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Rites of Passage Within the Canadian Fraternity System

ABSTRACT

The Canadian fraternity system is an excellent example of rites of passage. Unfortunately, many young men join fraternities with false preconceptions instilled by the fraternity. This paper presents a realistic picture of fraternity operations from the perspective of a former fraternity executive. In addition, the myth that fraternities enhance a young man's life will be dispelled.

Malinowski says that in order to fully understand a culture and its related aspects, one must immerse oneself into that culture, become part of and participate in that population. The same holds true for rites of passage within the Canadian fraternity system. The ceremonies and secret rituals that exist within a given fraternity can only be reported by someone who has experienced this liminal phase. This is an area with which I am familiar. I have rushed, pledged, joined with, and since disassociated myself from a Canadian fraternity. My experiences and informant interviews provide an adequate (I would like to say accurate but this is just one example within an entire system) account and are indicative of the rites of passage within Canadian fraternities.

RITES OF PASSAGE

Separation, Liminality, and Re-aggregation

The term 'Rites of Passage' was coined by Arnold Van Gennep. Just as Charles Darwin's contribution to Anthropology was the theory of evolution and E.B. Tylor's was 'animism,' so Van Gennep's contribution is the 'Rites of Passage.' Van Gennep defines 'Rites of Passage' as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Turner 1969:94), and he shows that these rites, or transitions, occur in three stages: separation, liminality (or marginality), and re-aggregation (or incorporation) (Van Gennep 1960:11). By separation, Van Gennep means detachment from the cultural setting of the individual or group. This detachment is signified by the symbolic behaviour that accompanies it. During the second phase, the liminal phase, the ritual subject passes through a cultural realm unfamiliar to him, meaning that the attributes relating to this phase are not characteristic of his past or future states. Lastly, in re-aggregation, the passage is completed. The subject is in a relatively stable state once more and is ready to assume his new social position within society (Turner 1969:95).

Van Gennep notes that rituals often are performed, at all levels of social complexity, when individuals or groups are culturally defined as undergoing a change of state or status (Turner 1974:196). For instance, universities and colleges are 'liminal' settings for many kinds of independent, cognitive behaviours, as well as forms of symbolic action (Turner 1979:27) that resemble those found in tribal societies. "Rushing" and "pledging" ceremonies used in Greek fraternities represent such forms of symbolic action. It is this aspect of the social position during the liminal phase (pledge period) within fraternities that this paper will focus on.

Rushing, Pledging, and Formal Initiation

There are two viewpoints which I intend to discuss. One is that of the individual member intending to join the fraternity, and the other is that of the fraternity itself, hoping to recruit new individuals. The process, as a whole, can best be divided into three phases: 'rushing', 'pledging', and formal initiation. These phases can be usefully equated with Van Gennep's rites of passage phases: the end of the rush period, when an individual accepts a bid to pledge, corresponding to separation, the pledge period, corresponding to the liminal phase, and formal initiation, corresponding to re-aggregation.

In simple terms, during the rush period, the fraternity tries to impress individuals because they are potential recruits. During the pledge period, it is the recruits that try to impress the fraternity and thus show that they are worthy of becoming full members. Lastly, formal initiation equates the pledge class socially with the rest of the fraternity by honouring them as full members. The term 'full' member is derived from the term 'associate' member. An associate member is simply one that is part of the pledge class (liminal phase), and a full member has all the rights and privileges of the fraternity.

RUSHING

Now if we were to discuss the point of view of the individuals joining the fraternity, we would find that the liminal phase is the one in which the ritual subject (who intends to join the fraternity) spends the majority of his time. Essentially, this does not begin until after the 'rush' period. As previously stated, the 'rush' period is the one in which the fraternity tries to impress the potential new member. The individual, as a result, need not to do much more than be present for a few of the scheduled events during the rush period; a period which generally lasts approximately two weeks. The subject does not even need to initiate conversation with...
anyone, because this is done for him. This is the phase wherein the subject learns—albeit quite superficially—what he is getting himself into. The decision of whether to continue on to the next phase is an important one for the subject because, if he chooses to do so, he thereby chooses to detach himself from his earlier position within the social structure (Turner 1969:94).

