

SECRET THOUGHTS OF THE RITUAL

by Edward M. King

There are many of us around. Some of us are very informal and loosely structured, others are very formal and precisely worded. Whether you are aware of it or not, your whole life is based on certain ritualistic patterns. The way you get up in the morning, the way you study, the way you organize your social life, the way you speak and write, these are all based on certain habits or routines that you develop and are performed, by and large, in an informal ritualistic way.

Today I would like to share with you some thoughts on another kind of ritual. One that is considered very private and is often esoteric. I am the fraternity ritual. One that you will find locked in a file in the corner of some dark office. Because I don't get used or opened up very often, I have a lot of time to think and I'd like to share with you some of my thoughts. Sometimes, I go through a real identity crises. Who am I? What am I? Why am I? In order to know what a thing is, you must first know what it is for. You tell what a thing is for by the way it is used.

Although there are some exceptions in the way I am used, let me tell you how the majority of fraternity chapters use me. The vast amount of my time is spent in a dark cabinet, locked up and gathering dust. About once a semester there comes a mad rush for my existence, people literally scrambling, and all of a sudden I become very important. It's really funny because many times they can't find me. They forget where I was placed and a mild panic sets in until finally they dig me out from under the stacks of constitutions, by-laws, and chapter minutes. Once I am found, I am under 24 hour surveillance. It's almost as if I'm being digested, but that's not really it; what's happening is that I'm being memorized. I'm literally studied word for word, phrase for phrase, with, "Well let me just copy my part," then the argument gets hotter because somebody says, "No, it's not legal to copy anything out of the ritual." Some people, however, go ahead and fudge a bit and copy their part and then pass me on.

After being up almost all day and all night for a week, I am taken to a dimly lighted room where a number of people are gathered. There I am presented with much feeling and serious drama. It is obviously a moment of great climax for some of the people, for they are seeing and hearing me for the very first time. Shortly after the ceremony, I am brought back to the dark room and placed in the locked file drawer and I am not seen or heard of until the end of the next semester. In this case, as a ritual, what am I? Well, as I see it, I am a perfunctory service that must be performed in order to get new members into an organization. Once the initiation is over, I'm pretty much pigeonholed until the next class is to be initiated.

However, in some fraternity houses I exist in quite a different fashion. Shortly after the initiation the brothers come in one by one, get me out of the drawer and look me over carefully. Some just like to read me, others try to memorize me. Whatever the case, I like it when they use me. Sometimes they even argue over me, and this gets exciting because you see that's what I'm about. I'm meant to be read carefully, discussed and even argued about. Yes, in fact, I can even be changed. I'm really a very human document, one that was written down some time ago after a great deal of thought of one or two men and I have been reworded, rephrased and re-evaluated many, many times.

In order to know what I'm really about, I need to be perpetually used and studied. (Too often the members mention me only at initiation time and I'm really meant for much more than that.) In fact, one of my most important missions is to help the chapter at its weekly meetings. If I am understood and used properly at these weekly meetings, I can really help the chapter get things together. There are always a few men who don't like to use me and put up a big argument about have an informal chapter meeting. What a joke that usually turns out to be. Most informal chapter meetings last a heck of a lot longer than formal chapter meetings where I'm used. As I've listened to people and watched how they use me, a couple of important thoughts have crossed my mind. First, the fraternities have done an excellent job in keeping me an esoteric document that is, basically a secret document and therein is much of the problem. Not only am I a secret

document to the outside, I am a secret to most of the members as well. They really don't know or understand me because they've never really studied me. Some people, I suspect, would like to keep me very, very secret because if non-members found out what I stood for, they might expect the members to live by it and that would be very difficult. Therefore, they keep me secret and they won't have to change their lifestyle.

Although I can be used in different ways and for different things, when you boil me down to my fundamental essence, I'm essentially one thing, a system of values. I don't change very much because I am the product of history and the spirit of man and how he relates to his fellow man and to his God. This relationship between man and man, and man and God, has never been a static one. It is confusing and illuminating, painful and exciting, a separation and a reunion and although I appear to be a contradiction, I am really no more of a contradiction than man himself. Too frequently we forget that man is both animal and spiritual in nature, and to reconcile the two can often be painful, confusing and frightening. And that is why it is so critical that man understands who I am and what I am for.

Because I am a system of values, I am therefore, an instrument of self-evaluation. My values are clear and absolute and yet difficult to emulate. To state a few, I am honor, courage, integrity, fidelity, courtesy and I demand self control as well as ambition and humility. What your Founders did is take the idea of friendship and move it a significant step forward to the concept of commitment.

Those of you who are leaders in your fraternity chapter-leaders both formal and informal-must continue to ask yourselves how you can improve in articulating to your members the message of your fraternity. Why is it that some of the members get it and others do not? To some the message goes deep and becomes a part of their very being, while for others it never scratches the surface. Ask yourself the question when you attend your regional meetings, your workshops, retreats, leadership schools, how much time do you spend discussing and sharing with each other what personal effect I have had on your lives? Do you, as so many chapters do, use me to start the meetings and close the meetings and become so involved in your day to day business that you forget I am there to be reflected upon? For those of you who do understand and use me, are you afraid or ashamed to share those experiences and thoughts with your fellow brothers? Those of you who are fraternity leaders, and are not using me in this way are very derelict in your responsibilities, your duties, and the very oath that you took when you became a member and an officer in your fraternity. For, you see, as written in your esoteric manuals, I am really of very little value unless you and the other brothers come, and though your mutual sharing begin to experience the essence and depth of my message. Then you and I are activated by the real charge into your spiritual and moral fiber that is possible for all men but achieved by too few. The effectiveness of my message is in direct proportion to your knowledge and belief in my values.

If there is something about me that you do not like, then ask the convention of your fraternity to change me, but for God's sake do not ignore me. It is the indifference to and the ignorance of my essential message that continues to stifle the growth of the fraternity system. Never has the time been so ripe as this period in our history when the young people of today on our college campuses are crying out for the kind of message, guidance, value, and leadership that has been so long hidden in my pages.

If you would just realize that by better knowing and understanding me, many of your day-to-day problems, housing, collections, and apathy, would simply fade away and not exist.

Basically I am a road map to help a person along his journey of life and assist him in his communion with his fellow travelers. Who am I? Your ritual. What am I? A system of values. What am I for? My purpose is not to make you just a better fraternity man, but more importantly, a better human being.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Edward M. King is the former Director of Housing and Residential Life at Bradley University, Bradley, Illinois. He is a member of the Sigma Chi Fraternity and has been inducted into their Order of Constantine.