

Socrates put it very well years ago when he said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." The problem is, how do you examine your life? What criteria do you use? What's the process? Because our founders were students of both philosophy and theology, they understood the nature of this Socratic statement. And that is why they gave us the Ritual.

When we think of ritual, we tend to think of a formal ceremony like a wedding, a funeral, a baptism or, in the case of a fraternity, the initiation ceremony and the chapter meeting. These and many like them are formal rituals. However, we tend to take for granted other rituals of an informal nature: the way we get up in the morning, the way we prepare for class or work, the way we party and socialize. These become customs, and customs are based on rituals.

In the case of the undergraduate chapter, we need to evaluate how we use the Ritual. Most fraternity men and women, graduates as well as undergraduates, become very self-conscious when the Fraternity Ritual is used "out of context." For example, when the Ritual is used in an informal discussion, a feeling of awkwardness and uncertainty exists among the members. The purpose of this essay is to help both graduates and undergraduates become aware of the nature of the Ritual and how it ought to be used in an informal and personal way. We attempt to answer three fundamental questions: (1) How can we motivate our fraternity brothers to seriously study the Ritual? (2) How can we motivate our fraternity brothers to

seriously discuss the Ritual? (3) How can we motivate the undergraduate chapter to seriously perform the Ritual. Inevitably, the brothers who get the most out of the Ritual are those who perform it.

The Fraternity Ritual is important because it deals with the moral problem of every man and woman. It attempts to explain our two fundamental relationships: our relationship with ourselves and our relationship with others. We must do a better job of explaining these relationships in: (a) the pledge or membership development program, (b) the pre-initiation program, and (c) the post-initiation program. Ultimately, by better understanding the Ritual we should do a better job of living it.

A good place to promote understanding is at a chapter workshop or retreat. Divide the members into small groups (six members in a group) and discuss the following four questions: (1) How did I feel during my initiation? (2) How do I feel when I am participating in or observing the initiation? (3) What part of the initiation is most significant to me and why? (4) What have I learned from the Ritual that I can use in my daily life? End the discussion by having a member recite the Charge. Then have each member in the small group discuss the thought in the Charge that means the most to him and why. This process can set an ideal tone for a productive workshop.

All fraternal rituals have three common elements: they tell a story, provide a set of virtues (values), and ask for a lifelong commitment. In his book Philemon's Problem, James Burtchaell tells us that "It is through ritual that we bring purpose into our lives. Our rituals provide us with intense moments of meaning, opportunities to

display the powerfully operative forces that shape the way we live.”

To initiate means to begin, and that is precisely what our initiation ritual is: an opportunity to begin a life of both personal and spiritual development. Ritual equals empowerment. In the development of a chapter, whether through membership selection or risk-management, the Ritual is the key for empowering the officers and individual members. These two words-- Ritual and Empowerment-- should be synonymous if the Ritual is properly understood and used.

The chapter meeting is the best example of how the principle of empowerment should work. When you study the structure of the chapter meeting, you immediately see the wisdom of our founders and how they understood the process of self-examination. The meeting is divided into three basic segments. First, the gathering is to serve as a regular reminder of our obligations, purpose, and ideals. Second, the business of the chapter is transacted. Third, brotherhood and fraternalism are promoted. What happens at the end of the chapter meeting truly defines who we are. This is the time when we share the joy and pain of our daily life, which is essentially the bonding process. This is the time when we embrace each other. If this sharing and bonding does not occur in the chapter meeting, than it is ~~is~~ highly unlikely that it will occur outside of the meeting.

The National Interfraternity Commission on Values and Ethics developed the following statement in 1991 entitled We are Fraternity:

“We, as fraternity, believe in the development of the human spirit. The primary

process by which the human spirit is developed is through the relationships we have with one another, ourselves, and God. These relationships are the essence of our identity. It is through fraternity with others that we know who we are. The absence of positive relationships, not the absence of things and events, is a primary source of unhappiness.

"The Fraternity is essentially making one statement: We believe in each other. It is through the values expressed in our ritual that we share this belief. It is through our actions that we exemplify this belief.

"As a system of values, our ritual provides us with a foundation for the art of living."

This, my brothers, is why we must take every opportunity to Lead through the Ritual.