

THE OLD PAST MASTER

IT'S A SECRET!

PART I

[THE DECLINE AND FALL OF MASONIC EDUCATION]

How many times have you heard: "My Grandfather was a 33rd Degree Mason, but he never told me anything about Masonry"; or "My Dad was a Mason. I asked him about it, but he said 'It's a Secret', you have to join before you can be told, so I never joined."

What a loss to Masonry. Family members who did not tell their children, brothers or grandchildren what Masonry was about. Each time, another potential member lost. This does not include the broader spectrum of friends and associates in the general public who would ask those same people and receive the same answer "It's a secret". No wonder the ranks of Masonry shrunk so severely in recent years.

In my case, my Grandfather was an active Blue Lodge and York Rite Mason, and my Father was Blue Lodge, Scottish Rite and Shrine Mason. Neither of them ever told me about DeMolay [although there was a Chapter in my High School], nor did they tell me anything about our Gentle Craft. I asked to join when I was 46 years old, because I thought if it was so important to them, there must be some reason to join. They were past masters of their Lodges, and I became the same – in two different Lodges.

The first time through the chairs, it was RITUAL, RITUAL, RITUAL, social events, comradery, and nothing else [other than donate to the Masonic Home]. Then, in 1996 I affiliated with San Mateo 226 and immediately became their Officers' Coach. I like to think that I was a good coach, since the immaculate correctness of the ritual had been an imperative at Burlingame, and was a real help. As the officers improved their ritual and built team spirit, I began to feel there was still something really lacking. What difference does it make if you could give all the lectures from memory, if you did not really know what they meant?

It was then that I began to search for explanations of the ritual. I began to study different Masonic writings. I began to give speeches and Masonic talks at events. Then, after more study, I started giving mini-lectures after the charge in each degree, trying to focus the candidate on certain key concepts to take out of the degree with him to share with others. I was hooked. I was a Masonic junkie and proud of it. The different layers of meaning of the ritual began to show themselves. I saw the ritual as signposts pointing to a Masonic path to enlightenment. At this point no degree seemed complete to me unless there was an explanatory talk for the candidate [and the members present]. When I went to degrees at other Lodges, they seemed disappointingly incomplete. I now write more, as I can get the time, and try to dig deeper, so that can be shared too. I am happy to see that some of the ideas I talk about are well received, and encourage others to share their thoughts as well.

The young men who knock on the door of Masonry today are interested in the historical, philosophical and spiritual aspects of the Craft, as well as in the community involvement aspects. We need to be there to point the way. I only wish that I had been told about the deeper aspects when I was younger, and could have joined then, but what happened with myself and others was endemic, and a product of Masonic ignorance.

In the 1920s and 1930s education was a large part of Masonry. Many publications on the esoteric meanings of the ritual, history and philosophy of Masonry were available. Each new Mason had

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"Intenders" appointed to instruct him in those areas and to mentor and accompany him on his Masonic journey. In fact those customs had been in effect since the early days of Masonry. Then came W.W.II.

During and after W.W.II, Masonic lodges rapidly became "degree mills", cranking out masons like mad. Five at a time of any degree. The membership grew. Grand Lodges were ecstatic. Their per capita cup ran over. But they paid no attention to a very important fact – there was no time in a degree mill to teach Masonry. Education went by the board, and it's lack produced uninformed Masons who did not know what they could talk about to the public and what was a secret. Don't get me wrong, They were fine men, and good masons by their lights, they just were not interested in education. The ritual was all important, and it was necessary to be able to parrot each and every word. Get the word right. Oh, he's such a good Mason, he gets all the words exactly right! You should have heard so-and-so last night – he didn't miss a word! But rarely did the speaker know what the words really meant! Mind you, some became interested anyway and sought education, but, when asked for instruction, the average lodge member would tell that inquiring mind that "you have to teach yourself, that's your job" [Loose translation: "I don't know, please don't ask me."]. More's the pity! It takes a stubborn person to persevere and study for himself. The Masonic libraries of the Lodges I went to had little to learn from, and there was nobody to ask what to read and study to "improve myself in Masonry.". Indeed, if you go by the topics in the Short Talk Bulletins after W.W.II, by the 1990s less and less was written about the esoteric and philosophical side of the Craft, and more and more about great Masons of the past, and other light reading. Low calorie dessert, but no meat and potatoes. We will next consider the nature of the real Masonic secrets.

