

## From boys to men? The use of storytelling in Freemasonry

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#### 1. Introductory background

It is intended, with this paper, at least, to **try** to reconcile two polar opposites: I will present an objective paper on a completely subjective topic.

I have researched academic material on the esoteric.

There are some assumptions which will need to be tested, and even a working hypothesis:

- Freemasonry's Workings fall within the sub-discipline of Rites of Passage, a branch of a relatively new discipline called Ritual Theory, and research into Masonic ritual can thus be compared and contrasted with a growing body of research.
- It is also assumed that the reader is aware that rites of passage are not, as in the popular literature, important moments in a person's life (Davis: 2003, p. 3); but rather specific ritualised and community-based celebrations of a person's transition from one life-phase to another.
- It is also assumed that the reader is cognisant of a "craving" (Fanning: 2011, p. 46) for initiation, especially among male youths in their mid-teens to early twenties, as evidenced by media reports of happenings at two South African schools in the recent past.
- It is assumed that those initiations, like the mythic rites of passage into street and biker gangs are not valid rites of passage, but lack essential elements.

My hypotheses are straightforward:

- Freemasonry's Workings are indeed valid rites of passage within the scope of current research;
- Freemasonry's rites are/can be deeply transformative, but exactly **how** and **why** needs to be thoroughly examined.

#### 2. Case study #1: David Attenborough 1961 (Attenborough: 1961).

Though I did not know it at the time, I watched a historic documentary series on RTV as a nine-year old boy. It was historic on various levels. The fact that the presenter was to become a world-respected entertainer-scientist and producer of ground-breaking television, was only one level.

In that series of *Zoo quest*, he explored human customs in the South Seas, and was the first to document a rite of passage which has become one of the world's most popular extreme sports – now known as bungee jumping.

What was shown were the preparations for the annual ceremony, the ceremonies themselves, and the resulting community celebrations. Firstly the men of the village built a rickety scaffolding structure several stories high, consisting of various platforms, the lowest being about thirty feet off the beach.

All the prospective jumpers, from young first timers to elderly gentlemen prepared their own ropes (no sharing), carefully tested that they were of the correct length, and knotted them to the platform from which they would be jumping.

Then, on the eve of the ceremony, all first-timers were rounded up, leaving their homes and families for the last time, and gathered for a night-long vigil without sleep. They sat around a camp fire and were regaled with the legend and myths of their heritage – I believe there was singing too.

The next morning, the first-timers were led to the scaffolding.

Attenborough, in an interview televised fifty years later, said that during the first part of the ceremony, as each boy tied a rope to each ankle, he noticed a woman standing next to him, suckling a baby. She seemed a bit agitated. Then, as a certain boy took his first jump (“avoiding fear on the one hand and rashness on the other”), the woman threw her baby away. Attenborough dashed to save the child, only to find that the “baby” had been a ragdoll.

Mum played her part in the ceremony, too.

Jumping took place throughout the day, with “the manne” jumping from the highest platform, less-experienced from the lower platforms, and the elderly jumping from the beginners’ platform.

Finally, the entire community celebrated the return of the men with feasting and more storytelling. The newest men in the community, as youths do everywhere, were excitedly recounting their personal experiences to each other, and to their families, fixing the experience forever in their hearts and minds.

### 3. Case study #2: artificially created rites of passage

Many writers, Americans in particular, have bemoaned the absence of rites of passage, and attributed all societal issues to problem youths: gangs, drugs, violence and anti-social attitudes to an absence of proper male initiation. It must not be forgotten, however, that each individual attains readiness for any given rite of passage at his/ her own rate.

Davis (2003, p. 3) puts it thus: “ We, as a culture, do offer a few ceremonies for marking passages such as graduation exercises, confirmation or bar mitzvah, weddings, and retirement parties. However, these events have generally lost their deeper connection to the patterns of our lives, to the significance of the transition, and to the larger social context. Too often they are empty rituals done to please someone else and accomplished by going through the motions.”

