

DECONSTRUCTION OF RITUAL

JUNIOR WARDEN INSTALLATION – THE CORINTHIAN PILLAR

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Masonic ritual is rich with layers of meaning. The use of symbolism and metaphor creates a foundation for depth of content in our rituals. This may not be readily apparent as we recite those passages with which we have long become so familiar. We embrace these words and cherish them, but do we truly understand the layers of meaning that reside within even our most well-known passages? Do we take the time to analyze the words and phrases to find the deeper meaning that may be hiding in plain sight?

Certain rituals are performed more frequently, such as those involved in the opening and closing of a lodge. These are the most well-known, and through repetition become so familiar we may fail to look at them with fresh eyes. Some, such as degree work, are less frequently practiced, yet might be more thoroughly studied as we use these to teach and bring Masonic light to our lesser informed brothers. And some, such as in the installation of officers, are less frequently reviewed as they are typically only performed on an annual basis, prompting us to look at them with fresh eyes each year.

It is in the less frequently executed rituals that I was first attracted, and then enticed, to examine the content more deeply. In preparing for the Annual Installation of Officers at my lodge, I initially was drawn to the beauty and elegance of certain phrasing, which led me to take a deeper look at the underlying meaning. The result was not only an enhanced understanding and appreciation of the text, but also some deeper insights into the construction of the ritual. For me, this is best exemplified by the presentation of the Pillar of the Corinthian Order to a newly elected Junior Warden. Here are the words that drew me in:

“I likewise entrust to your care this pillar of the Corinthian order, it is an emblem of beauty and points out that you are to adorn the work with all the powers of genius and active industry, and to promote regularity among the brethren by your good example, the persuasive eloquence of precept and the discriminating encouragement of merit.”

The passage is rich in imagery and symbolism. The choice of wording is extremely specific, capturing so much while maintaining incredible brevity. At first it was the phrasing and imagery that made me look deeper, and as I did, I found myself asking what it was really trying to say.

The Corinthian pillar has both architectural and symbolic meaning. In architecture the Corinthian pillar is characterized by its ornate, elegant design, embodying beauty and harmony. Symbolically we are instructed in the Third Section of the Entered Apprentice degree that the three principle

supports of a lodge are Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, each represented by a column of an architectural order, and that Beauty is represented by the Corinthian order.

I wondered how such an “emblem of beauty” points out that we are to “adorn the work with all the powers of genius and active industry”. And I quickly realized that to answer that question I would have to consider the meaning of “powers of genius” and “active industry”.

“Powers of genius” seems straightforward. We respect intelligence and acknowledge the power “genius” implies as the highest level of intellect. We invoke the “benign Genius of the Mystic Arts” and invite her to preside over our councils in the Opening Charge. The “Powers of Genius” implies strength of intellect and force of reason. However, we still need to relate this to the emblem of beauty and how one may adorn our work with it. Before we attempt that task, let us consider “Active Industry” as it is combined with “Power of Genius”, and we need to solve for both.

To understand “Active Industry” it helps to consider the context within which this was written. Our current understanding of industry is different than what was likely intended when this was conceived. In the prelude to the Annual Installation of Officers section in the Monitor, Henry Pirtle includes a footnote encouraging the reader to refer to the section titled “Some Things a Master Ought to Know”. In that section there is a reference to the earliest known ceremony of installation, that used by the Duke of Wharton as described in the first edition of Andersons Constitutions which dates back to 1723. However, the first installation ceremony was solely for the installation of the Master of the lodge; much of the ritual we use today was probably drafted in the early 1800’s following the unification of the Grand Lodges in England and the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England. It seems clear that the use of the wording likely dates back to the 19th century if not before.

What “industry” meant in the 1800’s is not the same as we may think of it today. We now may think of large factories, filled with machinery used by laborers and perhaps automation to manufacture all sorts of goods and products. In decades past industry might conjure images of gothic factories belching black smoke from coal foundries. None of these are likely the correct context for the use of industry in the Junior Warden’s installation. The Oxford English Dictionary describes an interesting evolution of the meaning of the word “industry”. The usage seems to change over time from skill, cleverness and ingenuity in the 15th and 16th centuries, to exertion, effort, hard work, diligence or assiduity in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

Industry in the context of the Junior Warden installation is most likely intended to refer to individual labor based on the meaning of the word in the 18th century. This may apply equally to the labor of an operative or speculative Mason. In either case, the reference to industry here is evocative of being industrious. The connotation is positive, as an industrious man was one who was demonstrating the values of his time and considered virtuous.

