might normally and quite reasonable have regarded such activities as finished with. Some have done literally nothing of the nature of memorizing since their school days or early youth. As one who has never been away from that sort of thing since early childhood, I think I can appreciate what it has cost those Brethren. Once a person's mind has become set and attuned to his way of life, it is far from easy to switch to something new, and those who do come back to the memorizing and delivery of ritual are worthy of high praise.

We know that a proper understanding of the Craft can come only from a knowledge of our ritual. We know also that no one can be a complete success as an officer and correctly interpret our ritual through his delivery of it unless he learns that ritual thoroughly. We know further that a knowledge of the ritual will add immeasurable to one's enjoyment of a meeting even when others are doing the work.

Because of my liking for ritual work well done, and, I suppose, of my vacation in life, I have always been interested in its presentation in Lodge. It may be for the same reasons that I have not infrequently been approached by Brethren with regard to their difficulties of learning and delivery. It therefore seemed useful to me to put together into one paper ideas and hints I have given in part to various Brethren.

LEARNING

Before a Brother can deliver ritual in Lodge he has first of all to learn it. This, of course, is axiomatic, but this is what most of us find hardest to do. Some fortunate people are gifted with photographic memories and one or two readings of a charge suffice to enable it to be repeated with little trouble. Others have to work harder to memorize, but have very retentive memories and are able to recall material committed to memory many years previously. Very often, but not always, these are the ones who have to strive hardest to learn. The Main point with which I am concerned

here is that anyone of normal intellectual ability can memorize if he sets his mind to it, and I would suggest that it is a useful personal discipline. There is no easy road for most of us, but only determined effort will bring the desired result. However, the following suggestions have proved of assistance and I offer them for what they are worth.

(1) CONCENTRATE:

Some people have the ability to concentrate on a task despite all sorts of extraneous noises and other distractions. Most of us cannot put our minds to real effort if there is a conversation or music in a room. Others find a background of minor noise no great deterrent to learning. It appears that the majority of people, especially when beginning a study, need peace and quiet. Each will soon discover his own needs in that respect. It is necessary to keep the matter in hand in the focus of one's consciousness. Any other thoughts which endeavor to thrust themselves forward must be forced to the outer margin and the mind kept firmly on the task one is endeavoring to perform. This matter of concentration is personal to each of us and some have less difficulty than do others.

(2) READ:

Read the whole of a charge through and through. Do not attempt to dispense with the book too soon. This appears to be a common source of trouble and difficulty. It is no aid to the memory to strain it by trying to recall material not sufficiently known, but rather like going into a big football match inadequately trained. (I shall return to this point of frequent reference to the book for another reason.) Repeated readings will enable you to get a picture of the whole charge in your mind and develop a sense of sequence and continuity which is very important. What at first seems involved and difficult will miraculously resolve itself into something familiar and smooth-running.

(3) LEARN CAREFULLY AND EXACTLY:

Too often we hear a Brother spoil his work by a lack of exactness which can, even to a slight degree, alter the meaning intended. Care and concentration in the early stages will lead to good results.

(4) MEMORIZING:

Although a whole charge should be read and re-read at the beginning, most of us will divide it into sections when memorizing. In spite of this, go back to the beginning regularly to insure that continuity and exactness are being maintained. It must be emphasized that this continual returning to the beginning and reading the whole charge is important. When you have done this and are reaching the limit of what you know from memory, then use your book and go on to the end of the charge. This keeps the overall picture in your mind, and will help materially in learning the remainder of the charge. It is most inadvisable to attempt to learn in isolated blocks.

(5) REFERENCE TO RITUAL:

When you are trying to say a passage from memory and find yourself stuck, do not hesitate to refer to the ritual at once. In this way the probable perpetuation of error due to an attempt at guessing is

avoided. Again let me stress the need for exactness of learning which will be maintained by this use of the book.

When you are fairly sure you know a charge, it is wise to read it through before you try to repeat it. The human mind is prone to error and little mistakes easily creep in. Do not hesitate to do this even though you are confident you can manage without.