It is necessary to filter out the more subjective commentary from these statements: Wiener (Quoted by Fanning: 2011, p. 39), for example, specifically stated that his Bar Mitzvah was meaningless as a rite of passage. Generalizing from personal experience is poor logic, but at least we can conclude that one man’s Rite of Passage is another man’s waste of time.

Davis conducted many wilderness rites of passage with at-risk and “respectable” urban youths in settings ranging from the Colorado desert to heavily wooded mountains and islands. These rites were artificial, and very loosely based on Native American customs, earning him their censure. A summary of his methodology and findings is given below:

- Exposed to the power of the wilderness, participants feel more of their own power (Davis: 2003, p. 11).

- The entire trip is the ritual. The essence of ceremony is very strong; it shines through even the simplest ceremonies: a bow to the rising and setting sun, sharing thanks before a meal, passing a stick of smouldering sage in silence. Such a “light-handed” approach encourages every action to take on a ceremonial significance: washing the dishes, carrying a backpack . . . shooing a fly (Davis: 2003, p. 12).
- Wilderness rites of passage reveal each person’s life as a story being written each moment, and they remind us deeply that each story is magnificent. Living one’s life as a mythic journey and periodically reflecting on it reinforces its dignity. Witnessing one’s story deepens the sense of being the author of one’s future and the sense of following one’s destiny (p. 16).

In other passages, he breaks down the project into the categories based on those first proposed by van Gennep ( Davis: 2003, p. 6): preparation, separation, liminal, return and implementation.

Candidates are prepared physically, mentally (including coaching in mindfulness and journal-writing), and spiritually (the act of packing equipment and tidying ones bedroom was made into a ritual). Then they travel by bus for some distance, a self-contained cohort of contemporaries now being bonded into a community.

At the site, some way up a hiking trail, Base Camp is made, where the community spend two and a half days together, mindful, ceremonial and taking hikes together, and such. As time progressed, Davis induced the participants to create those rituals for themselves.

Finally, in the liminal phase, all participants spent four days in total solitude and fasting. Again, they were persuaded to make up their own personal ceremonies, but with the suggestion that the final night be spent in wakeful vigil, within a circle of stones. When the returned to the community at base camp, they were to bring a “gift” for one of the other candidates.

Back at base Camp, they debriefed one another, celebrating overcoming their ordeal, and finally packed up Base Camp and returned to civilisation in ritualistic mode.

In a previous version of Davis’s paper, the one I originally found on the Internet, (see third bullet above) he made the observation that the youths, as children, felt that their lives were something which happened **to** them, that they were spectator/ victims in a drama controlled by others. After the rite, they had become men who were the directors, scriptwriters and stars of their own stories.

That, in essence, is the difference between an adolescent and an adult.

#### 4. A brief literature review:

Blumenkrantz & Goldstein define rites of passage thus: “A modern day rite of passage is achieved when parents and the community create and participate in experiences which are perceived to be transformative by youth and, in fact, offer them increased status within the community and facilitate their healthy transition through adolescence” (Blumenkrantz, 1996, p. 21, quoted in Blumenkrantz & Goldstein: 2010, p. 43). Although their paper describes their work with urban adolescents, the elements they discuss have relevance to all rites of passage.

They refer to van Gennep's division of rites of passage into three distinct phases: Separation, Transition [Limination] and Incorporation, as does Fanning (Blumenkrantz & Goldstein: 2010, p. 43) (Fanning: 2011, p. 7), but subdivide them further into twenty elements (Blumenkrantz & Goldstein: 2010, p. 44).

Some of these elements can be recognised in the two case studies above, and more especially, in Freemasonry's Workings: they can be paraphrased as follows:

- A shift in focus in the candidates from self-orientation to community-orientation;
- Inculcation of the values and attitudes of the community through the rituals;
- New relationships are forged between the candidate and his new community;
- Emphasis on ritual;
- Physical and psychological challenges;
- Silence;
- Time for reflection;
- Myths, legends and storytelling;
- Altered states of consciousness;
- An obligation to serve the community and society at large;
- Celebration.

