

The Secrets of a Master Mason, What are They?

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It's not the places we meet. They're fairly well known. This building has "Masonic Lodge" clearly emblazoned on the front in 10 inch high stainless steel letters. No, it's not where we meet.

It's not when we meet. Every major newspaper has a section just for announcements about when the Masons meet. No, it's not when we meet.

It's not who we are. Most Masons in the United States proudly sport a Masonic Emblem on their lapel and one of the first purchases a new Mason makes is that Masonic ring especially for him. No, it's not who we are.

No, it's not these things, so what are Masonic Secrets?

Throughout our history no term has done us more harm, caused us more pain, created more confusion, nor bound us together more than our so called "Masonic Secrets." Religions and other groups have condemned us for being a "secret organization." People have called us "devil worshipers" because of our "secrets." Some churches refuse to have us as members because we are a "secret society." Courts have made rulings, both ways, because of Masonry and its "secrets" and men have both won elections, and lost elections, because of Masonic secrecy. Yet, exactly what are these so-called "secrets" that so many defend so dearly?

The irony is that if you asked a thousand Masons what are these secrets, most would have no idea. And, confronted with this question, rather than simply saying "I don't know", most Masons will say "it's a secret." Some Masons sincerely believe any mention of the fraternity is a violation of their obligation. Others limit it to a few simple words. If you were to pin a Mason down and force him to say something that he believes is a secret, invariably, without fail, he will cite something out of the ritual of the lodge.

Are the words of our ritual our "Masonic Secrets"?

I have here three rituals or monitors. The first is the Official Standard of the Work used by the Grand Lodge of NC. It only contains certain letters of certain words. And though it makes absolutely no sense to anyone who is not trained in its use, its use and content is governed by the Board of Custodians, one of the strongest committees of the Grand Lodge of North Carolina and until recent years the book was so protected that it could only be possessed by active officers of the lodges, Certified Lecturers, DDGLs and DDGMs. Even then each, person who possessed a copy had to sign for it and the Secretary of the lodge had to certify in writing that he had seen and examined each book. He had to certify it was clean, and had no marks in it. These documents were required by the Grand Lodge as a part of the Annual Report. Recently, this was changed by the Grand Lodge and now the books can be purchased for \$25. Yet still, the Vocabulary, the actual words of what is in the OSW is required to be kept under lock and key by the Secretary.

The next book is Duncan's Ritual. The ritual in this book is completely written out and it can be purchased at any larger bookstore or on line for about \$20. The third is the Prince Hall Ritual which is also written out and can be purchased from a bookstore in New York for \$15.

These books have much in common. Our OSW or ritual, with its letters only would be meaningless to 100% of the non-Masons and about the same percentage of NC Masons unless they had been an officer and trained in its use. The others can be read, but even then, they are almost meaningless. Yet, there isn't 10 cents difference between the three books. They are almost word for word identical. And all three have something else in common... they mean nothing outside the context of the lodge.

These things are "mechanics". They are words. Unfortunately, very unfortunately, the majority of Masons worldwide consider and sincerely believe the words in these books are the secrets of Masonry. They are not! They are nothing but "mechanics".

All right. If the words of the ritual aren't the Masonic Secrets, then what are they? Let's look at the origins of Masonry.

Today's Masonry is what is called Speculative Masonry. Speculative Masonry is the exact opposite of Operative Masonry. Operative Masons are people, or workmen, who actually lay stone and build buildings for a living. It is a trade not unlike other trades. Some stonemasons, or brickmasons, if you will are more skilled than others. Let's keep this in mind for a minute.

Sometime in the mid to late 1600's a group of inspired men decided they wanted to form a band of friends who held values and morals a bit higher than the average man. They felt the average man was below them. Exactly who these men were or why they banded together is long lost in history, but we do know that by the beginning of the Eighteenth century these men had formed what they called lodges and these lodges had something in common. Each had patterned itself after the Medieval stone Masons clinging especially to a group of rules found in what was noted in the Regis Poem of 1390 as "the old book".

This list of rules established a certain degree of ethics expected of every member of the guild. It set working hours, how the apprentices and craftsmen were to be paid, and expectations of fairness that wasn't found in most crafts.

To say that Masons of today are a logical progression of those ancient stonemasons, or even related to them may be a bit of a stretch. Most likely when that first group of speculative, or symbolic Masons banded together they searched for something to pattern their organization after. Something like the ethics of the stonemasons was a logical choice. It required men to study before they could advance, and it already possessed a code of ethics. During the previous few hundred years they had been oppressed by Popes and Kings and in spite of this, protected each other and their craft. It was an excellent choice.

Around 1717 several of these groups joined to form the Grand Lodge of England. Like the operative Masons, at that time there were only two levels of masonry. The apprentice and the journeyman. There was no Third Degree or third level. Sometime in those next ten years they wrote and introduced the Third Degree or what we call the Master Mason's Degree.

