

Explanation of the Rituals of Beta Sigma Phi

To trace the origin and growth of the Rituals in Beta Sigma Phi is to draw the picture of the very heart of an association of people devoted to the development of a better self as individuals and to a better world. Even a computer cannot turn out results that are good unless the right data is programmed into it. Rituals are the programming by which Beta Sigma Phi feeds into the minds and hearts of its members the basic data from which they will, in time, be rewarded with individual and personal results, differing in form but not in the essence from these symbolic statements, more general and abstract.

The urgency and variety of lesser things press upon us day in and day out. But constructive thinking to be most effective must become habitual. It needs cultivation as a habit until it is firmly established as one. Here again the Rituals are of value, especially the ones repeated at every meeting, because this helps by repetition, to deepen our understanding, and at the same time to form a habit of deeper thoughts.

Beta Sigma Phi Rituals are symbolic representations of the spirit of Sisterhood and of the determination of the members to improve themselves and in this way, make a better world. The language of Rituals is purposely poetic, because of the heightened emotional impact made possible by that form of expression. It deals with images and stories outside our normal terms of reference in order that the ideals and ideas expressed may be approached and appreciated, as if seen for the first time. In this way, the words themselves and the things of which they are symbolic, are not the “old friend” principles of our school days, but the living, acting, effective ones by which we mature into ever more valuable women.

The very first Ritual of Beta Sigma Phi, the Pledge Ritual, begins with a story which like the ancient myths imparts a message in a vivid way. The story concerns Diotima, the wise woman of Mantinea. To some experts, Diotima is a mythical person, to others she was an historic person. She was reputed to be the teacher of Socrates, a prophetess, who taught Socrates about the art and mystery of love. While it is taken for granted today, in Diotima's time, the idea that love is something more than physical desire was unheard of. Diotima taught that love is the “over beyond”, the very core of progress, the urge, the whip that drives us all toward perfection of the self in the creation of goodness, truth and beauty, which she maintained were the most sublime goals.

In the story found in the Pledge Ritual, a woman slept and dreamed that she wandered in the night through quiet streets of an ancient city, in the company of Diotima. She saw a light and realized that it was a torch moving in the distance and she discovered that they were following the torch. She asked Diotima what the torch was, and was told that it is called learning and that it moved away through the darkness to show them the way. She discovered that the torch never stopped but always led onward. Diotima told her that the torch itself was lighted from a fire that some call truth, some call beauty and some call love and that those who follow it learn all of these. The symbolic message of that story is that each new member of Beta Sigma Phi is handed a torch which can guide through her search for the good, the true and the beautiful.

The rest of the Ritual expands on the opportunities offered to a new member through her acceptance of the sisterhood of Beta Sigma Phi. It expands also upon the importance and depth and meaning of the fellowship of Beta Sigma Phi and its lesson of the love that grows between women who have “united at the same distaff.” The word distaff is described as part of a spinning wheel which has since Old English times symbolized women, their work and concerns. And the Ritual describes the scope and impact of that kind of love, that kind of fellowship. The rest of the Ritual of course, informs a new member of the significance of the badge and the meaning of the motto.

The second Ritual of Beta Sigma Phi, the Ritual of Jewels, is chiefly concerned with beauty and with six virtues, which are parts of beauty and which shine forth from you as though your life were a crystal prism, separating the light of the torch into a spectrum. The virtues are courage, vision, humility, loyalty, fellowship and service. The first three are represented by the colors red, yellow and blue, which are primary colors and which signify the great importance of those three virtues. The last three colors are secondary colors, each of which is formed by the combination of two primary colors, signifying that those virtues are seen as combinations of the virtues of courage, vision and humility.

The Exemplar Ritual is basically a recognition and an honor for those who have proved themselves in Beta Sigma Phi. It reminds them of the basic principles, of the symbolism, and of what they have learned in practicing the principles themselves. It celebrates what they have learned and what they have been together. It confers upon them the right to be known as one who exemplifies the highest purpose of Beta Sigma Phi, an Exemplar.

