

Freemasonry: Why Secrecy? **Worshipful Dr. Roger M. Firestone**

Freemasonry is usually referred to by outsiders as a secret society.

We have generally objected to this characterization, claiming that we are not members of a secret society, but rather of a society with secrets. We allow our members to wear insignia, do not conceal the location of our Lodge buildings, hold public Cornerstone Laying ceremonies, and welcome new members from men of good character who have but to ask to join.

But Webster's dictionary would agree with the general public, defining the term "secret society" as any of various oath-bound societies having a secret ritual and so on. The Craft certainly fits this definition.

Matters of definition aside, the characterization of Freemasonry by its secrets has caused difficulties for the Fraternity for quite some time. During some periods of history, the keeping of secrets was considered to be evidence of plotting against the regime or the established Church. Events in Italy a few years ago, concerning a secret, so-called "Masonic Lodge" known as Propaganda Due or P-2 under the Grand Orient of Italy and its involvement with highly placed government officials, indicate that this was not always a far-fetched assumption.

Nowadays, with matters once reserved for the bedroom to be found on television every evening and most government bodies subject to "sunshine" laws, the keeping of secrets by a social group seems anachronistic, if not downright suspicious. Many of us have been asked, "If there's nothing wrong with it, why do you keep it secret?"

Well, why do Masons keep secrets?

It is not enough to say that we have traditionally always done so, or that we are obliged to do so. These answers simply push the question further back into Masonic history.

The maintenance of secrecy is one of the first duties to which a man who becomes a Mason agrees. After the Symbolic Degrees, the first degree conferred in the Scottish Rite, Secret Master, and the last, Master of the Royal Secret, both indicate by their names that secrecy is a vital part of the Rite. A matter deemed so important by those who created the Masonic ritual is definitely worth further examination by all of us.

To be sure, we are mistaken if we think that the ritual secrets of Freemasonry are truly secret. More than one false Brother has chosen to reveal the entire contents of the Masonic ritual to the public. Although such exposés were more common and certainly more sensational during the earlier part of Masonic history, complete plain text copies of our work are available today in bookshops in many large cities. There is nothing to prevent any of the profane from purchasing such a volume and learning the entire contents of the ritual, even the grips, signs, and words. Moreover, Masonic jewelry is readily purchased by anyone who wants to make a purchase.

Only the use of a dues card ensures that we will not sit in Lodge with counterfeits, while we must rely on general honesty of the population not to be imposed upon in the street by strangers wearing a Masonic pin.

If, as was once remarked, the secret of Freemasonry is that there are no secrets to Freemasonry, a dues card seems like a flimsy distinction between the initiated and the profane. When the entire ritual can be obtained from a book, there must be something else that distinguishes Freemasons from the rest of the world and that justifies the emphasis made on secrecy within the Craft. There are several parts to the answer.

Perhaps the most obvious difference is the nature of the experience. Becoming a Master Mason is a process that requires effort on the part of the candidate. He must seek out our Institution, have a petition signed, provide an initiation fee, appear at the proper times for the degrees, and commit the appropriate information to memory. Someone who merely reads the ritual is, on the other hand, totally passive.

A psychological experiment in imprinting, the process whereby young animals come to recognize their mother by following her, is informative: An experimental group of infant animals was treated with a muscle relaxant before the imprinting process, while a control group was given a sham treatment. Normal imprinting took place for the control group. However, the experimental animals failed to become imprinted on their mother. The muscle relaxant had prevented the young animals from exerting much effort to follow their mother about. Without effort, there is no learning.

Since the purpose of the Masonic degrees is to impart useful knowledge, the result of this experiment suggests that the initiate who puts effort into joining the

Fraternity is far more likely to derive value from the experience than one who only peruses the ritual in a book.

Another major reason why secrecy is advocated for the knowledge imparted by Freemasonry is to make the point that our teachings are valuable. We leave many inexpensive items lying carelessly about our homes and offices, whereas truly valuable items are kept locked in safe deposit boxes or other repositories, or are carried with us at all times. In Poe's story, "The Purloined Letter," many hiding places are searched for the letter; but having been left in plain view, it is overlooked as worthless. Since knowledge, per se, cannot be locked up physically, keeping it secret is the method used to restrict its circulation and ownership.

If the teachings of Freemasonry were made available to anyone as a matter of routine, it would indicate to both members and outsiders that we attach only a modest value to them. Instead, we have spent centuries of effort keeping the truths of Masonry secret and passing them down the generations by memory. This should convince both Masons and non-Masons alike that what we have labored so hard to possess is valuable indeed.

We also should recognize that secrecy is an integral characteristic of individuals and groups. Within each of our families we have information that is ours privately and is not the business of outsiders. The breadwinner's salary, children's problems at school, the happy experiences of courtship, and the contents of one's last will – all are things we naturally choose to keep within the bosom of the family and would not care to have made public.

In the same way, we as Masons refer to ourselves by the family term of "Brothers," and thus the secrets of Masons in Masonry are our right to keep to ourselves as members of the Masonic family. For outsiders to demand that we give up our secrets, no less any other of our ancient practices, is as much an invasion of privacy as would be demanding a videotape of one's wedding night.

One of the more horrifying aspects of the world depicted in Orwell's 1984 is the total lack of privacy. The Masonic Fraternity has too much experience with totalitarianism in recent years to view such demands and presumptions as benign. They may well be feared as a first step towards the ultimate suppression of Masonry, as has happened too often in the past.

A further motivation for the keeping of secrets is that it promotes a form of mental self-discipline. There is a natural urge to share what we know with others. Gossiping and idle conversation consume more hours than perhaps any other

human pastime. This tendency is rooted in the evolutionary origin of the human race, where the ability for one individual to share his or her experiences with the other members of the community conferred a significant survival advantage over non-communicating lower animals. Humans that did not share information with their fellows experienced negative selection pressure, in the words of the evolutionary biologist.

Later, as society developed, the selective ability to refrain from communicating acquired importance. We all know someone who cannot keep a secret and such a person usually does not merit our trust in other matters, either. Keeping the secrets of a Brother Master Mason or of the Fraternity as a whole, teaches us responsibility for the property of others and shows that we merit the trust and confidence of our Brothers and fellows. The various Masonic penalties, although symbolic, should remind us of the seriousness of our undertakings and reinforce in us the mental toughness to carry them out.

Masonic secrecy is thus seen to be no mere idle device, such as those secrets with which children may twit their playmates. Rather, it serves numerous purposes, both to unite the Craft and benefit the individual member. We gain from secrecy a sense of the value of what we have come to Masonry to learn, we learn the lessons better for the way in which we learn them, and we develop worthwhile mental resources from the discipline of keeping the details of Freemasonry private.

When next we are challenged by an outsider on the "old-fashioned" nature of belonging to a secret society, there is no need to make excuses for it. Masonic secrecy is not merely an ancient tradition, it is a vital characteristic of our Fraternity that we should cherish and protect. No less than the democratic tradition of the secret ballot, we should be prepared to defend our right and duty to keep secret that which is uniquely ours as our Masonic legacy to those who will follow us.

Of course, given that we are not members of a secret society, but rather of a society with secrets, it should be clear that there is much about Freemasonry that should be communicated. That is why virtually every Grand Lodge, and so many Lodges, have a website with meaningful content that explains what we are about and why men of good character should seek to join our ranks. There is absolutely nothing wrong with each Mason talking about the Fraternity with his family and friends, and with his colleagues and acquaintances, but there is every reason to expect that each Mason will honor his promise to keep those legitimate Masonic secrets with which he has been entrusted.

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