Now, let's think about this for a moment. If you were to start writing something and you wanted your story to have meaning, what would be a good source for guidance and inspiration? The logical choice would be the Bible. Because of Gutenberg's new printing press Bibles were more available, and the new King James Version of the Bible could be understood by the common man.

You want to identify with stonemasons and where were stonemasons mentioned more than at the building of King Solomon's temple? The Bible was an excellent source. It had a world of names and places for our story. It was absurd to believe King Solomon was anything other than a Jewish King, but the background for the story was ideal. Thus, the third degree, the story of Hiram Abiff was created. It was a story of a man whose loyalty to his leaders, task and word were greater than his fear of death.

Within ten years the legend of Hiram Abiff spread throughout Europe and into the Americas. Dispersed within this and the other degrees are passwords and other items to perpetuate and enhance the tale. It was full of items and events to symbolically use.

In the lodge, a man, the Tyler, is required to sit outside the door to keep anyone from entering. There were times in history where Masonry was forbidden, and even today in some foreign countries membership could cause problems, but here in the United States in the year 2004, the man outside the door is symbolic. He reminds us to keep a guard on our hearts to keep ill thoughts and attitudes out. Like many things in Masonry today, he is symbolic. When we can't get 85% of our members to attend meetings it's doubtful that anyone is going to try to sneak in.

Inside the door the Jr. Deacon sits as a second guard, as we should have a second guard on our hearts against ill-will against each other. Many times I have seen members almost panic when no one occupied this seat for even the briefest time. Again mechanics, again missing the entire point.

Each meeting begins with a prayer and a recital of each officer's duties. Again, symbolism. The Junior Deacon is there to be with us outside the lodge. The Master is there to be with us in the lodge and the Senior Warden is there to help him in his duties to every member. Every person, every item, every motion in the lodge is a symbol of something. Are these symbols secret? Not really, though most Masons don't bother to take the time to find out what they are.

Are the rituals "secrets"? No, not really. Like I said, you can pick up one of these books for \$15 or \$20 and the whole thing is laid out before you. You can find one in any library. It's all over the Internet. The First Degree tells us to be cautious against outside forces that would try to divert us from a decent direction. The Second Degree encourages us to learn and to seek education. The Third Degree, the very basis of Masonry is the story of Hiram Abiff, a man who would rather die than abandon his integrity and trust. These things are pure symbolism and pure mechanics. Though so many Masons believe they are... they are not the secrets of Masonry.

Then what are "secrets"?

Okay... What are "our secrets"?

One of the greatest assets of being a Mason is knowing we are not alone. We know that we have someone we can trust within earshot of us at all times. Even when we are strangers in a large city we encounter each other.

Okay _____ let me ask you a question. If I were to say to you “Kroger has oranges on sale for 39 cents”, and you replied to me, “Yes, and the bread at the end of the counter is 99 cents.” It would be meaningless to anyone around us. Yet, if you knew my saying “Kroger has oranges on sale for 39 cents” was actually a greeting for a certain group and “Yes, and the bread at the end of the counter is 99 cents” was the response, we would immediately know we had something in common. We didn’t just imagine those words. We learned them somewhere, and most likely that “somewhere” taught us even more. We have something in common. We are not strangers.

Our methods of knowing each other are not really secret as much as they are private. They have to be. If we go out of our way to signal we are a Mason, we do so in search of another Mason. Most of us do so automatically. Since you walked in that door every person I shook hands with received a Masonic handshake. Since I began this talk I have given the signs of all three degrees. In every case, the handshake, the signs, the Masons picked up on it, the non-Masons saw or felt nothing. That is its design. Only a Mason would know it. In order to see them you not only be looking for them, you must know what you are looking for. Such things may seem insignificant, but they have allowed me to make friends and greet brothers in most of the major cities and quite a few of the smaller ones in the US and the Bahamas. But still... they are not secrets.

So, if none of these things are secrets, what are the secrets of a Master Mason?

People, I know this sounds like a dodge, or cop-out, but I can’t tell you. And, it’s not because they are a secret. It’s because I don’t know. The entire basis and purpose of Masonry is unquestioned friendship and loyalty. How can I say what brings another to that?

This lodge is named after Wilkerson College, probably the greatest new addition to Masonry since the founding of the Grand Lodges. Each year thirty-some very busy, very important men, donate their time and efforts to the College without one penny of reward. I know how these men came to us because I made each and every call. And of those thirty-some calls I was never told no. All I ever heard was “tell me what you want and where and I’ll be there.” What makes a man care enough about a fraternity and the individuals in it in order to prepare a lesson, drive for hours, and present it for no more than a thank you? I can’t tell you, but this is just an example of unquestioned friendship, and this unquestioning friendship is the true secret of Masonry and it’s different for everyone. Every man must decide it for himself. And when he does that’s the true secret of Masonry and it can’t be found in any \$15 book or anywhere on the Internet.