

Golden State College

Societas Rosicruciana in Civitatibus Foederatis

The Traditions of Freemasonry as practised in California A.D. 2016

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One of the original published texts concerning Freemasonry as preserved in our ritual states: “Masonry is a system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols...”. This rather profound statement certainly outlines one of the educational intentions of the fraternity; but how is this accomplished in practice? We inculcate this system of morality through a succession of degrees, grades and orders designed to introduce and advance our understanding of the Masonic philosophy via a series of allegorical lessons about the building, dedication, destruction and rebuilding of King Solomon’s Temple in ancient Jerusalem. These moral allegorical lessons are imprinted upon our memories indefinitely through a system of symbols designed to assist us in recalling and identifying those critical components of the lesson and as a means of recognition among those that have received the lesson previously.

This is all well and good in principle, but how did these lessons come together originally and more importantly how are they passed down to us and to our successors in the fraternity? The intent of this discussion is to delve more deeply into this question and where this leaves us in our approach to these lessons today!

Many discussions into the antiquity of our moral lessons begin with the “Ancient Landmarks of the Craft” which were published in California around 1979 in a document named “Constitution and By-Laws” which included a section titled “The Foundation of Masonic Law, The Landmarks of the Unwritten Law”. In that section we find some of the most important philosophical ancient Landmarks are written as:

Landmark FIRST – The modes of recognition

Landmark SECOND – The division of symbolic masonry into three degrees.

Landmark THIRD – The legend of the third degree.

...

Landmark TWENTY-FOURTH – The foundation of a speculative science upon an operative art, and the symbolic use and explanation of the terms of that art, for the purpose of religious or moral teaching.

Landmark TWENTY-FIFTH – The last and crowning landmark of all is, that these landmarks can never be changed.

These Landmarks are all very good so far as they go and we should agree that these are an important part of the philosophy and morality of the fraternity; but now what? How did our ancient brethren act on these edicts and more importantly how did they communicate them to us to act upon today? In an effort to answer these questions, we can review the state of our knowledge and how we know what we think that we know about our allegorical lessons and the symbols of Freemasonry.

We have grown by direct experience to expect to be informed of our Masonic philosophy and moral teachings through a system of allegorical degrees, grades and orders which are demonstrated to us directly by a cast of characters representing our allegorical forefathers, such as Solomon, King of Israel, Hiram, King of Tyre and Hiram Abiff, a hitherto unknown, but scientifically distinguished Tyrian of the Jewish tribe Naphtali among many others of Biblical and historical fame. The words that they speak and the movements that they make while presenting these allegories to us were largely passed down via mouth to ear methods from our forefathers to us today. The dilemma here is the largely verified fact that human memory is fallible and the actual words and movements of the original lessons were probably subjected to subtle changes over time by the elder statesmen of our Craft as their memories of events in the long past were corrupted by the ravages of time and the strength of one personality holding sway over others. So perhaps it is fair to state that the degrees, grades and orders we see today are not quite the same as when they were originally performed three hundred plus years ago? Yes, you may say, but we