The position of the fraternity is significantly different from that of the individual during the rush period. The fraternity goes through a liminal period for the entire time of rush, pledge and formal initiation, in the sense that the fraternity sets aside its normal operations and enters into a somewhat marginal phase. This phase lasts for approximately eight weeks: two weeks for the rush period, and six weeks for the pledge period and formal initiation. The fraternity's main goal is to maintain or increase its population. The recruiting of new members is vital to the survival of the fraternity because some members graduate at the end of each school year, and one cannot be an active member unless he is enrolled at university. This is the reason why it is necessary for the fraternity to impress interested individuals. At the end of the two-week rush period, the fraternity invites those individuals in whom they are interested to continue on into the pledge period. This is what is known as 'extending a bid'.

Those individuals who accept a bid become 'pledges'. Pledges are immediately stripped of any social position they may have had prior to pledging, and placed on the lowest possible social level within the fraternity system. Note that the pledge does not lose his status in the society at large, just within the context of the fraternity.

**PLEDGING**

During the six weeks of pledging, the fraternity works to determine the substance of each pledge. 'Substance', in the language of the fraternity, means one's personal worth and character. The fraternity needs to be certain that each pledge they accept will contribute positively to matters regarding the fraternity. This factor is considered to be very important. Through personal communication with members of other fraternities, I have found that many fraternities believe that the only way to be sure of the substance of the pledge, is by breaking him down emotionally, until he believes that he is nothing; "that he is lower than pond scum, a neophyte." Accordingly, the pledges are often called "neos," which is short for "neophyte." Within the context of the fraternity, the pledges have only those certain rights which are issued to them by the fraternity. The belief here is that if the fraternity can break down the pledge, in some cases to the point of tears, then he will be emotionally naked, thus having nothing to hide. Only then can the beliefs and characteristics of the fraternity be imposed upon him. For example, some employers like to hire people who have no previous experience related to the job in question so that they don't have to strip away any prior experience from the individual, and can teach him or her their own methodologies. In this way, the employer can show the new person how they want the job done, without having to change any old habits. The same holds true within fraternities. This is the time for the fraternity to strip away any undesirable personal qualities from the pledge because, if he becomes a full member, he will gain a certain degree of power and equality, and will be pretty much untouchable. In other words, he will be considered equal to every other member in the fraternity, thereby making it difficult to be discriminated against.

**Hazing**

How is all of this achieved? We now turn to the concept of 'hazing'. Hazing encompasses all acts, rituals and ceremonies that are inflicted upon pledges which are expressions of the fact that they are assigned the lowest social position. (Note that when the social hierarchy is discussed, it is within the context of the fraternal organization, and not society in general). These acts can range from things such as cleaning duties to ritual paddling. Despite the fact that hazing is illegal on Canadian campuses, it is still quite prevalent. For example, if an active member (a full member) is sitting around the fraternity house and wants a drink or something from the store, he can order the pledge to go and fetch it for him, and the pledge must comply. Another example of hazing is ritual paddling. Here, the pledge is blindfolded and is instructed to lean forward over a chair and hold his scrotum in his right hand to prevent injury to his genitals. If the pledge has offended anyone in the fraternity, or even someone in his own pledge class, that individual can smack the pledge's backside with a wooden paddle as hard as he desires. Usually the pledges emerge from this experience a little sore; however, occasionally a pledge does exit in considerable pain. This generally is the only ritual causing outright physical pain that is performed. The reasoning behind this ritual is, again, to try to break down the pledge emotionally. The majority of the time this ritual is performed with fraternity members being intoxicated, as a result the fraternity members often forget the meaning of the ritual, and the infliction of as much pain as possible upon the pledge via the paddle, becomes their sole purpose. To further illustrate, the fraternity members line up to paddle each pledge. Within these lines, it is not uncommon for members to wager on who would be the first to break the paddle on a pledge's backside. For the victor of the wager, this event serves to enhance his identity within the fraternity. In other words, this would be a story that he could tell in order to individualize himself within the fraternity in a positive way. For the pledge, the result is painful and humiliating. Fraternity members superficially console the pledge afterwards, by telling the pledge something along the lines of "it wasn't all that bad".