The Preceptor Ritual, the fourth in Beta Sigma Phi is again a Ritual of honor. Its candidates are honored for their courage, their vision, their humility, their loyalty, their fellowship and their service. They are honored as examples of friendship and living examples of the precepts of the organization, which they not only exemplify, but teach. They are called upon to give special concentration each year to one of the six virtues so that they can be good examples and teachers of those virtues.

In the fifth Ritual, the Laureate degree, the qualified candidates are reminded once again of the principles of Beta Sigma Phi and of the part they play in our lives. They are given a symbol of honor, which is recognized universally, the laurel wreath. They will be known as Laureates, those most honored, and they are urged to accept the continuing responsibility of progress and achievement.

The sixth Ritual, the Master Ritual, like all the rituals, build on those that came before it. This ritual was meant to be the final ritual for sisters in Beta Sigma Phi and those the name Master was chosen, like a Master carpenter or a holder of a Master degree, it was meant to signify attaining the pinnacle of the Beta Sigma Phi experience. Its pin's color is courage, showing that this degree was the ultimate attainment of the years of courage our Master sisters have shown.

The last degree ritual is the Torchbearer degree. This is indeed the final ritual for our members.

Because of that, it does take a moment to acknowledge that our lives are not infinite and at sometime in the future, we and all other humans, must lay down our burdens and pass to the other side. Unlike many our sisters will have a guarantee that their goals were shared and will be carried forward by their loving sisters. That their memory will be kept fresh and alive in the hearts of their sisters and even better, that they will cross into a realm we can only dream of, but one we know will be peopled by those sisters who have gone before us, who will greet us with open arms and the love we held in our hearts for them, returned. This is not an acknowledgement that this step is near, only that for all of us, it will come some day. This ritual builds on the language of many rituals and reminds us that our lives have been something we have built following our virtues and that those virtues will live in the memory of us and in the life we still have to live, that we continue to grow and learn.

It can be seen that each Ritual becomes progressively simpler. The Pledge Ritual seeks to impart to a new member the whole broad spectrum of ideals, purposes and opportunities and goals which are opened to her in Beta Sigma Phi. Each succeeding Ritual builds upon that wide base to recognize a level of accomplishment and growth. The Ritual of Jewels broadens and deepens the explanation of basic ideals. The Exemplar, Preceptor, Laureate, Master and Torchbearer Rituals recognize the attainment and urge toward greater happiness, growth and fulfillment. Each Ritual becomes simpler because more is already known, much has been already practiced, a great deal has been achieved, and it is not necessary to explain what is already known.

The Opening and Closing Ritual for the Beta Sigma Phi chapters serves as the “official” opening and closing of meetings. They help to create an atmosphere of friendship and closeness, and the right tone for conducting their business meetings and cultural programs. The longer the members are together, the stronger their bond of friendship grows, and the more meaningful all the Rituals become to them. The lovely Rituals in Beta Sigma Phi help to make our organization unique to others.

There is often a question about one line in the Rituals, that is “the only right you have is the right to be useful.” Many members find this inappropriate, we have more rights than that one. However, if you turn it around, and say, “the only right you have is to be useless” perhaps you will see what the emphasis truly is. What it is saying is that you are put here to make a mark, to accomplish, to create, that the gift of life, gives you this calling and it is the most essential right you have from the moment you are born. We as Beta Sigma Phi sisters recognize a special calling to help make the world a better place, to help those in need, to support our sisters and our families and the entire human family, because we have this calling, we are called to be useful. This is not saying we are merely this one right, because this one right is infinite in its possible facets, this is not a right that limits, it is a right that calls us to expand our existence and experiences, to make our lives something to be proud of, something that will be a jewel in our crowns. For those of us who believe in God, it is what God calls us to do when he tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, because in so doing, we commit to aiding them whenever we can. This is a sublime right, that we all thankfully, have a lifetime to strive for.