But van Gennep wrote his ground-breaking work in 1909. Since then, a new multi-disciplinary area of study has grown up. Britannica on-line refers to Ronald Grimes as "the founder of ... Ritual Theory." He acknowledged the pioneering contributions of van Gennep and Turner, but is quoted by Fanning (2011, p. 11) as saying that "the 'transformationism' implicit in theories of ritual by van Gennep and Turner is now in serious question."

He does not deny the idea of transformation, however. He personally underwent initiation into Vodun in Haiti, just to understand the impact of a rite of passage:

"Nothing could have been simpler. There were no words, only hands carefully offered, skin and bone bracing skin and bone against the threat of slippery stone. The shock of the water, the gasping that punctuated our week-long silence, the remarkable gentleness of our teachers – *all this drove something deeply into the bone. What that something was, I could not name then, nor can I name it now.*" (Grimes, as quoted by Fanning: 2011, p. 14).

Fanning (p. 15), further relates that Grimes emphasized the importance, not just of the ritual (in the above case, crossing a river under a waterfall) but of the entire time, place and social context of that ritual. That, for him, contributed to the transformational aspect.

Catherine Bell, the next great exponent of ritual theory (Ritual theory, ritual practice is her great classic, available free on the Internet) rightly challenges the assumption in all writers on rites of passage that Western society's problems are the result of an absence of rites of passage (Fanning: 2011, p. 16), but this raises a lot of questions: South Africa has recently seen a lot of controversy around the initiation of boarders in school hostels – unsupervised ritual by peers, not elders.

The Columbine high school shootings were apparently ritualised, and preceded by the creation of hate-and-revenge myths by the three perpetrators, and inner-city street gangs are famous for brutal initiation practices – also presided over by peers rather than community elders. . .

There appears to be a universal longing for ritual acceptance into a group by young males. What would society look like if psychologically validating initiatory experiences were universally practised?

Fanning says that Bell recognises the widespread need for recognition and incorporation into communities (p. 17), and thus that initiatory practices will always exist but is not quoted further. Boyer (Fanning: 2011, p. 19) posits that the rituals themselves have very little to do with transformation from adolescent to adult, but more with the social interaction between initiators and initiated, aimed at creating “coalitional behaviour”.

In short, the initiating community (e.g. lodge) exploits the candidate’s felt need to belong, and thereby ritually moulds the malleable candidate’s thinking into a clone of their own. That would explain why each lodge in Freemasonry has its own peculiar ethos, or corporate culture . . .

Regarding myth, Grimes is highly critical of Joseph Campbell, a great proponent of the need for myths which assist people to come to terms with the mysteries of existence:

“I reject the sexism and cultural imperialism of the heroic model propounded by Joseph Campbell and find the Jungian tendency toward purely interiorized initiations precious and disembodied. Ethnocentric images in heroic films like *Emerald Forest* or books like *Hero with a Thousand Faces* do enormous damage.<sup>1</sup>” (Grimes, quoted by Fanning: 2011, p. 10)

Nevertheless, the use of myth, or, in Masonic terms, allegories, is central to rites of passage – as related above. Grimes’s mention of Jung is felicitous. Jung studied the spiritual aspects of the human psyche, and developed a sound basis for the need for stories as vehicles for emotional growth and health. A practicing psychologist, son of a Mason, but not himself a Brother, wrote these words: “Analytical psychology and Masonry both require a religious sensibility without being religious themselves . . . Jungian psychoanalysis, like Masonry, is compatible with all religions because it recognizes that being is itself a phenomenon with spiritual dimensions in which we all participate.” (Hamilton: 1998).

He goes on to equate Jung’s archetypal themes with the same learning processes found in our rituals, and that Jungian analysis and Freemasonry’s rituals have the same goal: “claiming the joys and sorrows of life and death as meaningful processes of being a whole human being.”

Fanning (Fanning: 2011, p. 20) digresses into a topic which can be described as the Church’s appropriation of pre-Christian rites of passage for its own purposes. He postulates that the Church’s “warrior psyche” ethos is the cause of the John Wayne-type of “hypermasculinity” – patriarchalism, machismo, oppressive, sexism, etc. This, in itself, causes a sort of “So what?” reaction, except that he links it to universal societal problems, and then poses the question as to where can men meet and interact in a non-threatening, non-competitive, safe environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 144.