have the “ritual” which prevents us from corrupting these lessons beyond the recognition of our ancient brethren by simply writing them out in our local language or a cypher text for all to study and know! Yea verily, the “ritual” has certainly served to stabilize our lessons in time and made them repeatable to future generations without fear of losing the moral and philosophical intent of our founding fathers. Our work here would be done now were it not for the unfortunate fact that the “ritual” does not record Everything that is performed in our allegorical lessons and what about the symbols and signs of recognition, where are they recorded so that one brother Mason may know another in the dark as well as in the light? It turns out after some further research, that many of these unwritten “Traditions” are kept and guarded by none other than our Grand Lecturers and as such are subject to ‘change’ (What? There is no ‘change’ in Masonry!) as time passes from one generation to another. Each sovereign Masonic body, e.g. The Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of California, or The Most Excellent Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of California, etc., has the right within its jurisdiction to ‘change’ its Traditions at will and also to define and ‘change’ its written ritual at the will and pleasure of the Grand body in annual convention. This system of legislative change works well and is largely understood by the governed; but how shall we manage those undeniably important parts of our Traditions that do not currently fall under the veil of ritual? One technique currently being employed by the Grand Lodge of California is to transform all of their Traditions into a cypher ritual and thereby relegate any differing interpretation of the words, floor work, symbols and signs to the province of resolutions to be passed or failed by the Grand Lodge in annual communication. Notwithstanding the huge amount of work required to include the floor work with the cypher words to accomplish this feat; it still leaves undefined the symbols and signs of each degree unless they are drawn out in detail and presented to the Grand Lodge for ratification at its annual communication. This could be done, except for the injunction given to us in the first degree obligation Not to ...write, indite, print, cut, carve... Anything (emphasis added) that could then fall into the hands of the profane whereby our secrets could then be revealed. So, to solve that problem leads us to the well-known fact among the members and non-members of the fraternity that there Are expositions of the more esoteric parts of the work that are drawn out in detail for all to see and study, e.g. see Pritchard, Duncan and Ronayne. The rest is somewhat easier, the Grand Lodge of California has then only to pass a resolution connecting itself officially to one or another of these expose`s and all is complete! This was effectively done by the Grand Lodge of California in annual communication around 1896. The remaining work of linking All the Traditions of the first three degrees of Masonry directly to ritual is ongoing and nearly complete within the Grand Lodge of California. This would lead one to conclude that our intellectual work here is done and all that remains is for the advanced degrees, grades and orders to just get busy and do the same within their jurisdictions until everything is ritual and legislatively bound in perpetuity! While this is a tempting outcome for an institution that prides itself on perseverance, consistency and continuity, it begs the question of what our true nature is as Freemasons? Are we to be dogmatically bound to our Traditions as ritual for all time as are many if not all of the world’s religions or are we able to adjust our signs and symbols and add new lessons as the need arises to add new interpretations of our moral lessons to answer the probing questions of our new initiates? What if we could alter our symbols and signs to better inculcate our lessons and philosophy to the initiate? What if we could temporarily change our allegorical presentations to better communicate the lessons intended? Shouldn’t we be able to experiment first before we bind ourselves ritualistically in perpetuity! Tradition by its very name implies “we have always done it that way and I don’t know why?”; but it can also mean “we always do it this way and here is why!”. If the moral power of Freemasonry can be expressed as “freedom from religious dogma”, then which Masonic Tradition definition do You prefer? The power of our Grand Lecturers to innovate and police the Traditions of Freemasonry for the betterment of the allegorical lessons can be used for great good as well as to stifle any progress of the fraternity. What then can be said of those Masonic bodies that don’t avail themselves of this option at all? It is left to the reader to debate this question for another day. None of this discussion is intended to liberate us from our philosophical and moral underpinnings which have supported, sustained and enabled us for over three hundred years; but rather to embolden us to find new ways to communicate our great moral lessons to new generations with vastly different social norms than what we may have experienced in order that they may better understand who we are and what we stand for and if we are truly enlightened to establish new Traditions for the next three hundred years!

In the final analysis, we have established the foundation of our Masonic morals and philosophy as the Landmarks of the Craft as communicated via a series of allegorical lessons through degrees, grades and orders that are illustrated by signs and symbols unique to each lesson. We have discovered that the Traditions of Freemasonry include that which is written, i.e. the ritual, and that which is not, i.e. within the purview of the Grand Lecturer. If we add in the ability to vary the presentation of the allegorical lessons to accommodate “Local Conditions” of space, environment and the human condition, then we have fully described the communication of all Masonic morals and philosophy to our Craft and its initiates. By our morals we may be ultimately known by all Masons in the dark as well as in the light; but we can only truly recognize those Masons that share our Traditions in the end!

“Without our Traditions we would be a shaky as a fiddler on the roof!”

References:

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2. Duncan’s Masonic Ritual and Monitor, Malcolm C. Duncan, Third Ed, Crown Publishers New York
3. Jachin and Boaz, Samuel Pritchard, 2014, ISBN-13 978-1-61342-183-3