



Why Secrecy?: Understanding the Ritual and You

Get The Goods...

Fraternities are usually referred to by outsiders as a secret societies. We have generally objected to this characterization, claiming that we are not members of a secret society, but rather of a society with secrets. We allow our members to wear insignia, letters, do not conceal the location of our houses, participate in public events, and welcome new members through a process of mutual selection. Webster's dictionary would agree with the general public, however, defining the term secret society "as any of various oath-bound societies having a secret ritual" and so on. Our Fraternity certainly fits this definition.

In the later part of the 1820s an anti-secret society movement began which resulted in legislation in many states that banned secret fraternities. As a result of this movement, in 1831 the Harvard chapter of Phi Beta Kappa disclosed their ritual due to pressure from anti-secret society forces. This movement grew quickly into a political party that even ran a candidate for president, but slowly died out by 1840. Nowadays, with matters once reserved for the bedroom to be found on television every evening and most government bodies subject to "sunshine" laws, the keeping of secrets by a social group seems anachronistic, if not downright suspicious. Many of us have been asked, "If there's nothing wrong with it, why do you keep it secret?"

Well, why do fraternities keep secrets? It not enough to say that we have traditionally always done so, or that we are obliged to do so. These answers only push the question further back into fraternity history. Simply put, the maintenance of secrecy is one of the first duties to which a Candidate who becomes a Frater agrees. A promise deemed so important by those who created our Ritual is definitely worth further examination by all of us.

It is a fact that anyone who desires strongly enough to learn the ritual of a fraternity may do so, whether by pretending to be a member, or through uncovering a ritual book. Perhaps one of the most popular "urban legends" is that every fraternity has a copy of its ritual book on reserve at the Library of Congress. When the entire ritual of a fraternity may be obtained from a book, there must be something else that distinguishes true brothers from those who have simply read the words. There are several important points to consider on this matter.

First, the most obvious difference is the nature of experience. Becoming a Frater is a process which requires education on the part of the Candidate, and who commits appropriate information to memory and practice. Interaction with his future Fraters, and learning about the workings of the Fraternity are another lesson taught by experience. Someone who merely reads the ritual is, on the other hand, totally passive. Since the purpose of your education period is to impart useful knowledge, the result of the Candidate period is that the initiate who puts forth effort into joining the Fraternity is far more likely to derive value from the experience than one who only pursues the ritual in a book.

Another reason for secrecy is to impart the lesson that the teachings of our ritual are valuable. We leave many inexpensive items lying carelessly about in our homes and offices, whereas truly valuable items are kept locked in safe deposit boxes or other repositories, or are carried with us for all times. In Poe's story, "The Purloined Letter," many hiding places are searched for the letter; having been in plain view, it is overlooked as worthless. If the teachings of our Ritual were made available to anyone, then both members and outsiders would attach only a modest value to them. Instead, we have spent decades of effort keeping the truths of our Fraternity secret, and passing them down to those who come after us. This should convince us that what we have labored so hard to possess is indeed valuable.

We should also recognize that secrecy is an integral part of individuals and groups. Within each of our families we have information that is ours privately and is not the business of outsiders. A family's income, children's problems at school, the intimate relationship between a man and a woman, the contents of one's last will -- all these things we naturally choose to keep within the bosom of the family and would not care to have them made public. The *Declaration of Principles* aptly states that, "As secrecy is employed to protect and perpetuate the sanctity of the family relation, so we enlist the advantage of secrecy to preserve inviolate the confidences and sanctities of the brotherhood." For outsiders to ask that we give up our secrets is as much an invasion of privacy as would be the demanding a videotape of one's wedding night.

Another motivation for secrecy is that it promotes a form of mental self-discipline. There a natural urge to share what we know with others. Gossiping and idle chatter consume more hours of the day than perhaps any other human pastime. Yet we all know someone who cannot keep a secret, and such a person usually does not merit trust in other matters, either. Keeping the secrets of the Fraternity as a whole teaches us responsibility for the property of others and shows that we merit trust and confidence of our Fraters.

Fraternal secrecy is thus seen more than a mere idle device, but instead it serves many purposes. We gain from secrecy a sense of value, we learn the lessons better for the way in which we learn them, and we develop worthwhile mental resources from the discipline of keeping our Ritual private. It guides our words and deeds as no other teacher can, and it brings men together as no other experience will in this Fraternity for Life.

The Ritual is the first lesson about all there is to learn from the Fraternity, and it opens the doors to understanding and self-reflection. Remember that it is your closest link to the Founders, and to every Frater who has come before you. Though we may face different challenges and feats in our chapters, we are united by the common experience of our Ritual. This being said, it should be noted that experience is only useful if it is incorporated into our daily lives.

The Ritual serves no purpose, rights no wrongs, teaches no lessons, or enriches none of our lives by collecting dust. To capture the true power of our Ritual it must become a part of our words, deeds, and relationships. As "faith without works is dead" we must incorporate the lessons it teaches, and live by the principles that are the foundation of our Fraternity. These are the true tests of the Fraternity, and the essential aspirations of our Founders.

Note: This essay is part of a series entitled "Within The Bond," written by Steven R. MacLaughlin (Gamma-Kappa, Indiana University).



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