Another goal of the fraternity is to have the pledge class, as a whole, establish a long-lasting bond; a fraternal bond. This is usually accomplished by one of
two means. The first means is a 'lock-in'. A lock-in refers to a weekend when all the pledges must show up at the fraternity house and cannot leave the house for approximately forty-eight hours. They are usually kept in the basement and are given bathroom breaks and food. Their personal belongings such as watches and wallets, however, are temporarily confiscated. This leaves the pledges with no sense of time, and no distractions, and with nothing else to do but bond.

The second means used by the fraternity in order to establish fraternal bonds among the members of a pledge class might be considered as being the opposite of a 'lock-in'. The pledges are again stripped of their watches and wallets. They are then blindfolded and taken, as a group, to an obscure and unknown location where they are dropped off and abandoned with only one instruction: "Get back to the fraternity house". This event can be considered to be a levelling device — in the sense that the pledges are robbed of worldly identity through isolation and individuated treatment. This is also a very effective method of establishing a fraternal bond because, in such a situation, their only resource is one another. Moreover, the experiences that result from such a challenge may form memories that last a lifetime.

The people that share a certain set of interconnected systems (and among these systems there are usually also certain social groups — territorial, genetic or telic) maybe more or less conscious of this fact, and more or less willing to influence one another for the benefit of their common civilization for their mutual benefit. This consciousness and willingness, insofar as they exist, constitute a social bond uniting these people over and above any other social bonds which are due to the existence of regulated social relations and organized social groups.... [which can be seen] if the term 'community' is limited to the humanistic reality embracing such phenomena ... as the development of new cultural ideals and attempts at their realizations apart from organized group action (Turner 1974:45).

This "community" is what Turner called "communitas" or social anti-structure, since it is "a bond uniting ... people over and above any formal social bonds" (Turner 1974:45). These 'lock-ins' and further abandonment practices of the fraternity are nearly identical to those of many tribal societies when they send young boys in transition out into the wild to survive on their own. If this is done individually, it is through the vision quest. If they are sent out in a group, it is to bond with each other. This marks the boys' entrance into manhood within their tribes.

Lastly, it is not entirely uncommon to begin the pledge period with fifteen individuals, and to have only eight or ten pledges at the end. This conforms precisely to the fraternity's intention during the pledge period which is to filter out those that are 'unworthy'.

During the pledge period, the individual passes through a cultural realm that is unfamiliar to him, and one that he is not likely ever to experience again. What is it, then, that drives the pledge to continue and to tolerate the pledge period? On the surface, it seems that there is no rational reason for anyone to tolerate such degradation and verbal assault. However, when I recall being a pledge, I remember the desire I felt to belong and my sense of determination. I believed that a sense of failure would have overwhelmed me if I was not able to endure the pledge period — it was an obstacle that I had to overcome. This notion of desire and determination was something common to all the pledges that I consulted. This notion is instilled in a pledge by the fraternity during rush week, when the individual (potential pledge) is made to believe that being part of the fraternity will positively and profoundly change his life forever. It is this new—found motivation that fuels the pledge to continue and to endure the pledge period, despite his previous moral and ethical beliefs (Kalof and Cargill 1991:419).

The pledge often becomes so obsessed with the attaining of his goal (becoming a full member of the fraternity) that he becomes focused on the fraternity alone, and neglects certain other aspects of his life. Usually the main aspect of his life that the pledge becomes neglectful towards is the very reason that he has come to university to begin with: academics. This confusion arises out of many events and aspects of the pledge period. For example, on one day a fraternity member might be very nice to the pledge, show interest in his life, and portray the image that he would like to be his friend. The next day, that same fraternity member may act unfavourably towards the pledge. This is a source of much confusion for a pledge, as he has no idea of how to interpret this behaviour, or what to expect next. After all, he barely knows these people. One could interpret this type of behaviour on the part of the fraternity members as a form of psychological abuse. This routine of conflicting behaviours is a sort of on—going ritual that is known within the fraternity as "good cop, bad cop". Another version of this scenario is when certain fraternity members only play 'good cop', and others only play 'bad cop'. This routine formally occurs during what is known as 'Hell Week'.

