

MATCHING THE METHOD TO THE MESSAGE

or How to Insure that the Lessons of Freemasonry are Heard and Understood.
By Sir Knight W. Bruce Pruitt

Freemasonry is often defined as “a system of morality, veiled in allegory and taught by degrees.” Since the “teaching by degrees” is heavily dependent on verbal communications, it is important to study just how those verbal communications can be made most effective and how the beautiful lessons of the Craft can become meaningful and permanent in the lives of the brethren. In this article we will discuss some important elements critical to accomplishing that goal.

In the ceremonies of the Fellowcraft Degree, the candidate for Freemasonry is introduced to the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences:

Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy

We are indebted to the philosophers of the Middle Ages for this nomenclature and for the organization of knowledge as known by them in those days. In writing about the scholastic efforts to educate youth in the eleventh century, the historian Moshem points out that these seven topics were studied sequentially as a student progressed. The first three were referred to as the “Trivium,” translated loosely as the joining of three roads or three paths or three directions. The latter four were called the “Quadrivium” (thus a joining of four roads etc.). They are called the Liberal Arts and Sciences to distinguish them from the crafts and mechanical operations as practiced by handicraftsmen. Albert G. Mackey, in his Encyclopedia of Freemasonry comments:

“The Freemasons of the Middle Ages, always anxious to elevate their profession above the profession of a mere operative art, readily assumed these liberal arts and sciences as a part of their course of knowledge, thus seeking to assimilate themselves rather to the scholars who were above them than to the workmen who were below them.”¹

References to the Liberal Arts and Sciences are found in the Old Constitutions, such as the Lansdowne Manuscript (1560) and the Regius, (or Halliwell) Manuscript (about 1390). In the Regius, the order was different, with Geometry being listed last instead of fifth as it is today. It is not surprising that in 1717 with the “reorganization” of English Freemasonry, the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences were incorporated into the ritual. They were initially used in the First Degree, which was the basic and essential degree. They were later moved to the Fellowcraft, since that degree is more symbolic of science, where they were made a part of the lesson of the winding staircase.

In current times, a candidate is now told: “The greatest of these is geometry.” It is not surprising that the concept of points, lines, and solid bodies should be extremely important to operative masonry. To quote the ritual:

“Geometry, the first and noblest of sciences and the basis on which the super-structure of Freemasonry is erected.”²

In addition to the significance of Geometry, another of the Seven Arts and Sciences is also extremely valuable, especially considering the methods by which the lessons and traditions of the Craft are communicated over time. The teachings of Freemasonry are heavily communicated verbally, through ceremonies, lectures, charges, and obligations. Even with the new opportunities to use visual presentations to explain parts of the degrees, nothing has supplanted the tried and true idea of “from mouth to ear.” One could say that, while Geometry is valuable for Entered Apprentices and Fellowcrafts from an “operative” point of view, another science is employed by the Master Mason – that is the leaders and teachers of the Lodge. That art is rhetoric. Rhetoric is defined by Webster as the art of effective speaking. Here again though, we are indebted to Illustrious Brother Mackey for a clearer understanding of this art:

“Rhetoric is the art of embellishing language with the ornaments of construction, so to enable the speaker to affect or persuade his hearers. It supposes and requires a proper acquaintance with the rest of the Liberal Arts...”³

Perhaps it is even more interesting to look at the wording from the old Constitutions as found in the Harleian Manuscripts (Number 1942):

“retoricke that teacheth a man to speak faire and in subtill terms”⁴

It is the application of all those disciplines necessary to adequately convey the desired information. There is much more to getting a message across than just pronouncing words. We need to “match the method to the message.” Much depends on word emphasis, volume, speed, pronunciation, and enthusiasm. While Geometry is employed by the “working” mason, rhetoric is greatly needed by the Lodge Master, coaches, Inspectors, Grand Masters, and all other Brothers when presenting lectures and ritual.

