



THE LOST SECRET

When one becomes a Masonic officer we get to sit in on lots of discussions about just what Freemasonry is and where we, as leaders, should take it. These discussions usually turn into a three way tugging match between being a Charity organization, a Ritual Society, and a Fraternity. Very popular today is to disparage our rituals as quaint old remainders whose relevancy is at best questionable. Once familiar with the degree work, this very familiarity insulates us from being able to appreciate it. As the Zen master D.T. Suzuki once explained, we lose “beginner’s mind” and, once lost, it can never be regained. I also think many who joined hoping that we did hold a secret that would provide the key to what was missing in their lives nourish a quiet bitterness that this promise was not fulfilled. Of course, that Freemasonry never made such a promise is overlooked. Today also the number of people accustomed to really thoughtful discernment has been diminished by many aspects of our culture, especially television.

Concluding, for whatever reasons, that the rituals of Masonry are just a “dog & pony” show which, if they once held meaning, it was for men of a by-gone era when people were simpler and more easily satisfied, Masons turned to Charity as a worthy reason for existing. The most famous example of this is the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine who sought to ennoble activities that were not very noble by creating their hospitals for children. This proved tremendously successful back in the early 20th Century, and all of Masonry flocked to the idea. Overnight every Masonic group- and there are 48 of them- had to have at least one Charity. The chosen charity became the main selling point and replaced the degrees as the reason why a young man should be a Mason.

Yet the truths of human existence are the same today as they were in the 18th Century. Outside, in our culture, there have been many material changes since those days, but real change happens only within. Our modern business suit may look different than what Brother Gourgas wore, but under it he had the same body we all share. Our occupations are not the same as in the past, but our emotions, need for sustenance and love, and most of all our need for spiritual connection and growth, have not changed at all. Human nature of all times and cultures is remarkably unchanging. It may take a much different packaging and approach to demonstrate to men of today the truths of Freemasonry, but the truths themselves are timeless because they are based on the essentials of human nature. The meaning in Masonry is not only as fresh and relevant as ever it was, but urgently needed in the world of today.

A somewhat analogous development is seen in the history of the Protestant churches. Born from the urge to cast out all traces of “popery,” they ended up throwing the baby out with the

bathwater. Ending up with bare wall rooms devoid of iconography, symbolism or ritual, they found their numbers dwindling away to churches making a fuller appeal to human nature.

Viewing our declining membership, many voices express their idea about what “young men today” want. Reflecting the ideals of the WWII generation, a common conclusion is that we need to repackage Masonry into slogans and sound bites that will not unduly interrupt the young man’s focus on his private world. Another large camp cries out that men today have no interest in philosophy, and we need to offer them the allurements of the physical world. Once again the Shrine is often held up as a model. Advocating the party life, drinking and gambling, is really nothing more than expressing the conviction that the secret of life is contained in the gratification of the physical senses. But isn’t this only more of exactly what our society already offers to men? More gold and girls to keep them occupied while the sands of time slip away. This view says more about those who advocate it than it does about the truth of human nature.

There is just one idea about Masonry that I almost never hear voiced in this tugging match about “what young men want.” That is Wisdom. I believe the reason for this is that Masons themselves have largely lost the Masonic Secret, and so are unable to convey it. There is nothing wrong with camaraderie or charity, but it is wrong to consider this Wisdom. In the past, Masons considered charity the natural outgrowth of feelings of love for all mankind. It was not a distant charity done by writing checks, but a personal one, man to man, straight from the heart. In their company Masons have always felt a natural joy because, as the old song says, “Sweet fellowship from envy free, the Lodge’s lasting cement be.” Yet these were the outgrowths of the secret that they shared, not its essence.

There have been two popular phrases that have done great damage to Masonry. The first is: “There is no higher degree than the Third.” This was the dictum of the Grand Lodge of England as it struggled with “Antient” Masonry, and has been carried on as a mantra since those long ago days. To say this to a brother who may not have received the most inspiring Third degree is to say Masonry is only a story ending with an uncompleted Temple. For our Rite to say this only says to him “You will find nothing new here.” Surely to justly acknowledge our Grand Lodges we need not fire our cannon through our hull. The second phrase is “The greatest secret of Masonry is that there is no secret.” I think back on those almost endless generations of men who devoted their lives and often risked all, even their lives, for the sake of Freemasonry. What motivated them to give so much to bring this tradition up from dim ages past to us today? Those men lined up and shot in Spain, in Germany- it would have been easy for them to disavow their allegiance, set the obligations aside, especially if they felt there was, at heart, nothing to them, just empty vows of a club. What made Gourgas keep going, when he was all there was to the Scottish Rite? It was not nothing.

But if there is something, if there actually is some glimmer of light within the old rags of ritual and the traditions of our Rite, then what is it? If it was some point of philosophy that could be just stated or written out, don’t you think it would be common knowledge by now? However, as our Lodge of Perfection puts it, it is ineffable; not a matter of the rational mind, but of spirit. Simply put, the essence of human nature cannot be thought about, it can only be experienced. The moment one attempts to put it into words, it is lost. This is why demonstrating this quintessence has at all times been done by using the arts of the stage. A direct appeal must be made to the heart of man. “Heart” here and in our culture is the old word for “unconscious.” The

Temple in the heart of man can be demonstrated, acknowledged, acted upon, but not defined. This provides it with its ancient yet ever new attraction for men, and a motivating force in the lives of those who know it far beyond the power of any intellectual argument. The symbol, ritual and ceremony, sound, color and all the arts of degree presentation speak directly to the unconscious mind, that vast part of man we cannot see or think about, but which yet guides all our actions and controls all our bodies, from our blood pressure to our dreams at night.

To think we are ourselves or that we know is a vast presumption based on ignorance. There is a reason why men are unsatisfied with the fruits of life, with gold and girls. There is a reason why no noble aphorism can defend against the terrors of death, and why no graveside words can wipe away the grief of those left behind. And here, here my brother, is where the great secret resides.

The truths of Masonry lie within, not without. We practice morality because uprightness of life is the first step towards the ever living secret. Only the pure of heart can enter the gates of the Temple. Beyond this, as the old Secret Master Degree showed, our ritual points out that within us all there is an enormous secret hidden behind a veil. It is a veil that takes effort and training to draw aside, this is true. A veil that none can approach except those who have mastered the trails of life and have not been found wanting. Yet beyond the veil blazes eternally and in every living thing a Secret so powerful and so profound that none can gaze upon it without being utterly transformed, in an instant, and forever. The Light of Masonry is not a metaphor.

So I would suggest a better schema of our organization would be Charity and Ritual hand in hand as a Fraternity grouped around a shining Secret. My appeal is to my brothers to exert ourselves to remove away the rubbish of the Temple once again. Let us uncover and seize the true Key, lift it and point out the path to a new generation of Masons. It will look dark to them and like a meaningless descent, but let us have confidence that within the worthy may find that which these generations have labored so hard to pass on to us: the great Masonic Secret.

Eric Ginette
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