'Hell Week' is usually the last week of the pledge period. During this week, the fraternity schedules rituals and ceremonies nearly every night. These are the final efforts of the fraternity to discover the substance of each pledge. The atmosphere of these rituals and ceremonies, therefore, is far more intense.
The general belief is that the more severe the "hazing", the more devoted the pledges become once they are full members (Aronson and Mills 1959:121). These 'Hell Week' events are highly secretive, and are inflicted upon each pledge individually in private, and not among the pledge class as a whole. The pledge basically goes through the cycle of separation, liminality and re-aggregation several times during this week, only on a much smaller scale and in relation to his pledge group.

For example, in the fraternity with which I was affiliated, there was one ritual called "MQB", which stood for "Membership Quality Board". Although this ritual—and others that I may use as examples—may not be the exact same ritual that exists in other fraternities, the essence of the ritual remains consistent. The board consists of various active members of the fraternity's executive council (president, vice-president, treasurer, etc.) who sit at a table. Symbolic representations of the fraternity's inner values and meanings, for example, skulls and daggers are spread out on the table. The room is lit by one candle, and the faces of the fraternity members at the table are hidden by the darkness. One pledge is then brought into the room blindfolded, and is ordered to kneel in front of the table. He is instructed that when the blindfold is removed, he is to stare at the candle only, and to answer every question that is asked of him. In the pledge's experience, he is now separated from his pledge class and is completely on his own. He cannot draw support from anyone else.

This particular ritual puts the fraternity members in an dominant position. They have a frightened, defenceless pledge in front of them. They may question him on anything they wish and, if his answers are honest and to the liking of the fraternity, he will probably be considered to be a fine acquisition for the fraternity. If the Board can sense some deceit, or more likely an inappropriate attitude, then they may feel the pledge is someone whom they do not wish to recognize as a fraternity 'brother' (where 'brother' means fellow fraternity member). This is the final test before the fraternity makes its decision as to who is to be invited to join the fraternity out of the pledge class. During the event, the pledge is in an extremely vulnerable position. The intensity of the ritual can be extremely overwhelming, and in some case can induce an emotional break-down. Generally speaking, however, barring a major mistake of the pledges' behalf, and if the pledges put their time in willingly, then the entire pledge class is formally initiated as full members of the fraternity.

Formal initiation is the ceremony that reunites everyone at the same social level. It is the last phase of Van Gennep's 'rites of passage': re-aggregation (Turner 1969:95). This is the time when all the inner secrets of the fraternity are revealed to the new group of 'fraters' (pronounced "fraw-ters" /fræ:терz/, which is another way of saying 'brother' or fellow fraternity member). At this point, each frater takes an oath swearing that the secrets being revealed to him will remain within the fraternity. These inner secrets entail the true meanings of the symbolism of which the fraternity boasts (such as the Greek letters, the coat of arms, the fraternity flag, secret handshakes, etc.). After taking this oath, the rite of passage is consummated.

CONCLUSION

The fraternity system is an good example of Van Gennep's 'rites of passage' insofar as it clearly shows the three different phases of separation, liminality, and re-aggregation from an large-scale and small-scale view. The fraternity system differs, however, from other areas of our culture which employ rites of passage. This difference lies in what the individual comes to expect. Other rituals and ceremonies, such as the passage through puberty, or Mafia rites, hold the promise that a more fruitful life awaits them on the other side. The fraternity makes the promise that "it's the best experience you will ever have", or "it will positively change your life forever" (Kennedy 1985:7), however, it lacks the ability to deliver. Among the positive returns from a membership in a fraternity are the increased social contacts one makes, and the good sense of belonging to a group. Being the president or member of the executive council can provide good work experience for future employment, but not everyone in the fraternity receives that opportunity (Watson-Davis 1993:34). For some, the fraternity life can be quite rewarding. For the majority of the members however, there is nothing "profound" about the returns one receives from fraternity membership.

