

Socrates Cafe

At the last meeting of the Education Committee, one of the committee members asked a very timely question. He pointed out that the committee had spent the last five years bringing basics of Masonic education to the members. We have also covered a lot of history, biographies and so on. But, he asked, what if someone isn't interested in the past or minutiae of Masonry?

I was thrilled to hear that question as I had come to the the meeting with a new idea that I was very excited about sharing with the group. My idea was that is was time to bring a new and different idea of Masonic education to the members. And the new idea is the concept of a Socrates Cafe.

A bit of background on this idea and what it is.

A chance confluence of three thoughts had come together recently in my mind.

Thought #1

I too had been looking not only at what we have done on the education committee but what was happening in the Lodges. The conclusion I came to was that while we had done a good job, we were not reaching everyone. Not everyone likes to read or learn history or hear about famous Masons. However, everyone has an opinion!

Thought #2

In looking at the books and things we have presented as a committee, the question came to me: "What did early Lodges discuss, before history and famous past Masons existed?" Think about it for a minute. The early Lodges of the 18th century were brought about in a time of great change in the world. The Enlightenment was just getting into full swing and every thing was changing: religion, education, science, politics. Not everyone was thrilled with all the changes, especially those formerly in control of all aspects of the common man's life. So where else could these thing be discussed safely if not in a Lodge? Many of the concepts of Masonry, while considered part of our culture today, were quite radical in their time. The simplest example being the acceptance of people of a wide range of faiths. That kind of thinking would have gotten you killed in earlier times and in fact did account for a great many deaths.

In looking at the ritual and lectures one can see the Enlightenment ideas over and over. The various philosophic paths are represented as well.

So, it is very likely that Masonic Lodges were in fact, places of great learning and discussion about topics of great importance to all men in an atmosphere of safety and cooperation.

Thought #3

Reader's Digest recently ran an article on how the idea of discussion salons have been gaining popularity. This practice of getting together people to do some critical thinking and discussion

has been missing in our society for some time. Often what passes for dialog nowadays are ad hominem attacks, half truths and a lot of yelling. The article gave a web site called The Society for Philosophical Inquiry (www.philosophers.com). The web site author is Christopher Phillips. Mr. Phillips has left his “normal” job and is now traveling the world with his wife, starting discussion groups that he has named “Socrates Cafes”. His mission is to get people thinking and sharing views on important questions. And not just surface discussion but deep thinking, challenging your beliefs, really digging down and finding out what you believe, not just what you think you believe. Mr. Phillips’ success has been outstanding, having been to over 100 countries to start or visit groups.

These three things really came together for me. The ritual and lectures borrow liberally from classical philosophy; they talk repeatedly about learning more, making yourself better. We are taught that we should believe in brotherly love, truth and relief. What does this mean? We tell the profane that we “take good men and make them better” How is that done?

I believe that there are many answers to those questions but I also believe that especially in today's world, the need for honest, open, searching discussion on critical questions is vital to being a fully rounded Mason. The Socrates Cafe idea seems custom made for Masonic Lodges and it’s time to return the legacy of critical thinking and dialog to the Lodge scene.

So what is a Socrates Cafe? Why call it that? What do you do at a Socrates Cafe?

First some background on Socrates. The encyclopedia has this to say about Socrates:

469–399 B.C., Greek philosopher of Athens. Famous for his view of philosophy as a pursuit proper and necessary to all intelligent men, he is one of the great examples of a man who lived by his principles even though they ultimately cost him his life. Knowledge of the man and his teachings comes indirectly from certain dialogues of his disciple [Plato](#) and from the *Memorabilia* of [Xenophon](#). In spite of conflicting interpretations of his teachings, the accounts of these two writers are largely supplementary.¹

Sounds good so far, but how does this connect to holding a discussion? The method Socrates used was to question everything, always asking “Why?” To his pupils in Athens, which was in great turmoil during his life, his fresh attitude and questioning of old ideas were exciting. To their parents and his detractors, he was a gadfly who kept asking questions and never giving any answers.

Let’s let Socrates speak for himself here:

I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance.

Socrates (469 BC - 399 BC), from *Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

¹ bartelbys.com

The unexamined life is not worth living for man.

Socrates (469 BC - 399 BC), in *Plato, Dialogues, Apology*

Socrates never claimed to have the answers. In fact, Socrates often felt that “while others professed knowledge without realizing their ignorance, he at least was aware of his own ignorance.”²

“Philosophy begins when one learns to doubt, especially to doubt one’s cherished beliefs and dogmas.”³ This was the starting point for Socrates, to tear down beliefs into their component parts and examine them closely but with an open mind.

To that end, Socrates is said to have asked six great questions. They are:

1. What is Virtue?
2. What is Moderation?
3. What is Courage?
4. What is Justice?
5. What is Piety?
6. What is Good?

Socrates would gather students to him to discuss these questions. He also ceaselessly approached people on the street and would try to engage them in discussion about these questions. If someone answered too quickly or easily, he would ask: “What is it? What do you mean by those words?”⁴ The constant act of asking why, digging deeper and questioning further is the base of the Socratic method.

These six questions and this open style of discussion is what Mr. Phillips has brought back with his Socrates Cafe concept. (However, these are not the only questions that can be examined and in the next section, there will be a discussion on how to start a Socrates Cafe and what kinds of questions to discuss.) His belief is that by examining our lives in this manner we have a better chance at excellence in our lives.

So it would seem like this is the perfect activity for a Lodge or group of Brothers to engage in to improve themselves. It’s easy to start, has no startup costs and will build your mind and Masonic character. You might even learn something!

In the next section, the nuts and bolts of starting a Socrates Cafe will be examined.

(Interesting trivia about Socrates: After serving in the Peloponnesian war, he returned home and for a while made his living as a Stonemason!)

² The Story of Philosophy / W. Durant

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Suggested Reading and References

The Six Questions of Socrates

Christopher Phillips

ISBN 0-393-05157-9

Socrates Cafe

Christopher Phillips

ISBN 0-393-04956-6

The Story of Philosophy

Will Durant

ISBN 0-671-49415-5

A Small Treatise on The Great Virtues

Andre' Comte-Sponville

ISBN 0-965-30056-0

The Columbia History of the World

Edited by J. A. Garraty and P. Gay

ISBN 0-88029-004-8

The Story of Civilization / Volume 2 The Life of Greece

Will Durant

ISBN 0-671-41800-9