

Secrecy In Symbolism

by James M. Desmond

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The ideas presented in this paper are in response to a question that arises in the mind of nearly every newly-made Mason. Perhaps a month or two from the time he is raised, a helpful Brother presents the surprising news that all our secrets have been exposed. It may come up during an instruction session, or the new Brother may be already trying to find out how much of our work is secret, and how much he can tell to his wife. Or it may be in the talk over coffee after the lodge is closed. In any event the Brother learns that the ritual work, the signs and words, and everything else, can be found written down in a book, an 'expose', and he probably learns who has such a book!

However it comes about, the new Brother begins to wonder why he was made to understand that Masons took secrecy so seriously, and if he has been somewhat gullible for adopting a similar attitude. He wonders about it – he remembers the penalties. How is he to resolve this inconsistent situation? On the other hand, he is sworn to secrecy, the lodge is tyled to prevent unauthorized intrusion and visitors are examined to see if they are Masons and deserving to be admitted. On the other hand, he finds that there remains no real secrecy, yet no one seems greatly concerned. If he asks, they kind of shrug, and change the subject. If Masons feel this way about secrecy, do they likewise take the other teachings lightly and of no great importance? Do Masons go through elaborate ritualistic means to present great ideas of morality, and brotherly love, and then have no more concern for these principles than they apparently have for the practice of secrecy?

Of course, there is no doubt that Masons take their teachings, and secrecy, seriously. It is not the purpose of this discussion to consider such questions. Neither will we discuss the usual traditional basis for secrecy; they do not provide a satisfactory answer in the sense sought here.

The approach taken here will be much narrower in scope, perhaps even a technical approach. We will try to understand how the continued practice of secrecy can be necessary not only because of its inherent position among the landmarks as an essential ingredient of our philosophy, but because it has a practical purpose, that of insuring the success of our methods of teaching. To see how the method used by Masonry for so long, depends on secrecy for effectiveness. To show that secrecy is valuable, not because it keeps those outside the temple from finding what goes on within, but because it makes the lessons within more effective for those being taught. We can even go so far as to say that the enduring success of the order for generations depends as much on this effective method of presenting the teachings as it does on their content.

We will show that the Masonic method is consistent with rules for learning, rules which require active involvement on the part of the one being instructed. Furthermore, the practice of secrecy enforces teaching according to this principle of active involvement.

Let us examine in turn, then, the traditional practices used in Masonry, the role of secrecy, and possibility of further improvement in approaches to our goals which make use of findings from the science of learning.

I. Learning Principles

One principle of learning is that an idea is learned better when we become more deeply involved with it. If there is a skill to be learned, such as riding a bike or driving a car, then muscular activity plays a part, and calls into use additional avenues of perception. Such muscular skills are extremely well learned and retained for a long time, even after long periods of disuse. If the thing to be learned is an idea or a thought, we learn and remember it better by going over it in our minds, examining it, trying it out in different situations. We get deeply involved, and the learning takes place at a deep level in our minds. On the other hand, ideas that we receive only passively in the conscious thinking levels of our minds, make little lasting impression .

Concepts thus deeply learned are embedded in our minds and become a part of our Self. They play a most important part in controlling our future thoughts, actions, and responses to various situations. This process of deep learning has been going on in each of us since infancy, consciously or unconsciously. It can be a powerful force, shaping the characters of men according to highest standards, inculcating the virtues of brotherly love, relief and truth.

It continues throughout our lifetime, forming our personality, shaping our character. Masonry, to reach its goal of character development, tries to impress in our minds tremendous lessons. In its methods, Masonry takes its candidates by the hand and literally leads them in involved participation into the beautiful ceremonies and lectures. Masonic instruction in this manner

clearly impresses the lessons on its candidates, not by passive exposure, but by active experience.

Masonry has known and used this simple principle for hundreds of years. Our instruction is imparted by the ritual only. Candidates have to participate, get involved, in the experience they undergo.

Merely reading matter that we want to learn is not as effective. The information is held in the conscious training levels of the mind. It may not reach the deeper levels where it becomes a part of our self. If the lessons could be so easily learned, the ritual would not be necessary. But they cannot. Masonic teaching requires the active participation of the candidate.

With this understanding of the method of learning which has long been used in Masonry, it will be easy to see its relation to secrecy, or rather the role played by secrecy in the Masonic method.

II. Secrecy

Besides being essential to the form of Masonry we know, and in spite of the fact that the secrets can be obtained in a clandestine manner outside the lodge, the importance of secrecy lies in the part it plays in protecting the prospective candidate from learning, or being exposed to, the teachings without actively entering into them through the degree work. He must experience them.

