

“How Understanding the Ritual Will Change Your Life”
Worshipful Donald L. McAndrews, PM, KYCH, OPC

One of the stated goals of Freemasonry is to make good men better. The allusion we use to illustrate this process, taken from the building trade, is the changing of a rough ashlar into a perfect ashlar, suitable to be used in the construction of a beautiful and sturdy building. This allusion is expanded with an explanation of the many tools which are used to erect an upright, square, and level structure. We strive to take good materials and apply these tools to create a perfect structure. We understand, of course, that these allusions refer to the process of perfecting our lives (an endless process) and in turn, helping to create a beautiful, pleasant, balanced, and strong society of all mankind.

In Freemasonry we use ritual to transmit these lessons to our members through allegory and symbols, and it is the primary means by which we help men become better, and have a more perfect life.

Much has been said and written about how we use the ritual to do this, but in these brief remarks, I want to provide you with three “secrets” about how the process actually works.

The first “secret” is that knowledge and understanding are hidden; not simply hidden, but concealed in multiple layers that extend very deep; and can only be revealed to the seeker by the hard labor of digging for it. Once you discover the first bit of concealed knowledge, it is certain that there is another yet to be discovered and closely related to the first. Then even more, of greater subtlety, remains to be discovered after that.

This process of uncovering deeper and deeper layers is nothing new. It is the pattern used in traditional academics. Before studying algebra, it is necessary to have a firm understanding of arithmetic. After mastering algebra, one can move on to analytic geometry, trigonometry, and calculus. The understanding of each subject is necessary to gain an understanding of the next. Attempting to teach calculus to a typical nine-year old would prove that without the predicate mathematical building blocks, calculus would be hidden, that is beyond his ability to understand. Thus, it is that Masonic teaching, as we progress through our rituals, prepares and directs our minds toward better and deeper understanding of the Craft.

Our Masonic ritual encompasses scripture, history, signs, tokens, emblems, and legend to present the information necessary to better understand life itself and our own life, in particular. Through many centuries, this has proven to be the safest, most consistent, and most effective method, and has been unaffected by dramatic social and political changes. Our methods maintain the same quality of instruction in spite of the knowledge or ability of individual teachers (ritualists, coaches, and mentors). “Thus, through a succession of ages are transmitted, unimpaired, the most excellent tenets of our institution.”

The second “secret” of the transforming power of our ritual is an organic one. To be more explicit, it is in the very process of memorization by which we teach our ritual. This may not be evident to a new Mason, but over time the accumulation of memorized ritual becomes a deep reservoir of memories from which we may frequently draw in the future. There are times when situations in our life, or teachings from other disciplines, may remind us of segments of ritual – but only if we have spent the time to

memorize it. This memory allows us to connect diverse facts and teachings, a connection we would not be able to make had we not taken the time to memorize the ritual. Memorization comes easy for some and is more difficult for others but, for all, the rewards are substantial. This is because the process makes us more aware of, and better able to connect, diverse information in the future.

The last “secret” is the secret of reflection. In our current environment, few take time out of their lives to simply sit and think. Many would even say this is a foolish waste of time – but it is not. Reflection is an extremely important process, and is absolutely necessary for any serious seeker of light.

Eastern disciplines teach meditation to focus the mind. Focusing our minds on any topic will give us greater insight simply because we took the time to think about it, to reflect, to examine, and consequently to better understand. This is an essential process for deriving from our Masonic ritual a better understanding of its hidden secrets which, in turn, leads us to a better understanding of ourselves, our relationship with God, and with others around us. Drafting this talk, for example, was an exercise in reflection. It forced me to focus my thoughts on how understanding our ritual changes lives. The result of this introspection gave me greater understanding of that process – an understanding, which would not have come about if I had not considered the question in the first place.

Ritual, at its surface level, teaches us on an intellectual and philosophical plane. The memorization of ritual and catechism, although sometimes difficult, plants seeds deeper within our psyche. Finally,

through the process of study and quiet reflection these seeds grow and help us to attain light – that is the light within us. In sum, what we achieve from Freemasonry is a product of the fusion of ritual teaching, memorization, and reflection.

In today's society with smart cell phones with Internet connections, we may be allowing our minds to become lazy. Why memorize multiplication tables when we can whip out the phone and use it as a calculator? Why memorize phone numbers when we can just look up a name and press "call"? The problem arises if we lose the phone or if it doesn't work.

Our mind is like our muscles in that the more we use it, the better it works. But our mind is a much more precious resource than our muscles. The failure of so many to develop their minds could explain many of the problems we see in modern society. The use of our mind, guided by Masonic ritual, memorization, and reflection, can improve our life and help us to improve the world.

It is up to us, my Brethren, to use the moral and mental tools given to us by the Great Architect through this gentle Craft of ours. Using our ritual to its fullest will help us "break off the rough corners" and turn this rough ashlar (our mind) into a perfect ashlar – square, upright, and true, and fit for use in that spiritual temple, that house (composed of all mankind) not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.