

PROTECTING AND PRESERVING OUR ANCIENT PRINCIPLES THROUGH RITUAL INSTRUCTION AND MASONIC EDUCATION

Adapted from a paper by Wor. Robbie Robinson
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I realize that when I speak to those attending a District Ritual School, I am addressing some of our best ritualists and many of the Lodge leaders upon whom we so heavily depend. I know that you, more than most, understand the importance of the ritual as a teaching tool to guide the Brethren toward a better understanding of Masonic history and philosophy, morality and traditions.

It is a matter of some concern to me, and I'm sure to you, that so few of the Brethren learn much more than the catechism – which they quickly forget. I also am concerned about the basic lack of understanding of Masonic protocol. Both of these deficiencies impede our ability to turn the newly raised Mason into a Brother who lives in accordance with our Masonic values, who behaves toward his Brethren and others in accordance with Masonic principles, and who, by his conduct and demeanor, becomes a role model in his community and thus, an ambassador for Freemasonry.

Unfortunately, too many Lodges have low attendance at stated communications, with even fewer attending the called communications. But with each Lodge having at least eight officers who are regularly involved in the ritual of the Lodge, one would think that the Lodge room would at least be filled to capacity when the District School meets. Alas, attendance at District and Area Masonic Schools is often far less than we

hope for, and so many of the Brethren, who need to learn the ritual, and could so greatly benefit from learning it, simply do not attend.

We know that, in large measure, our ritual is the key to an understanding of Freemasonry and, properly performed, the ritual is both instructive and inspiring. But one result of the lack of attendance at ritual schools is that all too often the candidate and the Brethren who come to Lodge are denied the opportunity to observe the ritual being performed as it should be. What they experience is a poor representation of what Freemasonry has to offer.

It does not require that much more time, effort, or energy to learn the ritual correctly than to practice it incorrectly. And certainly, there is less stress and a whole lot less embarrassment when you can perform the ritual flawlessly rather than stumbling over every other word. But beyond avoiding embarrassment, we need to take pride in what we are doing and to be dedicated to excellence. In fact, I would say that we have an affirmative duty to get it right and to conduct the meetings and the degrees in a competent and professional manner every time.

Our ritual schools offer each of us a golden opportunity to learn from skilled and knowledgeable Brethren in a group setting or in one-on-one sessions. Moreover, it is in these schools that we learn the fine points of the ritual and the floor work, things that make a difference and turn the performance from sloppy to sharp.

There is a similar need for the Brethren to be schooled in Masonic procedures. We do not operate under Robert's Rules of Order, but there is an established protocol that should be observed. We must take our role as Master Masons seriously and conduct ourselves with decorum. We must show a proper respect for the positions and titles of our Fraternity. We

must be courteous to our Brethren and gracious to our visitors. It is by attending our Masonic schools and by attending Grand Lodge Communications and other similar functions that we can observe and learn what we need to know about Masonic protocol and procedures.

The need for ritual instruction and training in Masonic protocol is particularly important in Lodges where membership problems have led to leadership problems. In the ideal situation, there would be several candidates for the chair of Junior Deacon, each of whom is well educated in Masonic history, philosophy and traditions, and proficient in the ritual. But in many cases Lodges are forced to re-cycle Past Masters through the chairs because no one else is available. In other cases, newly raised Masons are put in line without understanding that five years of dedication and commitment will be required as he progresses through the chairs to the East. In either case, we risk ending up with lukewarm or unqualified Worshipful Masters, and we know that while it can take two or three really good Worshipful Masters to put a Lodge on the road to success, a single incompetent Master can do real damage to a Lodge

Of course, it is easier to outline the problem than to craft a solution. That said, it falls in no small part to you, the stalwarts of our District Ritual School, to play a role in dealing with the problem.

While the thrust of these remarks has been on the need for Masonic education, the problem is not a lack of opportunity. We have touched upon the various several levels of schools where we can learn and improve our ritual proficiency - the Lodge Schools, the District Schools, Area or regional Masonic Schools, and the annual state-wide Reid J. Simmons Academy of Masonic Leadership. In addition, the Grand Lodge Committee on Work exemplifies the Degrees each year prior to the Grand Annual

Communication. So, while I realize that because much of our ritual is unwritten, it is somewhat more difficult to learn, the issue is not the unavailability of training but rather a lack of motivation. And the main point I would leave you with is that you cannot conceive of your role as Masonic educators and leaders as simply being available to teach. Your real challenge is to motivate the Brethren to come and learn.

The key task for each of us here is to find the next generation of Masonic leaders and then inspire them to become the dedicated, committed individuals we need to preserve our Masonic heritage, teach the ritual, grow our Lodges, and work for the betterment of mankind through the practice of friendship, morality, and brotherly love. It is not enough for us to be passive educators waiting for someone to knock at the door asking for instruction. There are many Brethren who are just waiting to be asked to help and to participate. So we must also take on the task of getting out there, selling Masonic education, and getting the Brethren fired up and excited about learning the ritual. If we can do this, we will have gone a long way toward insuring that our Lodges will flourish and that the future of our Fraternity will be a bright one.

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