As far as the candidate is concerned, this simple idea provides a satisfactory answer to the question raised at the opening of this discussion. While our first thought might be that secrecy prevents the outsider from learning secrets that give us some supposed advantage, we can now see that its most important effect is to insure that the teachings are learned by real experience under control of the ritual. We have no secrets. We would proclaim our teachings from the rooftops as loudly as we can for all to hear, if they could be learned in that manner. They are neither secret nor unique to Masonry. The Masonic method uses secrecy to insure that the initiate receives the message with all the advantages of active experiences.

This is a very important idea. It is of central importance in the persistence of Masonry throughout the ages. Masonry continues to exist not because it has esoteric power, but because it uses secrecy to strengthen the sound teaching principles which it uses. Secrecy is used to keep the candidates from learning the lessons in any other than the most effective manner. Masonry takes the eternal truths and through its method of instruction by active participation deeply embeds them in the minds and hearts of men.

We are led to a concept of symbolic secrecy the act or practice of secrecy is itself a symbol. It symbolizes the Masonic method of instruction that requires active experiencing by the candidate of the lessons in the work. This concept of secrecy as a symbol can have a dynamic effect in the lives of those who choose to become Masons and strive to perfect their skills in our

art. It gives rise to a power that molds character and inculcates the higher principles of moral conduct. This is what Masonry is all about, and it can only be achieved in this manner of teaching. That is, of acquiring, at a deep inner level, the knowledge and beliefs which control and shape our lives in the most desirable way.

The profane are excluded not by being unable to obtain secret knowledge about Masonry, but by being unable to profit by the unique effective means of instruction employed in the ritual.

The great truths of our art are learned not by reading them or passively hearing them, but by deep active experience which puts the ideas into the innermost parts of our minds and bodies, where they become active, powerful forces controlling our behavior and shaping our lives in accord with the highest principles of moral character and personal development.

III. New Approaches to Old Coals

Some psychologists have come to believe, as a result of controlled experiments, that improvement can be gained not only by real practice, but also by practice in the imagination. That is, once we have experienced a new idea or skill, practice in the imagination is as effective as actual practice. Thus basketball players or golfers can improve their scores by regular practice, not on the court or fairway, but in their minds, by imagining that they are actually playing.

In a controlled experiment, psychologist R.A. Vandell proved that mental practice in throwing darts at a target, wherein the person sits for a period each day in front of the target, and imagines throwing darts at it, improves aim as much as actually throwing darts.

Another report concerns an experiment on the effects of mental practice on improving skill in sinking basketball free throws. One group, which practiced every day in their imagination, improved in scoring as much as another group which actually practiced.

The deep inner mind, which we call the subconscious, receives its impressions of the outer world from the conscious thinking part of our brains. Since accurately imagined experiences produce the same sort of impressions as real ones, and since they follow the same channels to the subconscious mind, real experiences and imagined experiences cannot be easily distinguished by the inner mind. In this manner the imagined practice produced the same beneficial results as actual practice.

You may wonder what all this has to do with secrecy or with Masonry. Well, if we find that secrecy supports Masonry's use of a well-known principle of learning, why can't we take advantage of a newer idea from the science of learning? Why cannot a Mason, who has been properly inducted into our order, gain more, whenever he is present at the exemplification of one of the degrees, by taking an active part by way of the imagination more than he could by sitting passively on the sidelines.

Why can't we, while the officers are enlightening and instructing the candidates, accompany him in our imagination? We can imagine in great detail, that we are again going through the steps with the candidate. We can thus strengthen the association between the ritual and ideas it expresses so that the symbolic acts become deeply embedded in our minds. This provides a better foundation on which to build an improved concept of what our life can and should be.

In these procedures, it is important to have clearly defined goals to guide the formation of impressions transmitted to our subconscious minds. The goals are found in Masonry: the development of moral character, inculcation of the Masonic virtues-charity, relief, brotherhood.

Summary

First, the method of instruction used in Masonry is based on the principle, which is now well-known, that active experience and deep involvement improve the process of education.

Second, in addition to its traditional basis, Masonic secrecy is essential to the Masonic method of instruction, the means of insuring that our candidates receive their instruction in the prescribed active manner. It matters not that the work is exposed, since the profane lack the "secret" of active involvement.

We started out looking for a symbolic meaning in the continued practice of secrecy in Masonry. Instead, we have come to realize that secrecy is not for the purpose of excluding the profane, but for the benefit of our initiates, since it is, in effect, employed to insure the success of our method. If we want to consider secrecy to be a symbol, it is a symbol of a method of learning by active participation.

Third, in a recent extension of the principle of learning by experience, it appears that practice or rehearsal carried out in the imagination is nearly as effective as actual practice.

That we can apply this extension by not sitting passively on the sidelines, but by taking part in our imagination while we are witnessing the work.

Finally, and most important, those methods of learning are more effective when they are directed toward a goal. Masonry provides the clearly defined goal. It is the improvement of moral character, and the inculcation of brotherly love and the Masonic virtues; that all men may be brothers united in their labors, to the eternal honor of the name of the Great Architect of the Universe.