

# **The Search for Masonic Truth: Big T Versus Little T**

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The whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God; Johnny, don't you lie to me; I want the truth. Ye shall know the truth. The truth shall make you free; The Naked Truth; Truth or Consequences; the game of Truth or Dare.

All our lives we've been exposed to the word, yet what does it really mean? We define truth as "not a lie." William James the pragmatic philosopher defined it as "what works."

Philosophers such as Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes and Spinoza defined truth as the correspondence between mind and reality. Yet idealistic philosophers such as Berkeley and Hume said there is no such thing as objective truth, close your eyes and the world disappears. Those around us are just pretending to hear and see the same things.

So, in the words of Oscar Wilde, the truth is rarely pure and never simple. Yet we must come to grips with it as Masons because it is generally agreed that the ultimate objective of Freemasonry is the persistent search for truth.

## **The Struggle**

As each of you likely have, I have studied and struggled throughout my years as a Mason to understand and apply the precepts of Freemasonry to my life. The fact that so many of these guides to an improved life are veiled in symbolism, allegories, and metaphors only makes the search and understanding more difficult.

I believe the veiling is done for a number of reasons:

1. To hide the content from the dilettante and the profane.
2. To cause one to struggle to learn and apply so the its value is enhanced and lessons long-lasting.
3. To provide a level of abstraction permitting a broader scope of interpretation, thus offering greater opportunities for application.
4. And lastly, the developers of our ritual did not possess the full truth themselves.

Let's take, for example, a most prominent set of precepts -- our principle tenets of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth. The real meaning of each concept is cloaked in the very veiling process mentioned above. How much more difficult the search becomes for the less frequently identified moral guides buried deep within our ritual. I found a good bit of discussion related to Brotherly Love and Relief, but a fairly small amount has been focused on the Masonic concept of Truth.

## **Research**

As I began to generally read up on the topic, even going back to ancient Greece and Rome,

looking at truth from philosophical, religious, and ethical viewpoints, I began to slowly slip into a quagmire of confusion and complexity. At that point I decided to get help, so I set up a series of Roundtable Discussions, drawing in Masonic scholars and writers in the northern Illinois area. This proved to be quite helpful in organizing the general thoughts and concepts regarding what Masonry means by Truth.

### **Basic Concepts**

To set a conceptual framework, I divided this thought into two categories: terrestrial, or what lies behind the nature of things both animate and inanimate and scientific experimentation, or the search for truth through acquiring knowledge. The latter has brought us a great way along the path to understanding our universe. The other category is celestial, or what lies beyond our physical plane both in time and place, and the consideration of the Deity. This is unknowable, yet philosophy has helped us to speculate, in particular, our Masonic philosophy. I have labeled the first of these two categories, the terrestrial, as Little t truth. The second, the celestial, or what Mackey calls Divine Truth, as Big T Truth. The application of these searches is directed at what I call the continuum of totality:

Little t = Birth, Life, Death; Big T = Afterlife, Immortality, Deity

These are the great truths that we seek: Where did I come from, what is the purpose of my earthly existence, and to where am I going after death, or what we conceive of as “immortality of the soul.”

### **V. Little T**

Let's look at Little t first. In our First Degree Lecture we learn about our relations to other people.

Truth is the divine attribute and the foundation of every virtue. To be good and true is the first lesson we are taught in Masonry. On this theme we contemplate and by its dictates endeavor to regulate our actions. Hence while influenced by this principle hypocrisy and deceit are unknown among us, sincerity and plain dealings distinguish us, and the heart and tongue join in promoting each other's welfare and rejoicing in each other's prosperity.

This, I believe, is an injunction against one of people's most destructive behaviors, that of making one feel better about oneself, by putting another down. Thus, moral truth exists when our speech and actions conform to our thoughts. But how do we know what is true beyond our thoughts?

Our relation to the tangible, concrete world beyond our skin can only be apprehended through our five senses. What data we take in through these and reflect upon becomes truth to the individual, yet it must be always subjective or limited to one's perspective

We are bound by the limits of our experience and reasoning or intuitive capacities of our minds.

There are limits to what we can interpret and make sense of from sensory data. As Lucretius wrote, the failing to grasp truth is not in our senses but in our minds. This is a variation on the statement of Solon who was asked if he had given his countrymen the best laws. He answered, "The best they are capable of receiving." This holds for finding greater degrees of Truth, or more light.

We may approach truth (big or little t) in a variety of ways:

1. Rational cognition using reasoning and logic.
2. Practical experimentation, or scientific method.
3. Intuition and analysis.
4. Speculation.

## **Big T**

The latter two seem more fitted to big T though. We must ask "How can our finite minds conceive of the infinite?" No more fully than we who live in a three-dimensional world could explain it to one who lives in only the two dimensions of length and width.

Yet one segment of this thinking says that the more greatly we know ourselves, the more we can grasp the Absolute (or Big T) truth as Deity is with us. We can never on this side of the veil, achieve full understanding of the continuum of totality, but we can approach it by persistent endeavor of introspection. It is the trip, not the destination.

Victor Popow, a Brother and friend from Manitoba, summarizes this as follows: "Indeed we may find that the Craft's three degrees seem purposefully designed to incorporate truth in all its various forms. The First Degree stresses the importance of truth and of truth being the basis of correct living, living a virtuous life in alignment with principles of society and with Deity. The Second Degree stresses the importance of truth revealed through the application of the arts and sciences and through the five senses. Finally, the Third Degree offers us a glimpse of what may lie beyond ourselves, a transcendental glimpse that perhaps we can know more about ourselves and of Deity. The Third Degree offers us a chance to psychologically reinvent ourselves to cause growth and new awareness where before there may not have been an opportunity."

We often think of being raised in the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree as a symbolic resurrection into the immortal realm. Might it rather be symbolic of our being raised to a higher level of consciousness and exposure to greater truths? I will close with a quote from Bro. Albert Pike in his book *Morals and Dogma*.

"...we are not to relax in the pursuit of truth, nor contentedly acquiesce in error. It is our duty always to press forward in the search; for though absolute truth is unattainable, yet the amount of errors in our views is capable of progressive and perpetual diminution; and thus Masonry is a continual struggle toward light."

**Magna est Veritas et Praevalebit**