

# The Future Of Masonic Ritual



Larry Porter  
WM, Internet Lodge No. 9659  
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# Topics

- Factors Creating Pressures to Change
- The Arguments Against Change
- How the Ritual Might be Changed
  
- Next Meeting



# Pressures for Change

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- Changing Social Conditions
  - Workplace
  - Family
  - Decreasing Tolerance
  - Educational Changes
- Reduced Impact of the Masonic Experience
- Globalisation and the Internet

## Background Of Declining Membership

# Changing Social Conditions

- Workplace
  - The new work ethic
    - Long and variable working hours
  - Blurring of work and home life boundary
    - The mobile phone
- Family
  - Equal participation in all aspects of family life
  - High expectations of Dad's involvement
  - Difficult to find time and space for ritual learning
  - Evenings out together is the norm
- Decreasing Tolerance
  - Willingness to opt out quickly if not 100% satisfied
- Educational Changes
  - Rote learning a thing of the past
  - Grammatical and literary accuracy much less important

# Reduced Impact of the Experience

- Increased “Competition”
  - Many alternatives
  - High quality, dramatic content
    - E.g. Cinema, Theatre, Computer Games
- Variable Quality of Ceremonies
  - Particularly under UGLE-style systems
    - Master does majority of work
    - Master changes almost every year
  - Can be embarrassing for Candidate and Onlookers
  - Inhibits desire of junior Brethren to progress

# Globalisation and the Internet

- Much more interchange of ideas
  - By Brethren at all levels in Freemasonry
- More exposure to alternative forms of ritual
- Not so much a “pressure” as an enabler
  - Brethren increasingly more receptive to change



# Arguments Against Change

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- The Fashion Cycle
- The Appeal Of Antiquity
- There is No Competition
- Ritual Change is Difficult to Do Well

# The Fashion Cycle

- Masonry will always be subject to cycles of popularity
  - Current dip is temporary
  - We should not overreact
- Consider what aspects might lead to a resurgence of interest
  - Prominent members
    - “The Albert Edward Effect”
  - Return to search for moral values and spiritual needs
    - But Ritual Change may have a role here
  - Engagement in charitable activities
    - Financial support versus personal involvement?

# There Is No Competition

- Face to Face will always be special
  - The Masonic Experience is special because the Candidate is a participant in the drama
- Fears of “competition” from modern forms of entertainment are exaggerated

# The Appeal of Antiquity

- One of the fundamental attractions of Masonry
  - Words that were spoken at least two centuries ago
- Language Is Of a High Standard
  - Victorian English in UGLE and many other Constitutions
  - Adds dignity to the ceremonies
- Modernisation can result in a loss of
  - Style
  - Substance
  - Impact

# Difficult To Do Well

- Re-writing ritual is extremely difficult to do well
- Even a small problem can have a serious effect
  - Generations may be condemned to struggle with an ill-wrought change
- Has to be right first time
  - Unless the ritual is read!
- How do we decide what to leave out?
  - Some elements may have much greater significance than at first sight
  - Future research may uncover as yet unrecognised allusions



# How The Ritual Might Be Changed

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- Read it
- Translate it into modern language
- Shorten the ceremonies
- Remove the “gotchas”
- Change the distribution of work
- Make it more realistic
- Increase the drama
- Introduce more spirituality
- Adopt “best practices” from around the world

# Reading The Ritual

## Pro

- Reduces workload on officers
  - Less impact on work and family life
- Consistent standard of ritual
- Ensures accuracy of important elements
  - E.g. Obligations
- Enable gradual refinement and change of ritual

## Con

- Badly read can be equally awful
- Well-remembered is better than well-read
  - More drama and realism
- Reduced Challenge
  - Shared experience that binds
- Recitation is a fundamental in Freemasonry

# Modern Language

## Pro

- More readily understood
- More acceptable to modern candidates
- Easier to learn and retain?

