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What is the Purpose of the Masonic Fraternity Now and in the Future?

The purpose of the masonic fraternity now and in the future remains the same as it was in the past when it was created. The purpose of the masonic fraternity is to protect, preserve, practice and transmit the entirety of masonic philosophy, symbolism, and teachings which are contained in the ritual and structure of the lodge itself. The masonic fraternity is defined as the various grand lodges of the world, the numerous lodges that operate under their charters, and the individual masons who belong to those lodges. The masonic fraternity is the organized structure that exists and revolves around the core of freemasonry, which is its philosophy, symbolism, and ritual. To put it more metaphorically, think of the masonic fraternity as King Solomon's Temple and masonic ritual as the Ark of the Covenant. It is a strong metaphor and admittedly over-dramatic, but it does a good job to illustrate the point. The masonic fraternity should act as responsible and caring stewards towards the tradition that has been handed down to them. A tradition that has survived for over three hundred years and one which is woven into the very fabric of our society and culture. It is an important duty and one that should not be terribly difficult. However, there are many members who are fearful of our declining membership and would sooner change every single aspect masonry to stop the decline rather than to have it survive in its original form but on a smaller scale. Their position is understandable, and it comes from a place of concern for the brotherhood that they hold dear but if masonry is continually watered-down, made easier, and altered to fit the fashionable viewpoint of outsiders eventually we masons will wake up one day and not recognize it at all.

If the true purpose of the masonic fraternity is to ensure the continuation of the masonic tradition, then we as an institution have some difficult facts that we must face. Unfortunately, our order is shrinking in membership and lodges continue to go dark, but this does not mean that the quality of the masonic experience should suffer as a result. In fact, if we allow masonry to morph into something less than its intended form then we would be doing a great disservice to those lodges that came and went before us. The hay-day for masonic membership has come and gone but during its time freemasonry went through a great expansion that supported many lodges and concordant bodies. Freemasonry was, at that time, an extension of the community, men belonged to churches, clubs, and lodges and they joined these various groups in order to do their part for their community and to be active members of their society. These were all great reasons to join a lodge, but the end result was that the membership levels and general enthusiasm were unsustainable on a long-term basis. It may be because masonry was always meant to exist on a smaller scale, for the few instead of for the many. Today it is more common for someone to join a lodge for reasons that are related to them as an individual, meaning they are joining our fraternity because they have a desire to know what masonry is and what it can teach them personally. These men need to be given a real opportunity to experience masonic philosophy and as members of the masonic fraternity it is our duty to provide them with that.

The influx of membership that occurred in the past can be seen as the great expansion of masonry and the current decline in membership can be seen as its contraction. These are both naturally occurring processes and are observable in the rhythm of nature. During this time of contraction, it forces us to evaluate what is truly important to freemasonry's long-term preservation. There is only one thing that binds us all together as freemasons and that is our shared experience of, and participation in the ritual which took place within the masonic lodge. As previously stated, the purpose of the masonic

fraternity is to carefully preserve masonic ritual, teachings, and philosophy and to pass it along to future generations unaltered and pure. The purpose of the masonic fraternity is, therefore, different from the purpose of masonic ritual.

The purpose of the masonic ritual is to serve as the vehicle through which the totality of masonic philosophy is experienced by the individual mason. The ritual itself is a bit of a mystery and seems to serve as a sort of full-length mirror that has the ability to reflect perfectly the image that the individual is prepared to see. Some masons see only the most common notions of virtue and morality, others see a traditional connection to past generations, while others yet see the riddles and mysteries that were contemplated by the alchemists, kabbalists and Rosicrucian mystics. The ritual, in a sense, acts as a sort of container into which we may pour our unconscious ideas and vaguest notions so that they can take a form that is legible and understandable to our conscious minds. The ritual is, therefore, a great tool that can be used by the individual who is concerned with understanding his own nature and who is willing to be an introspective observer of himself. Masonic ritual itself teaches that the greatest of all human mysteries is the knowledge of the self. To the mason who is open to the mysteries of nature and science the ritual is a modern version of the ancient Greek axiom, "Nosce Te Ipsum" – Man Know thyself.

The ritual therefore is of primary importance to the masonic fraternity and without it we would immediately cease to be freemasons and become no different than any other service club in existence. The ritual is what sets us apart and its contents are what we must preserve for future generations. The symbolic philosophy that it contains, and the study of its meaning, should be freemasonry's future purpose. Freemasonry should never become some vague, everything-to-everybody social club but should focus its efforts on building true Master Masons who have a personal understanding of the masonic mysteries and who strive to practice its teachings and virtues.