The pledge may experience disappointment upon discovering that the strong motivation associated with the pledge period does not last. It is quite rare that someone maintains their enthusiasm for the fraternity, at least to the degree that was mentioned previously.. The one time that the enthusiasm returns is during "Hell Week", when members can degrade pledges just for fun; and this is for all the wrong reasons.

The fraternity boasts of 'brotherly love' and 'fraternal unity' to potential recruits. Basically, it portrays the image of 'no boundaries within' (Knuf 1990:112). The number of cliques and groupings that exist within the fraternity is surprising. For example, members of the executive council seem to be closer, for the most part, to each other. This occurs in part due to the frequent 'executive only' meetings that are held, at which time important matters of the fraternity are discussed, such as upcoming social and philanthropic events. The non–executive members of the fraternity are not invited to these meetings. Another interesting pattern—perhaps a natural one—that develops is that newly initiated members rarely integrate with long serving members of the fraternity, outside the fraternity's social realm. To further illustrate, outside of planned fraternity events (which are in most cases mandatory for all fraternity members to attend), older members rarely associate with newer members.

The poor social integration of fraternity members outside of the fraternity, may have to do with the
financial survival of fraternal organizations. The fraternity depends on money from its members in order to operate. Operational costs are met with the fraternity dues paid to the fraternity by each member, a fee which is often in excess of five hundred dollars per school year. Thus it is crucial for the fraternity to maintain a sufficient number of members to maintain the organization. Often fraternities find themselves with low numbers, and therefore in need of financial help. The fraternity can obtain financial help either through alumni donations (which are never enough to run a fraternity), or through recruiting new members who can pay dues. In times of financial duress, fraternities often accept anyone who is interested in joining as long as they can pay their dues, with little regard for the personal worth and character of the pledge. This imperative of the fraternity system completely contradicts the established system of values set up through tradition.

Another element of fraternity membership contrary to the apparent mandate of fraternities is the perception of tradition on the part of people who join. In discussing this contradiction with members of the fraternity with which I was affiliated, as well as with members of other fraternities, I found that very few of them joined their fraternity because of its supposedly 'rich tradition'. As pledges, the concept of 'the fraternity' was unfamiliar to us—the chief criterion guiding us in choosing which fraternity to join, and whether to join a fraternity, was whether the people at a given fraternity appealed to us. In some cases, one fraternity would be chosen over another because it was rumoured to be 'better than others'. Accordingly, the tradition and history of the fraternity did not receive much consideration when it came to the choice of which fraternity to join.

The future of fraternities in Canada seems to be very uncertain. Although the Greek fraternity system is reasonably stable as it stands presently, its continued existence as an organization depends entirely upon successful recruiting. Throughout the history of the fraternity system however, its popularity has gone in cycles. In the 1920's fraternities were popular, whereas in the 1930's they were not popular. During the 1940's and 1950's they were very popular, while during the 1960's through to the 1980's popularity decreased (Guemple 1994). This decreasing trend has continued up to the present. The resulting persuasive task necessary for increasing membership presents a practical problem which cannot be solved without abandoning the pretense of organizational strength symbolically enhanced by behaviour stressing structure, cohesiveness and lack of boundaries (Knuf 1990:128). It seems that what it means to be a member of a fraternity today runs entirely counter to the apparent status dimensions symbolized in the overall structuring and situational framework of the fraternity.

Society at large has come to devalue "herd" behaviour and the cultural elitism that the "us–them" structure of the fraternity implies, in favour of individualism. A person can still be considered special in some way, but not because of his or her membership in one of these "elite" organizations. Social groups with closed membership and ritualistic entry thresholds are discriminatory, no matter what their aims and aspirations are.

It has been over a year since I have disassociated myself from my fraternity. At the time, I was a member of the executive council and actively involved in the fraternity. I had experienced everything that fraternity life had to offer. When I realize that I was weak and naïve enough to be taken by such a façade, however, it makes me feel quite uncomfortable. The fraternity system contains 'empty' rites of passage, in the sense that, instead of having the feeling that a significant transition in the fraternity members' life has occurred upon re-aggregation, that fraternity member begins to discover that the satisfaction which was supposed to be associated with their change in social status is illusory, and that, in fact, no significant transition has occurred at all.

REFERENCES