One might imagine a young Entered Apprentice being asked by a friend how he enjoyed his first degree and how he felt about now becoming a Mason. The answer might be something like this:

“Well, the men were really friendly, and I think I am going to enjoy the fellowship, but I am afraid I didn’t get the full message of the degree itself. The Master and other brothers must have worked awfully hard to memorize all of those lectures and things. I’m not hard of hearing, but they talked so low and so fast that I didn’t understand a lot of what they were saying. The Master talked in a kind of monotone, and I almost went to sleep.”

What a shame if that were true too often. Masons do work hard at memory, and major emphasis is given to getting the words just right. There is more to effective communications, however. We must first give major thought to the one receiving the words and ideas and then develop the practices that make for complete understanding and a pleasing experience.

Most Worshipful Brother Harry Truman, Grand Master and President of the United States, had several things to say about communicating:

“A good speaker genuinely likes people; he respects his listeners.”

and also: “Sometimes I forget the microphone and the formality and really warm up, but you will note that it is usually when I want to drive home some important facts and not just phraseology”⁵

Brother Truman served in Missouri as District Lecturer and District Deputy Grand Master for five years.⁴ He was known as one of the most proficient lecturers of his day, and he even participated in degrees during his term as President. He was especially interested in public speaking and was certainly a successful campaigner.

Listeners expect to receive something of benefit for their time and attention. It has been shown that there are several different things that a listener may look forward to getting, such as information, inspiration, education, entertainment, direction, warning, insight, supplication, or demands. The list could be very long. The respect that is due to a listener places a heavy burden on the speaker to ensure that, whatever the message, it is delivered in the most effective and profitable manner possible.

As members of the Masonic Fraternity progress through the various offices that lead to serving as Worshipful Master, total emphasis is given to memory. We practice the degree work and usually have a coach or prompter to correct us when we skip a word, give the wrong word, or get phrases mixed up. We attempt to deliver a lecture, or any part of a degree ceremony, by saying just the right word at just the right time. If we are going to endure all of that pain and stress of memorization, doesn't it make sense that we want the listener to actually get the full message?

It appears to me that we leaders and communicators within the fraternity have lost sight of a discipline that was considered important during an earlier culture. It was taught in schools for many years. Contests were held similar to spelling bees and math exercises. The subject I have in mind is “elocution.” Elocution is just another word for rhetoric; it is simply defined as: “The art of effective public speaking.” It is, indeed, an art, because it requires study, practice, and concentration on basic principles. It involves proper pronunciation, loudness, correct speed of speaking, proper emphasis of key words, and breath control. Some people come about it more naturally than others, but that is true of all art. However, elocution can be learned, and we are convinced that it must be learned and emphasized if our members are

going to really understand the importance and beauty of our Masonic ritual.

A Formula for Success

In this article, I am proposing that there is a very simple but effective method to exemplify, learn, and remember the basic elements of elocution and rhetoric. This method is in the form of a “mathematical-type” formula. It doesn’t require a proficiency in higher math to be understood. It is plain addition and division, but it clearly gets the message across. Here it is:

$$Au = (Vs + E) / St$$

The meaning might not be obvious. Perhaps it will help to give some definitions.

Au — represents the amount of understanding that takes place when information is transferred by word of mouth. This represents the purpose for talking in the first place. In every case, as Most Worshipful Brother Truman said, we want the listener to understand the full meaning of the delivery. Unless information is truly communicated, the time and effort expended is completely wasted and is only “breathing into the wind.”

Vs — is defined as the voice sound. In other words, if the sound being projected is not loud enough, it is impossible for the ear to receive what is being transmitted. If the listener is thirty feet away, he should not be talked to as if he were close up and face-to-face. Some of the Masonic youth groups are good at teaching this lesson. The young ladies and gentlemen are told that they have a “big voice” that must be used in public delivery that is different from their normal speaking or “little voice.” What we are talking about is projection. That refers to a concentrated effort to bring breath and resonance into play. One needs to think consciously about speaking to people some distance away and put some effort into it.