## Con

- Very difficult to do well
- Reduction of sense of antiquity
- Harder to learn and retain!
- What's the problem we're trying to solve?
  - Only a few small cases of difficulty
    - Make it a small rather than a large exercise
    - e.g. change "peculiar" to "particular"

# Shortening the Ceremonies

## Pro

- Fits with modern lifestyles
  - More likely to retain members
- Much can be reduced without lessening impact
  - With judicious change impact can be increased

## Con

- What are we here for?
  - Surely the ceremonies are what Masonry is largely about
- A “Fast Food” approach to Masonry will reduce quality
- How do we choose what gets left out?
  - Throwing the baby out with the bath water

# Removing the “Gotchas”

## Pro

- The present ritual is full of little traps
  - Continually being fallen into
- E.G.
  - opening a Lodge for “the purposes of Freemasonry in the second degree”
  - Arbitrary variations between obligations
- Unnecessary detraction from the dignity of individuals
  - Especially the WM

## Con

- No serious cons if
  - a) done carefully and sensitively
  - b) important features are maintained
    - E.g GA vs GG vs MH

# Redistributing The Work

## Pro

- Increases the standard of the work
- Ceremony has much better impact on candidate
  - And on the attendees in general
- Much less stress on junior progressing Officers
- Motivating for longstanding members
  - And junior members with aptitude
- A significant aid to retention of members?

## Con

- Changes the character of Masonry
  - At least of UGLE-style Masonry
- Devalues Mastership
- Reduces the special feeling and camaradie between PMs
  - Loss of the shared experience

# Increased Realism

## Pro

- Remove items which are blatantly not true OR give them explicit status of “Legend”
  - E.g. “3000 years after the creation of the world”
- Modern men are less tolerant of arbitrary systems of knowledge
  - “Hocus pocus”

## Con

- Any reasonable person can distinguish legend and allegory from reality
- It has not been a problem in times past despite having many prominent historians and scientists in the Craft

# More Drama

## Pro

- Need drama to meet high expectations
  - Compared to other forms of “entertainment”
- Dramatic ceremonies are always well-received
- Lasting impact on Candidate
  - More likely to stay
  - More likely to recommend it to friends

## Con

- Must avoid the impression of “cheap thrills”
- Solemnity and dignity are more important than drama
- Dignity of candidate is paramount

# More Spirituality

## Pro

- The search for spiritual outlet is a recurrent human theme
  - Perhaps cyclical in nature
- Could become a major attraction of Freemasonry over the next century
  - Turning the cycle in our favour
- Needs to be brought out more explicitly in our ceremonies to be convincing

## Con

- Explicit inclusion of spiritual components would be artificial and unconvincing
- Best left as a by-product of our ceremonies

# Adopting Best Practices

## Pro

- One of the standard ways to increase quality
  - Look for “best practice” around the world and adopt it
- Much easier to do nowadays with modern communications
  - Especially the Internet

## Con

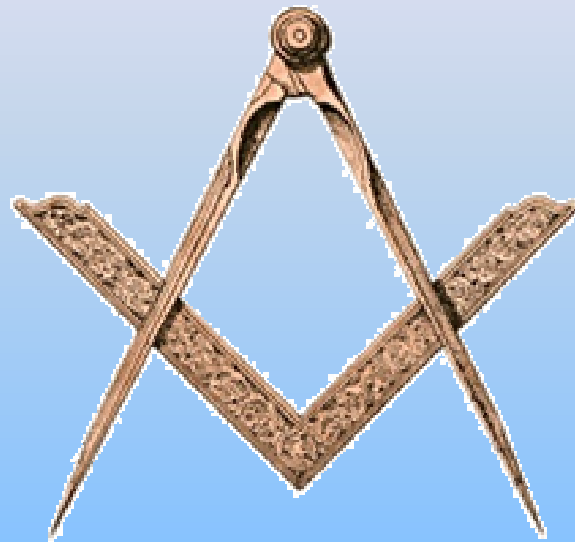
- How do we know what is best
- Could produce an “unholy mixture”
  - An unattractive hybrid
- Loss of continuity and history
- Would remove the unique character of different GLs



# Conclusions

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- There are significant pressures for change
- There are good arguments for not changing
- Change is not easy and not to be undertaken lightly
- More research needs to be done on ritual change
  - Scholarly analysis of the existing ritual
  - Practical examples of updated ritual
  - To provide a better base from which the Rulers can make decisions in the future



# Next Meeting

# Next Meeting

- August 12<sup>th</sup> Meeting in Durham, England
  - Demonstration of Masonic Ritual as it might be practiced in the year 2106
  - A research project, not a proposal!
  - Based on a set of assumptions about what will and won't change

# Assumptions for 2106 Ritual

- Significantly shortened: 75 Minute Meetings
  - Increased consistency and coherence
- Work done by “qualified” ritualists
- It will continue to be spoken from memory
- Dramatic elements introduced
- Spiritual dimension added
- Victorian language will be retained



The End