

The “Secrets” of Freemasonry

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While serving my Lodge, I had occasion to call on one of our Entered Apprentices to ask about the reasons for his long absence from the Work. Like all too many men who join our Fraternity, he completed his initiation and then disappeared. He had several reasons; the demands of his busi-ness had picked up, some personal issues requiring his attention at home, scheduling problems with his Coach, etc. All these were valid, but there appeared more to this than he was letting on. After some more conversation the truth was revealed... he was concerned about his obligation, particularly about the penalties for revealing our secrets.

Our Brother is a man who is very interested in Symbolism, Metaphysics, and (what we call our) Esoteric Work. The reason he sought out a Lodge to join was to write some papers on our Symbolism! He explained that he became alarmed when taking the obligation. We never informed him of what “secrets” he had just vowed to protect! We simply advised him of grave penalties for failing to protect them. This caused him concern, as it was his goal to bring some light to non-initiates in his writings. Being a man of much honor, he felt it better to go no further in our mysteries to be free to explain some of our symbolism to non-masons.

Symbolic vs. Pragmatic

We entered a discussion of the penalties. The need for protection of our secrets was, and is, self evident . . . if everyone knows our secrets, we have none. Having none, we are no longer unique, or even special. Nothing then remains to induce men of good moral character to want to associate with us. We discussed the historic nature of the penalties. Without addressing the accuracy of our alleged descent from the Knights Templar, there have been other times in history when Masons have faced death simply for being Masons, and living according to Masonic principles. Hitler, Franco, Khomeni, and others have issued death sentences for freethinkers. We teach our candidates to be freethinkers by the nature of our ceremonies.

He was surprised to learn that, under Masonic Law, the strongest penalty a Lodge can impose on a member is simply expulsion from the Fraternity ! Although to most Masons, separation from the Craft would be far worse than the grisly acts described in our Ritual ! The term “no less a penalty” applies here, in great measure. The thought of revealing our secrets to the unentitled should cause revulsion in the minds of our membership.

The Secrets Themselves

What are our secrets? Today, in this country, our existence is well known. Published phone numbers and meeting times, even the jewelry openly and proudly worn by many Masons is evidence of this.

That we use mystic ceremonies, embedded with symbolism to impart moral and ethical lessons to our novitiates is almost as well documented. Any interested person could enter a specialty bookstore, purchase a book or two and learn the essence of our ceremonies. At the Local Masonic Center in my area there is a book store, well stocked with books on and about Masonry, and writings by many Masons. Many of these books clearly explain our ceremonies and the reasons for the manner in which we exemplify them. Within the same building there is a library containing hundreds of volumes of writings by countless Masonic scholars. Most of these books discuss either the history of our Craft, or the Ceremonies and symbolism we employ in our Work. Who we are, what we do, and how we do it are clearly not secret.

We proudly refer to our modes of recognition as the only secrets in our craft today. In my library at home, I have books describing our ritual in detail. These books have clear English text and include our cherished modes of recognition (complete with diagrams). These books were purchased at a wonderful little bookstore in the Business district in my neighborhood. Any interested person, with a few dollars, can do the same. Though Masons treat the modes of recognition as secret, they could not be considered unknown outside the Craft.

Secrets Defined

Well, what does that leave? It sounds like it's all out in the open. Our existence, methods, ritual, even the ways we recognize each other are known to any expressing an interest. The real secret of our Craft is the spiritual and emotional growth we encountered because of the experiences we shared. The true Mysteries of Freemasonry are contained within the acts of being conducted around the Lodge Room, kneeling at the Altar, first learning the Grips and Words of the several Degrees, and participating in the Third Degree Ritual. Experiencing this as we do (first hand) cannot be described in words. As with many other life experiences "you have to be there" to really understand it. Words could only confuse the issue, never explain it.

What this means to us, my Brother

What does it mean that we are required to keep all this secret? The prohibition against unlawful disclosure of these secrets is meant to protect our ritual from corruption. It is not prohibited to instruct a candidate in the Work. Proper instruction of Candidates is strongly encouraged by Lodges.

Candidates Coaches (the unsung warriors of our Fraternity) spend hour after hour personally instructing candidates in a myriad of areas. The Ritual Work, the history of Freemasonry, even proper Lodge etiquette are topics of much discussion. They spend many additional hours sharpening their proficiency in the Work to do this more effectively. They patiently answer the

hundreds of questions posed by Candidates. Officers spend evenings away from their families to attend practices to improve their Work. In California, Coaches and Officers are required to attend District Schools of Instruction, and when proficient, they are certified by District Inspectors. Inspectors are supervised by Assistant Grand Lecturers. These men come under the oversight of the Grand Lecturer. The Grand Lodge of California, and most of its constituent Lodges, have active committees on Masonic Education. This elaborate system exists to insure that Candidates receive proper instruction.

Work is done only in a tyled Lodge, by qualified Officers. Coaching is done in private settings, by skilled and dedicated men. In this way the Ancient Landmarks are preserved. If Degrees were to be conducted by the unqualified, errors would begin to seep in and Keystones would begin to change or disappear. The essence of the Work would change and those elements that make it what it is would be lost. Thus, it is easy to see why the admonition against unlawful disclosure of our Work exists.

The ‘flip side’

“That is it? All I have to do is leave things to the Officers and Coaches and I have fulfilled my Obligation?” Not at all! Remember promising never to reveal these secrets unlawfully? That promise contains a hidden injunction to reveal lawfully. Relate the emotions you feel in Lodge to your family and friends, and to the way in which you conduct your life. Share what Masonry means to you by your conduct out of the Lodge. Remind yourself why you are a Mason. Let the world see, by your actions, evidence of the growth you experienced. Promote your Lodge’s activities and invite non-Masons to social activities. They just might get caught up in the spirit of Brotherhood and ask “How may I become a Mason’?”. Then discuss the membership and degree processes with him. If he asks for a petition, help him fill it out. Introduce him to other members of your Lodge.

Lawful disclosure of our secrets

Signing a petition also carries with it a moral obligation. It obliges you to support our new Brother through his Masonic travels. Be present at his Degrees and Proficiency examinations. Patiently answer his questions, or refer him to his Coach. Sit with him at Lodge dinners and in Lodge. Be to him the friend you told your Lodge he was to you.

Being a member of a Lodge enjoins you to attend whenever you can, even if you are not an officer. A full Lodge room for an initiation expresses the love of the fraternity to the Candidate and encourages him to become more active himself.

Doing these things will go a long way to fulfilling your “unstated” obligation to lawfully communicate the secrets of Freemasonry. Become a True and faithful Brother and encourage others by your cackle.