At home, men are cast in a leadership role, at work, they have to be aggressive and competitive, so too in sporting activities. Where can men just *be*, and not be required to act out social stereotypes?

I propose that Freemasonry is supposed to be that place where ego is pushed aside, and Brothers can meet “on the level”.

Finally, Rohr (quoted by Fanning: 2011, p. 29) is brought out for his insights:

“The entire process that we call initiation somehow made it possible for a man to experience the five essential truths. They became the five essential messages of initiation:

- Life is hard;
- You are not that important;
- Your life is not about you;
- You are not in control;
- You are going to die.”

#### 5. Interim summary:

It is clear that society and the academic world has spent the past century working out many of the things which Freemasons have been led to understand for the past 250 years at least.

- a. Men need an initiatory process, because they want to belong to a community where they are accepted and able to win respect.
- b. Blumenkrantz and Goldstein’s 20 aspects of a rite of passage largely incorporate what happens in a Masonic working.
- c. Rites of passage may or may not be transformative: it depends on the state of mind and preparation of the candidate, and the entire context of the ritual – so the spirit within the Lodge is a major component of making the rite special;
- d. Something small can trigger the transformation – and that transformation cannot necessarily be put into words;
- e. In all cases, the newly initiated person is expected to work on improving society: “To improve the morals and correct the manners of men in society must be your constant care . . .” (Rainbow ritual Final Charge in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree);
- f. There is a universal intention to remove a candidate from his comfort zones, and confront him at least symbolically, with challenges;
- g. The rite of passage is very long-term, having even the threshold of death in view;
- h. Myths and legends play a big role in the formative process.

#### 6. Masonic storytelling: how we use allegories

In the course of this section, reference will be made in passing to what we tend to think of as the central, even *only* initiatory legend in Freemasonry. But the larger context is easy to miss. We need to take cognisance of the elephant that *is* the room: all three degrees focus on the building of King Solomon’s Temple. There is a wealth of allegory in that.

The Temple is referred to in the Ancient Charges, but is not a major feature. Another theme in the Ancient Charges is a passing reference to the aftermath of the Flood, and the retention of Mankind’s civilising knowledge.

It is necessary to look at how these stories evolved in the development of modern Freemasonry: how passing references were built into a complex, intricately linking series of stories which culminate in a single enactment.

a. John Theophilus Desaguliers: the Newtonian connection

Much has been written about the fact that Desaguliers played Leonard Hofstede to Newton's Sheldon Cooper. Indeed, much of Desaguliers's published work consisted of experiments designed to defend aspects of Newton's work.

Their relationship officially began in 1713. Desaguliers came to London to practice public scientific experimentation for the entertainment of, amongst others, the titled and well-heeled. In that same year, he took on the job of Newton's experimental assistant (Whipple Library).

It is also well known that his parents smuggled him out of France in a wine butt, subsequent to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Perhaps less well known is the fact that next door to the Huguenot chapel in Leicester square was the house of Isaac Newton: "It appears that his close proximity to the Chapel enabled him to offer the ground floor of his house for further French refugees from France as a place of worship." (Carter: 2009).

Newton spent over 50 years in study of KST. His interest grew from his study of Revelation and other eschatological prophetic books in Scripture, particularly Daniel and Ezekiel. His protégé would have been well aware of that. Sir Isaac was also, from his studies in the Scriptures and of the Jewish scholar, Maimonides, adamantly Unitarian (Gotfryd: 2008). Further, Gotfryd quotes Faur thus: "Siding with Rabbinic tradition and contra Christian doctrine, he maintained that the Noahide precepts alone suffice for salvation."

This reference to Noahide law becomes significant later.

Carter (2009) also notes that Desaguliers was responsible for adding the phrase "hidden mysteries of nature and science" to our rituals, deriving this from Newton's influence. It's possible. Carter's other comment, attributing the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences to Newton via Desaguliers merely demonstrates a lack of knowledge of the Regius Ms.