(6) TAKE TIME

It is most unwise in fact, it is not an economical procedure to attempt to learn a long charge in one sitting. It is a proven fact that when we are at rest our sub-conscious minds are still at work and should be given an opportunity to consolidate what has been learned. The fatigue factor must be considered also. It is best to start work on a piece of memorizing far enough ahead to allow adequate rest periods and complete changes of occupation. The importance of this procedure cannot be over-stressed. It is a fact that material learned over a period is actually learned more easily and is retained more thoroughly. It is also true that frequent revision is part of the learning process and should not be neglected.

(7) Memorizing is an individual process and can be successfully achieved only by real individual effort. While we can be reasonably certain that we have mastered something, we cannot be certain until we have said it aloud. In this connection the use of a tape recorder by those who have one available can be thoroughly recommended. When we listen to our own voices coming back to us and follow with the book open, we pick up all the little errors and lack of exactness which otherwise can be easily overlooked. This instrument can be of immense assistance in another direction of which I shall say more.

It is realized that this is all very indefinite, but I do know that if an attempt is made to work on lines similar to those indicated, some progress will be made.

DELIVERY

Having mastered the text of a charge, the next point we have to consider is its delivery in Lodge. There are two major things to consider here-- the manner of the speaker when delivering the charge, and the effect of his hearers. It will probably be best to discuss this from the "delivery angle", because there is no doubt that if ritual is well spoken, the candidate and others present will give it full attention. The suggestions I wish to make will, I believe, assist in achieving this object. They are in no particular order but their value has been amply demonstrated in Lodge and elsewhere.

PHYSICAL:

A: POSTURE: Stand easily, naturally and comfortable, Do not slouch but avoid making yourself into a ramrod. Have your feet in a position dictated by ease, with the body balanced on them evenly.

B: HANDS: It does not make for ease nor for a natural dignity to put your hands behind you. Rather have them loosely and naturally at the sides or lightly clasped in front, certainly not one in the pocket.

C: EYES: LOOK THE CANDIDATE IN THE FACE. Let him be thoroughly aware that it is he who is being addressed. Do not look at his feet, nor at a point over his shoulder, nor somewhere on the wall behind him. This is not always easy to do but should be insisted upon. Nor only the candidate, but others present also, will find the delivery much more worth-while if that is done.

D: SHOW the candidate that you yourself appreciate to the full the beauty of the charge you are giving and the lessons it is intended to convey.

E: VOICE It is important to remember that although you are speaking to the candidate, you should be clearly audible to all in the room. This is achieved by speaking out and not by something akin to shouting. Open the mouth and speak out not up. Use the front of the mouth and the palate will project the voice forward giving you a high standard of audibility. If the mouth is not opened, the voice is produced right at the back. You cannot use your lips, teeth or tongue properly, and the escape of the voice is impeded with resultant lack of clarity, tone, resonance and "carry".

In general, keep the voice at conversational pitch. You will be quite audible if you open your mouth and speak out. Be aware all the time of the necessity of being heard. Make conscious and active effort and you will soon obtain the desired result quite naturally.

SPEECH:

Good or bad speech in normal human beings is largely a matter of habit and, in one's early days, of imitation. correctness can be cultivated without speech becoming overformal, artificial or elocutionary. I do not propose to discuss the correction of errors of speech and such matters. There are any amount of books from which assistance can be obtained and teachers who can put one right. However it may be well to draw attention to common mutilation of vowel sounds. Development of nasality and of a twang. Unless there is some physical defect, most of such faults are corrected by thought and opening the mouth.

I do not think it is within the scope of this paper to warn against allowing the delivery of ritual to develop into an elocutionary performance. Nothing is better than clear correct speech, but do not exaggerate to a painful degree of artificiality. Similarly, avoid developing (or maintaining) a monotone or singsong voice.