With this knowledge of the intended meaning of “industry”; what is meant by “active industry”? Is there such a thing as inactive industry? What would industry look like if it is not active? This leads to the conclusion that “active” in this context is not intended as the typical usage. I propose the intent

here is more closely related to the Middle English meaning of preferring action over contemplation which implies intent. Thus, the meaning of “active industry” may be considered to be “intentional labor”.

Given this understanding of the power of genius and active industry, we can address the question of adorning the work with them. We learn as Freemasons that the Three Principal Supports of a lodge are Wisdom, Strength and Beauty represented by columns. And that Beauty is represented by the Corinthian column and is intended “to adorn”. We are taught that the usage of adorn relates to the symbolism of the universe as the temple of the deity, and that “beauty shines through the whole of His creation”. In this ritual the choice of the word “adorning” implies the use of the power of genius and active industry in our work as aspects of the beauty of the universe, specifically the creation of man. I suggest that the intent here is to consider the beauty of the Corinthian Pillar as a metaphor representing the ideal of the perfect Ashlar. Our work as Masons brings us closer to the paradigm of the perfect Ashlar when we use our strength of intellect and force of reason and is best performed with industrious intent. In this way we are fulfilling the will of the Great Architect of the Universe. The beauty of our work is not the same as for the operative Mason; for the speculative Mason beauty, meaning our path to self-improvement and Masonic light, results from the virtuous use of the human mind and spirit.

This brings us to the next section where the Junior Warden-elect is told to “promote regularity among the brethren”. The context here comes from the duties of the Junior Warden which include superintending the Craft during refreshment and ensuring none perverts the purpose of refreshment to intemperance or excess. For the speculative Mason, this implies that the Junior Warden has responsibility for ensuring the proper conduct of the craft while under his superintendence.

The installation language provides three mechanisms to promote regularity, including the Junior Warden’s good example, the persuasive eloquence of precept, and the discriminating encouragement of merit.

The use of “good example” in this context instructs the Junior Warden to act as a role model for the brethren under his superintendence. It is a reminder that as a leader in the lodge his character is being observed by the craft and his actions will be emulated by the brothers of the lodge. It directly reminds him that his conduct is a critical guide for others. He is to be upright, as symbolized by the jewel of his office, the plumb, and temperate and discreet. It reminds us to virtuously square our actions and to circumscribe our desires and passions.

The use of “persuasive eloquence of precept” requires some additional deconstruction. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a precept is a general rule intended to regulate behavior or thought. Eloquence is to be fluent and articulate, and persuasive in this context implies the use of reason to persuade others to do or believe a particular thing.

Putting this together, it can be seen to imply the use of rhetoric and logic to influence behavior or thought. It invokes mastery of the Trivium, that portion of the seven liberal arts and sciences that form part of the paths of learning each Mason is instructed upon in the second section of the

Fellowcraft degree. It reminds us that as Masons we study the seven liberal arts and sciences, and that the Junior Warden should use these skills to influence the behavior of the brothers under his superintendence to promote the proper conduct of the craft.

Finally, the remaining mechanism is to use “discriminating encouragement of merit” to promote regularity of the craft. Discriminating is a word that can have multiple meanings. To discriminate can mean to be prejudicial in the treatment of different categories of people. However, the context of discriminating in this usage implies the use of good judgement. We know encouragement means to provide support, confidence, and hope, and is most closely related to persuasion. And finally, merit also has many meanings. It can mean to be good or deserving. It also means to be worthy. However, in this context it refers to excellence. Merit in this phrase is the goal; merit is being encouraged. Thus “discriminating encouragement of merit” means to use good judgement to encourage excellence. And it is worth noting what this does not say. It does not advocate the promotion of regularity by other means, such as by coercion, force, or other inappropriate and un-Masonic mechanisms of influence. This speaks to the high ideals of Masonry, those which we might think of as beautiful.

It is apparent that this concise instruction to the Junior Warden-elect carries depths of meaning. It instructs us on the symbolic connection between beauty and how we can use intellect and spirit to approach the highest ideals of excellence. We learn how to use the teachings of Masonry to guide and positively influence our brothers.

However, I believe this complex passage has additional layers of meaning. I suggest the use of eloquent wording is intentional to draw us in to look for deeper meaning as it did for me. It is an example of combining form and function to transcend the typical usage of narrative. Not only does this passage speak of eloquence, but it does so eloquently. Not only does it talk of beauty, but it does so beautifully. Not only does it discuss genius, but it does so intelligently.

This portion of the Junior Warden installation is a work of beauty to teach us about using beauty in our work. It is an example of work well done to direct us to do good work. It is eloquently persuasive to encourage us to master the power of persuasive eloquence.

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