PART II

[THE SECRETS OF A MASTER MASON]

You can read the ritual – but, as a candidate, you experience the degrees. And that is Hiram's key. The secrets are learned through a process of experiencing understanding. You have to seek within yourself for a path to enlightenment and to seek the understanding of Deity. That is the great object of Masonic study. And, if you attain it, no description can be adequately placed in words – because is experiential only. It is a process of becoming through a spiritual journey on your own path – not that of another.

You have to search within yourself to find the understanding of your relationship to God and Man. In the words of the ancient mystery schools, "Know Thyself, and Thou Shall Know the Universe and God."

So what are the "secrets" that we cannot tell our spouses, children and friends and acquaintances? It can't be the degree work or words of the ritual, because you can find those in any good public library, and now on the internet. Get a copy of Duncan's Monitor – everything is in plain English, and it shows the grips and signs, as well as the words given in full. It can't be the history or philosophy of Masonry, as those are the subject of many, many books available to the general public. Much has been the subject of PBS programs for the viewing public. So what is left to be a "secret"? The secrets that you cannot communicate are those which are beyond speech. We can only allude to them and attempt to illustrate them by use of symbols –

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such as the implements of architecture, most expressive, or sacred geometry. For the real secrets are secrets of the heart and spirit that only take place when you begin to follow and understand the spiritual path that Masonry attempts to point to through our ritual and mythology, and emphasized by the way in which we confer the degrees. The underlying teachings of the degrees are a spiritual path – first, by discipline of the material aspect of your nature, secondly by the discipline of the psyche through aspiration to knowledge and virtue, and lastly by participation in the ritual of the Hiramic myth...that symbolic death to your material aspect and rebirth as a spiritual being. We learn that time is encompassed by the eternal. As recorded in the Gospel of Thomas – Jesus said heaven all around us, we just cannot see it. We have to learn to step to one side and find it.

I urge you to study, to question, to learn and to teach. We are brothers of the light – the light of understanding, tolerance and compassion. We are the seekers on the journey toward light, and seek knowledge in order to better understand the meaning of the oldest known prayer for initiation – which appears above the door of our preparation room and is first viewed by the candidate when he is being prepared to knock at the West Gate:

Lead me from the unreal to the real.
Lead me from darkness to light,
Lead me from death to immortality.

---- From the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, circa 800 B.C.

As recently stated by Bro. Greg Sudmeier in his recent talk on sacred geometry, we are spiritual beings on a human journey of discovery, rather than human beings on a spiritual journey. We are seeking to discover that spark of deity within each of us which is a microcosmic reflection of that Great Creator which spoke us into being. That spark which is the point within the circle – the deathless, immortal part within us, which only may be discovered by a transcendent understanding for which there are no words – only glimpses of the divine through the dark glass of our material senses – those are the secrets which we cannot express, but which are the goal of every Mason, and our passport to travel in the foreign countries of the GAOTU. So to those who have an ear, let them hear -- anything that you can tell them about Masonry – educate yourself in order that you can be an ambassador for the Craft and disseminate information, especially true Masonic light – so that when a good man whose questions you have tried to answer knocks on the door of Freemasonry, it will be because he has conceived a favorable opinion of our venerable Institution, has a desire for knowledge, and has a sincere wish to be serviceable to their fellow creatures. Be both a student and a teacher of the Craft.

Remember: Teachers Open the Door. You Enter By Yourself.

FRATERNALLY AND FONDLY,
JOHN D. NELSON, P.M.