Unfortunately, many people think their voice is sufficiently loud because it resonates in their own ears. You will hear them say, “Oh, I don’t need a microphone,” when they really do. There is a helpful saying used by professional singers and lecturers: “Don’t forget the little lady in the back of the balcony!” Brother Teddy Roosevelt said: “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” We could say: “Speak loudly and you won’t need a big stick in order to wake up the listener!”

E — represents an element that is demonstrated by the voice but originates somewhere else in the body. It is the enthusiasm of the speaker for the subject at hand. Dull, monotone delivery with no emphasis or emotion communicates: “I am really not interested in what I am saying.” If the speaker does not have a real enthusiasm in heart and mind for the subject, that fact comes through in the manner of delivery. As Masonic leaders, the more time and effort we give to the study of and appreciation for the deep meaning of our ritual, the more effective we will be in communicating it. It is obvious that Vs (volume) and E (emphasis) go hand in hand.

Just listen to an effective minister or a political candidate, and the marriage of volume of the voice and enthusiasm comes through loud and clear. Refer again to the quote above from Brother Truman on enthusiasm.

St — is the third element on the right side of this equation and presents a negative influence. It tends to diminish the strong voice and the enthusiasm of the speaker. This element is the speed of talking. The great temptation in recitation of a memorized piece is to hurry and get it over as soon as possible! The speaker is unconsciously afraid that if he pauses or talks slowly, he will lose concentration and forget the words. In reality, speech that is too rapid is annoying to the listener, harder to comprehend, and also conveys a lack of enthusiasm.

It would be hard to try to quantify the results of this equation by putting in numbers. However, the author has conducted experiments which proved that a properly-spaced delivery consumes words at about one half the rate of simply reading through the material at a normal pace. Thus, the audience will likely retain twice the amount of information that is given slowly and with variations in the pace, as opposed to rapid reading or reciting as fast as possible. This simple formula demonstrates that sufficiently loud speech and enthusiasm increase understanding, while rapid speech decreases understanding.

The Pregnant Pause

One of the most effective elements in elocution is the pause. As a part of maintaining a slow, deliberate speed of talking, taking an occasional break not only helps the speaker to get a breath but conveys a specific message to the listener. It says, “Pay attention; what I am about to say is important!” Some experienced speakers actually begin their talk with a pause. They simply wait, look around, and begin speaking when they sense that the audience is anxious to hear the first words.

Key Words

Not every word in a lecture, or even in normal conversation, has the same meaning. Try saying: “I love you” to your spouse or some other family member in a low monotone without enthusiasm. She would certainly reply, “Say it like you mean it!” A much more pleasant reaction will come from: “I L-O-V-E you!” Now, giving a Masonic lecture is not the same as saying sweet things to a loved one, but the point is obvious. Thought must be given to emphasizing key words and phrases, a critical element in effective elocution.

Don't Drop Off the Cliff

One bad habit in public delivery probably takes more thought and effort than any other factor of elocution. There is a natural tendency to pronounce the last word in a sentence or phrase much softer than the preceding words. This practice may have something to do with breath control. One might be getting shorter of breath at the

end of a sentence or may think that they are. This situation makes a properly placed pause even more important so that one does not get short of breath. In either case, care must be taken not to “drop off the cliff” when you get to a break in the text. A bit of practice will show the lecturer how common this habit is. It just seems natural but must be avoided, or the complete meaning can be lost. A good tendency would be to consciously emphasize, in a small way, the last word when you come to a break.

