The Merits of Secrecy

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The whole subject of secrecy seems much more appropriate to a much earlier era. Of course, we believe in freedom of association, and yet we are not quite sure that such freedom should include societies that make what appear to be extreme demands on their members and conduct their affairs in a covert fashion.

The confusing duality involved in tolerating such groups, which is the price we must pay for preserving a pluralistic society, is treated by Joseph Bensman and Robert Lilienfeld in their landmark book *Between Public and Private: The Lost Boundaries of the Self*: "The double nature of voluntary associations is apparent in the fact that, while Masonry and all voluntary associations emphasize the freedom of their members from both narrower (the family) and wider (the state, the church, and the firm) institutions, they make demands for peer loyalties upon their members and subordinate them to a rich hierarchy of ritual and leadership within their own organization sphere."

Secrecy is an aspect of human behavior and especially of political behavior which we feel unsure about: "Secrecy touches our lives more than we generally like to admit. Most of our thoughts do not immediately get uttered. Some are simply forgotten, but others we purposely suppress. These are the secrets -- perceptions, gossip, memories, dreams -- that we keep back until time and audience are right. Some of these secrets contribute to a positive sense of self and
to the harmonious continuation of our communities. Others create debilitating suspicions and uncertainties in self and society."⁴

Yet secrecy is certainly part of everyone's personality, and an essential part. Kittredge Cherry remarks, "We all keep secrets. From neighborhood gossip to government scandal, the power of secrets is deeply woven into our culture. Some people disguise their age, hide their poverty or their wealth; other cover up illness, or the fact that they are in therapy. Deciding the best ways to share knowledge -- when to hide and when to speak -- is everybody's lifelong challenge."⁵

The fact is that secrecy is not always a bad thing. The confidentiality of the confession or of discussions with a doctor or lawyer are guarded legally in many societies, as are exchanges between a married couple -- and indeed, clinical psychologists have sought to extend such protection to their discussions with their clients. Psychologically, the experience of secrets is part of maturing. An authority remarks, "Children take a big step toward psychological maturity and identity when they first learn to keep a secret...We also express our identity as much in what we hide as in what we reveal about ourselves."⁶ It is not considered axiomatically a character defect to be a private and circumspect individual, although in the extreme case such as the billionaire Howard Hughes or the actress Greta Garbo (famous for her remark "I want to be alone."), the desire for personal secrecy slips over a line into what some regard as pathological behavior. The figure has the right to at least attempt to keep secret a portion of his past.

Where do we get our attitudes towards secrecy and learn its uses? For some individuals, secrecy is largely learned in the family unit. But for others, their experience with secrecy is learned by joining a group. The group of course maintains its identity by sharing secrets amongst its members, but it also cultivates the individual's sense of secrecy as a value and as a means of empowerment."⁷
Possibly Freemasonry has been apologizing too much for its secrecy. We can remember the delight in childhood of having secrets. The fact is that we still do enjoy the mystery of concealment, that it still is an ingredient of our society, and that much of the thoughtful literature on the topic suggests that having secrets is part of a healthy personality. While not always appropriate, it is not the terrible thing that it has been made out to be, and we ought to think twice about treating it like a wayward relative.

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1 “Young Protestant middle-class men [in nineteenth-century America] sought their rituals not only in the fraternal and beneficiary lodges, but also in scores of voluntary associations with primarily religious, reform, political, or economic objectives. College fraternities are an obvious example, but they involved few men and their initiations were brief and underdeveloped. Fraternal initiation was more important in Mormonism, temperance societies, the Know-Nothings and the Knights of the Golden Circle, the Grange, labor and veterans’ organizations, and the life insurance industry. Historians of each of these subjects have commented on the peculiar role of initiation, which they generally have attributed to shield members from blacklisting, and fraternal life insurance firms used ritual to remind members to pay premiums. What is less appreciated is the extent to which founders and members regarded ritual as important in and of itself.” Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1989, 6. See also Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (New Jersey), 1984, 221.

2 See Fritz Steele, *The Open Organization: The Impact of Secrecy and Disclosure on People and Organizations*, Addison-Wesley, Reading (Massachusetts), 1975, passim.


6 Cherry, 23.

7 "We have a tremendous sense of belonging when we share hidden knowledge with another person or a select group...Even the most mundane organizations may have secret handshakes and other codes so members can identify who falls within the boundaries of the group." Cherry, 25.