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Masonic Silence by Bro. Chris Franceschini

The virtue of silence seems to have always been an important component of Freemasonry. At every level we advance in our craft, an oath of silence or non-communication to others, even to brothers who have not, or may never, take further steps in Masonry through additional degrees is given at the altar under penalty with the expressed greatest expectation of diligence. Silence and secrecy that come with the progressing higher levels of initiation is a tradition that can be traced back to the mystery schools in Egypt, Greece, Rome and the Near East. Initiates would be entrusted with secrets of increasing importance after they had demonstrated their dedication to not exposing these to those outside of the group they had joined.

Most are familiar with the saying “Silence is golden”, but how and why does silence figure so importantly into our Masonic life? We most certainly have many historical examples of this concept of silence being employed in our craft to look at for contemplation. A Masonic hymn from 1781 reads “Cease clamour and faction, oh cease, fly hence all ye cynical train ; disturb not, disturb not the lodges sweet peace, where silence and secrecy reign.” The English Masonic Philosopher W.L.Wilmshurst held that an ideal lodge would be a sanctuary of silence and contemplation, broken only by ceremonial utterances or such words of competent and luminous instruction. John Banck’s Ode to Masonry from 1738, which invokes, “Come...silence, guardian of the door...be present still where Masons meet.”

As Masonry has its roots stemming from ancient sources, we also see influence from the philosophical observances of ancient days. For instance, Angerona was a deity in the Roman Pantheon. She was known as the Goddess of Secrecy. Her most important duty was the maintenance of perfect secrecy. She guarded the mystical name of Rome, the divulgence of which would imperil the city. Her name means "She who raises up", which may refer to the finger raised to her lips in silent communication of the imperative of silence. She is perhaps first mentioned Masonically in 1756 in Lawrence Dermott's Ahiman Rezon. She also features on the frontispiece of the Freemasons Calendar and Almanac of 1775.

Masonic silence is intended to be an imperative of our craft. William Preston taught that silence is "The Masons chief virtue", and the monitor instructs us that: "The Book of Constitutions, guarded by the Tyler's sword, reminds us that we shall ever be watchful and guarded in our thoughts, words, and actions, particularly when before the uninitiated; ever bearing in remembrance those truly Masonic virtues, silence and circumspection". Incidentally, the first seal of the Ancient Grand Lodge in London has the words "Virtue and Silence" crowning its top. And in the United States, most Worshipful Bro. Abraham T. Metcalf, Grand Master in Michigan stated in 1871 "Finally, silence, silence, silence, should be the first, second, and third degrees of every man's Masonry".

The ancient "Sign of Harpocrates", or the raising of the finger to the lips, has been used as a Masonic gesture for a long time, even on one occasion having been seen at a public ceremony in England in 1841 at a corner stone laying ceremony for a new Masonic Hall. This sign having

been given by the Worshipful Master to communicate an understood silence to his lodge during the ceremony.

We can find my brothers images of silence that extend from effigies left in ancient stone and metal from the figures of Harpocrates, Amun Ra, Isis, & Horus in Egypt and Greece to the statue titled "Silence" by Augustus Saint-Gaudens which graced the main staircase in the Grand Lodge of New York in 1874, to the various implications of silence employed in various Masonic Degree Penal Signs and Due Guards. What then are beneath these visual and auditory instructions, the reasons for this wisdom being imparted on the virtues of silence?

Masonry, among its many Latin Mottoes has one in particular that is of interest, "Audi, Vide, Tace, Si Vis Vivere In Pace", which means, "Hear, See, Be silent, if you would live in peace". A shortened version of this, Audi, Vide, Tace", graces the United Grand Lodge of England's Coat of Arms from 1815. This motto was also attached to the Grand Lodge in South Australia being on the building's North main entrance, which was in fact the motto of this Grand Lodge until 1950, the original building having been built circa 1927.

In reading the book "The Key of the Mysteries" by Eliphas Levi, the great French occult philosopher and author of the 1800s, whose writings include information on Hermetecism, ancient Greek philosophy, and other disciplines, I discovered additional information which relate to Masonic observances of silence that obviously are regarded as valuable coming then from apparent earlier sources. The Latin words Vide, Aude, Tace, which mean "Know, Dare, Be Silent" are an old Latin motto used by Masonry in America from the 1700s,

stemming from a similar Masonic motto from England from an earlier period of “Vide, Audi, Tace”, or “Know, Hear, Be Silent”. In England, a Master Mason’s sign of putting his finger to his lips to communicate an understood silence, seemingly being a reflection of those Ancient Egyptian and Greek Gods who did as such in effigies left behind .What then again, is the importance of this motto held in esteem for so long?

Eliphas Levi relates that human will develops and increases itself by its own activity. Boldness united to intelligence is the mother of all success in this world. To undertake, one must know; to accomplish, one must will; to will really, one must dare; and in order to gather in peace the fruits of one’s audacity, one must keep silent.

To know, to dare, to will, to keep silent, relate to the four hieroglyphic forms of the Sphinx. To know, is the human head; to dare, the claws of the Lion, to will, the mighty flanks of the Bull; to keep silent, the mystical wings of the Eagle. He only maintains his position above other men who does not prostitute the secrets of his intelligence to their commentary and their laughter.

The symbols of the Lion, Ox, Man,& Eagle figure into York Rite observances. You will see these on the four banners within a York Rite Lodge and will also see this symbology on the Royal Arch Coat of Arms, as well as the Coat of Arms for the United Grand Lodge of England next to the Latin motto “Audi, Vide, Tace”, and also the registered coat of arms for the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland.

Silence is a shield that protects spirituality or great thought from being diluted. Enlightenment as given to us in Freemasonry, can only truly be

understood by those who knocked at the door of their own freewill and accord and had their experiences firsthand. The light received is in jeopardy of being diminished in luminescence if shared with those unable, for whatever reason, to comprehend it. True, we must endeavor to show the world around us the best sides of ourselves, including those made better by the improvements gifted to us by Freemasonry. To attempt to communicate sacred concepts however to others, who may not be ready, able, or desiring to comprehend the more profound aspects of the world in which we live, or our relationship to it, could only serve to no meaningful end. Let us then retain our enlightenment in reverent silence only communicating the profounder wisdom that we have come to understand to our brethren alone.

Thank you.

List of sources :

1. The examples of the observance of silence in Masonry over history comes from W. Bro. Shawn Eyer's excellent article "Silence in Freemasonry" which was posted on the Grand Lodge of New Jersey's website in 2012.
2. "The Masonic Initiation" W.L. Wilmshurst 1924.

3. Mackey's Encyclopedia page 684 as referenced on the Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon website.
4. Grand Lodge of South Australia and Northern Territory website.
5. Richardson's Monitor of Freemasonry, pages 81 and 133.
6. Duncan's Masonic Ritual and Monitor Third Edition page 189.
7. Saint Andrew Royal Arch Chapter #146 website referencing the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland's Coat of Arms.
8. Thelemapedia.org and Reshafim.org.il for information on Harpocrates.
9. "Egyptian Initiation" by Wim van den Dungen.
- 10 . [www. Virtual-egyptian-museum.org](http://www.Virtual-egyptian-museum.org) for visuals of Egyptian Gods with the "sign of Harpocrates"
11. " The Key of the mysteries" by Eliphas Levi, first volume form publishing from 1959