About Public Address Systems

It would be fair at this point to say a few words about microphones and public address systems. All of the concerns about proper speaking cannot be solved by adding electronic amplification in a Lodge room. Certainly, public address systems are needed for large auditoriums and outdoors. They should not be necessary all the time, however. There are a number of negative aspects to having them in an average meeting room. First, recognize that an amplifier is really for the benefit of the listener, not the speaker. It just makes the sound louder. It doesn't change the need for proper elocution. Proper use of a microphone is not easy and needs practice and careful thought. You have to keep thinking “Do I have the mike in the right position? Is the sound getting through?” It could make for a distraction from the subject matter and can cause a loss of concentration. That has been learned from long experience.

If a speaker is using a stationary microphone, he cannot keep looking back and forth around the room. Some of the words always get lost, and it is very annoying. With a portable microphone, one has the flexibility to move around, but the microphone must be kept close to the mouth, and only one hand can be used for any gestures or emphasis. Cordless clip-ons are the latest development, and they are good but expensive. Another limitation of public address systems is the need for a technician to set up, monitor, and control the volume. Some disadvantages of amplification are the distortion of the voice, feedback, and occasionally a “buzz.” The natural voice is always more pleasant than even the best electronic system. A good clear voice often works fine, but help can be used when necessary.

Getting Back to Basics

When a sports team is in a slump and needs to do some hard work to get back in a winning mode, the coach or general manager usually says “We've just got to get back to basics!” It means to review again the principles and practices that are effective and have been used through time to perfect whatever discipline is at hand. That concept can be used in almost any situation and certainly so for Masonic delivery. We can take Freemasonry's basic definition: “A system of morality, veiled in allegory, and taught by symbols,” and we can add “and communicated by word of mouth!” There is no argument that communicating Masonic principles and concepts is primarily accomplished through speaking.

This article is intended to encourage emphasis on rhetoric and elocution. We want to challenge all the members of the Masonic Fraternity to pay as close attention to the method we use in delivering our message as we do to the accuracy of the words. This charge is especially important to those who have the responsibility of being Inspectors, grand officers, Masonic education committees, presiding officers, and Lodge coaches. Such groups as research Lodges and table Lodges should be good venues for practice and companion feedback.

I was very encouraged to see support for the opinions expressed in this article in a contemporary paper. It dealt with the important changes that take place when a man becomes a Mason. In the Journal of the Masonic Society, Brother Scott Kenney reported on his study of the broad subject of change. He interviewed one hundred twenty-nine Freemasons, and he discussed in his article the various effects that Freemasonry has had on those brothers. One paragraph in the report is particularly relevant to our thesis, and shows that application of the rules of rhetoric and elocution can indeed have a beneficial result:

“In perhaps the most notable example, twenty-three respondents claimed involvement in Freemasonry had helped them to overcome fear and learn to speak in public. Given their claim to feel “supported if I make a mistake,” there seemed to be a progressive improvement over time from “stammering and stuttering” at first, through “becoming a better communicator,” to developing “confidence eventually to take on Masonic leadership roles.”⁷

The above statements demonstrate that significant improvement can be made, not only in qualification but in the enjoyment of public speaking. This is specifically true in the delivering of a degree, in increasing the understanding of Masonic principles, in the education of new members, and in the encouragement of older members who are perhaps a bit hard of hearing to continue attending Lodge meetings.

Summary

To summarize and to review the overall thesis, we will take one more look at the most basic elements needed to achieve effective communications.

- (a) Talk loudly enough to be heard in the back of the Lodge room.
- (b) Talk slowly enough to be easily understood.
- (c) Be enthusiastic. Enjoy your subject.
- (d) Pause at appropriate times and emphasize key words.
- (e) Don't drop the last word in a sentence.
- (f) Memorize the formula for success: $Au = (Vs + E) / St$

Proper elocution can be fun and extremely rewarding, both to the individual and to any organization that calls for verbal communication. This is especially true with respect to the family of Freemasonry. Heed the advice of Most Worshipful Brother Truman. The listener is the most important person, and the reason for all of the

effort of the speaker.

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Update: August 19, 2014 - [Top](#)