There is one point to bear in mind which will materially assist in obtaining the desired effect from any spoken passage: the end of a word, phrase or sentence is as important as, sometimes more important than, the beginning. In words, attention to this detail assists in projecting the voice out. In any case, there is a suggestion of slovenliness in not finishing off a word correctly. In phrases or sentences attention to the ending will help in conveying the meaning. definite sounding of final consonants gives clear enunciation and gives "carry" to the voice. I mention this as I have noticed it to be a by no means uncommon fault.

DIFFICULTIES WITH PARTICULAR WORDS:

Many Brethren for varying reasons have difficulty with particular words. They may not be aware of their difficulty and can often be quite surprised when their errors are pointed out to them. With these words a good deal of drill and practice after correct demonstration will usually effect a cure. the words should be broken up into syllables and closely examined, the difficult part being marked in some way-- by being printed larger or in a different color. the whole word should be carefully and deliberately pronounced. As confidence comes, speed up until the word is being spoken naturally and correctly. Again, briefly, examine the word, syllabify it, open the mouth, use the tongue and lips. This gives good articulation. It is a good idea to make a list of the words which give you difficulty and require your special attention. Make yourself thoroughly familiar with them, concentration on their pronunciation and enunciation. In making this suggestion, I should say that my aid is the achievement of clear, careful and accurate delivery of ordinary speech-- not exaggerated, not slovenly, not elocutionary

BREATH CONTROL:

Breath control is important in order that the charge can be well phrased. Do this according to sense by insuring that words are grouped in keeping with the intention of the whole passage. This can be done without making phrases too long. do not pause before unimportant words. Pause to give balance and rhythm to what you are saying. Pause for emphasis, but be sure you are emphasizing the right word or group of words. Pause to let an idea sink in.

VOICE:

Normally when a charge is being given, the voice should be kept around about ordinary conversational pitch, that is, at about the middle of the range. This insures a good medium tone which can be listened to without strain and also makes possible upward or downward modulation as required by the immediate passage being spoken-- its emotional content, etc. Keep the voice on a fairly even keel, and use pitch only to assist you to "put over" the desired effect.

STRESS:

Many Brethren appear to find difficulty with stress when delivering charges. the following rules are safe to follow:

(1)Do not make a practice of stressing a lot of words. If you "speak in exclamations", so to speak, effectiveness is lost -- nothing will stand out.

(2)Be sure to stress only important words or phrases.

(3)Be sure to stress the correct word or phrase. A meaning can be completely altered through wrong stress.

(4)The correct syllable to stress is ascertained from common usage. Any good dictionary indicates this. remember that stress within a word is often altered according to the meaning.

EMPHASIS:

Stress is only one way of obtaining emphasis. As it is the easiest, it is probably the commonest. Other methods which will be found of value in the delivery of Ritual are:

(1)CHANGE OF PACE. This can be very effective. We all know how a sudden speeding up or a change to a slow measured speech can bring back flagging attention.

(2)CHANGE OF PITCH. This also, when appropriately used in a charge, is valuable.

(3)Similarly CHANGE OF VOLUME. For a short period will often give the desired effect.

CONCLUSION:

To sum up what I have tried to put before you, I would suggest that attention to the following matters will be beneficial to all ritual work:

(1) KNOW YOUR RITUAL. With knowledge comes understanding, with understanding comes expressiveness.

(2) BE EXACT

(3) OPEN THE MOUTH

(4) DON'T HURRY

(5) BE NATURAL

If these points are borne in mind by anyone desirous of improving his delivery of ritual, I know the results cannot be other than beneficial. The Craft and its ritual are worthy of the best we can give and I offer these suggestions in the hope that they may be helpful to those Brethren who wish to improve in this direction.

I have to a degree been concerned, perhaps unduly, with the mechanical aspects of ritual. I have not at any time forgotten, however, the "the word killeth, the spirit maketh alive"; but I do affirm that attention to the learning and delivery of our ritual will result in its spirit being impressed on our candidates in the most telling manner.