Whatever else we must understand that a man who had experienced religious persecution revered another, who himself experienced a large measure of the same, because of his Unitarian belief, and leaning towards the Ancient Faith through the influence of Maimonides.

If we also take into account the rumoured Jacobite leanings of Freemasons of the day, then we must recall that King James finally lost his throne through Whig opposition his Declaration of Indulgence, granting freedom from persecution on religious grounds.

b. Desaguliers's influence on Freemasonry

Let's begin with the 1723 Constitutions of the Rev. Anderson, Desaguliers's protégé. At the time, Desaguliers was Deputy Grand Master.

On page 9 (Anderson: 1723) we read “NOAH, and his three Sons, JAPHET, SHEM, and HAM, all *Masons true*.” From this passing mention grew the original legend of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree, in which the sons of Noah raised him by the FPOF. Those interested may consult the Graham Ms. Of 1726.

Until the 1730’s Anderson elaborated upon the Noachite legend, made the statement that Masons were “Noachidae”, thus bound by the universal seven laws of the Noachic covenant. This is a distinct echo of Newton’s belief.

The religious tolerance of Desaguliers and Newton found its expression in the first Charge of Anderson’s Constitutions (Anderson: 1723, p. 48):

“’tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves ; that is, to be *good Men and true*, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish’d ; whereby Masonry becomes the *Center of Union*, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must else have remain’d at a perpetual Distance.”

Desaguliers became the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grand Master in 1719, and through his popularity with celebrities and nobility quickly revived Freemasonry (Maine: 1939). Subsequent to his term of office, he served three times as Deputy Grand Master. Mackey attributes most of the impetus to re-create Freemasonry to Desaguliers in the 1720’s and 30’s (Mackey, quoted by Madhavan: p. 4).

During this period, a third Degree was gradually instituted, the first recorded instance being 1724. Certainly, by the end of the decade, it was generally practiced (Madhavan), but the legend in use was that of Noah.

Again, all sources attribute to Desaguliers the gradual adoption of a different 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree legend. It creeps in gradually. The first mention of the name HA is 1721, when the incoming Deputy Grand Master was installed into the Chair of HA (Madhavan: p. 4)

This newer legend has greater utility than the Noachic tradition.

c. The uses of KST and its appendant stories:

Everything is based on a single Scriptural reference: I Peter 2<sup>5</sup>: “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God . . .” [overtly Christian reference omitted, in line with Anderson).

Freemasons, in every Degree find themselves confronted with the symbolism and allegories of KST. Principally, the Temple was built of stone – created by God and shaped by men – an allegory of the Masonic quest, and a contrast to the Tower of Babel, mentioned in the Ancient Charges, as being built of purely man-made materials.

KST was God’s dwelling – and for the same reason, Masons place their altars at the heart of the Lodge, as a symbol to remind us of the Divine presence.

The key passage, at which the VSL is opened in the First Degree is Ps 133: an exhortation for the Brethren to dwell together in unity. Considering the idea of building a spiritual Temple, we are reminded of a comment about a house, divided against itself not being able to stand . .

There is obviously a great deal more, such as the Kabbalistic layout of our Temples. But those are stories for another time.

#### 7. A final word.

I experienced exactly what Grimes described (see above). Ten days after my initiation, I attended my first Installation at The Robert Burns Memorial Lodge. I distinctly remember my disorientation, and then watching agape the intricate perambulations of the Deacons, Bible Bearer and DC, thinking first: “How ridiculously comical we look; beer guts and aprons!” Then, immediately, on the back of that irreverent thought: “If it looks so comical, howcome it **feels** so right?”

If the candidate and the Lodge allow it, there is transformation from day one, but much of our growth happens in subsequent years. Some Brethren never learn to lay aside the assertiveness they use in the rest of their lives, and just be humble. Therein, for me, is the prime reason for the deaths of lodges and appendant orders. . .

If any Brother feels he was not transformed in any way by his Initiation, Passing and Raising, then I strongly suggest asking a Lodge to take him on as a demonstration candidate for a complete rehearsal Working.

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