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Arlington Street Church
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Telling Secrets

There are good secrets – surprises, gifts, good news – and there are bad secrets. I wish we had different words for good secrets and bad secrets; on the joy-misery scale, they really couldn't be further apart. And while one kind is meant to be kept, the other is meant to be told. This morning, I invite you to a consideration of the end to keeping bad secrets.

On January 1st, 2005, Frank Warren launched what he imagined as a community art project. He handed out postcards to strangers, and left them piled up in public places, with the instructions to take one, write on it a secret you had never told, and mail it back to him, anonymously. It's your guess as to why PostSecret “captured the popular imagination and became a worldwide obsession.” More than half a million secrets later, Frank Warren has a wildly popular blog and five huge bestsellers comprised entirely of an intimate glimpse into “individual private lives and ... our shared humanity.”

When asked what he's learned from this project, Frank Warren says, “Sometimes when we think we are keeping a secret, the secret is actually keeping us.”

As a child, I dodged questions about the dissolution of my family. My father, I said, was away on business. My mother, I said, wasn't feeling well. These were not lies, per se; they were partial truths, designed to obfuscate the whole truth: they kept the secret that kept me. And I never shared the elaborate fantasy that my father had been recruited to the CIA; I imagined that he was on the run, keeping a wide berth so as not to put us in danger. Sometimes, late at night, I would slip out of bed and stand at the window, staring hard into the shadows where I hoped against hope that he was hiding, hoping for a glimpse of me as I longed for a glimpse of him. I don't remember whether or not I believed it, but it was a self-soothing explanation for his disappearance and my mother's anguish.

Swiss physician Paul Tournier said, “Nothing makes us so lonely as our secrets.” I wonder what might have happened if there were even one person to whom I felt I could have told the whole truth. I know that many of you have kept such secrets, fearing further isolation and retribution, and have wondered the same thing.

In an excellent and nuanced article called “The Power of Secrets,” family therapist Evan Imber-Black explains that when the family motto is “don’t tell anyone our business,” there’s always a bad secret being kept. When families “create inviolable rules to keep information hidden,” they make it “impossible to ask for [help] or to use needed resources in the outside world.”¹

At the age of 37, a woman I’ll call Judy² told her family secret for the first time. Her family – viewed from the outside, the *perfect* family – orbited around her mother’s addiction to tranquilizers. “My father is a physician,” she says. “To this day, he writes her prescriptions.” Everyone in the family knows, though they’re supposed to act as if they don’t. “Our family invented ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ long before the government ever thought of it.”³

Judy had left home for college nearly twenty years earlier, yet she still found herself in thrall to the family secret; paralyzed by some toxic combination of fear and habit, she continued to pretend that nothing was out of the ordinary, ever. All her conversation was superficial, and she found herself unable to “reveal anything personal about herself to anyone.” As a result, she had no close friendships, and no sustained intimacy in her life. Only a crushing loneliness drove her to break the silence.

How much life did Judy miss keeping that secret? And, really, what would have happened had she told? When we say, “I’m afraid I’ll lose my family if I tell the truth,” we fail to accept the fact that keeping bad secrets means *they are already lost to us*.

¹ Dr. Evan Imber-Black, “The Power of Secrets,” 4/26/13. Please see psychologytoday.com/collections/201304/keeping-secrets/the-power-secrets and Evan Imber-Black, *The Secret Life of Families*

² not her real name

We have kept secrets that have no business being kept, made their shame our own – though it was not our shame, but that of those insisting on the secrecy – and we have kept secrets of our own making. Author Jane Isay writes, “What may start as a simple ... [secret] can spread through a person’s character like a cancer. Keeping a secret demands habitual denial, which gradually may morph into self-deception, resulting in the diminution of self.”⁴ Adds psychologist Andrea Pollard, “It takes a lot of psychic energy to keep tabs on big, internal events, energy that would otherwise be used for personal growth and fulfillment.”⁵

Countering French philosopher René Descartes’ assertion that “we are what we think,” French novelist André Malraux writes, “We are not what we think. We are what we hide.” This is the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous, and all 12-step recovery programs: We are only as sick as our secrets. When our addictions are hidden, when we keep bad secrets, they have extraordinary power – including the power to kill us.

My friend Harvey’s⁶ mother was very sick when he was a child. He and his six siblings were never told what was wrong; the implied message was that they were not even to speak of it. When she died, none of them asked what had killed her. When Harvey was a young adult, within months of each other, four of his sisters were diagnosed with late-stage colon cancer. Too late to save their own lives, they learned in the cruelest way that this was what had killed their mother. Had they known, they could have undergone regular, life-saving colonoscopies.

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How to unweave this tangled web?

Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project*, suggests that we commit to a “Strategy of Clarity.” This begins, she says, with paying attention to what we are inclined to hide. She is not talking about a wanted pregnancy or other happy surprises. She writes that preventing others “from acting as witnesses – from seeing what’s on the computer

⁴ Jane Isay, “The Secret That Became My Life” in *Psychology Today*, 1/1/14, adapted from *Secrets and Lies*. Please see psychologytoday.com/articles/201312/the-secret-became-my-life

⁵ Dr. Andrea F. Polard, “The Antidote to Lying and Keeping Secrets: How ‘Facing and Embracing’ the Truth Can Set You Free,” 1/6/14, from *A Unified Theory of Happiness*

⁶ not his real name

screen, [what’s occupying our thoughts, how we’re spending our money] – shows that, in some way, our actions don’t reflect our values.” The antidote – the choice to be happy – begins with forcing the secret into plain view, and telling it. When we’re inclined to keep something hidden, the litmus test is to notice whether we’re hiding something destructive or self-destructive ... and why.⁷

In 1977, American poet Adrienne Rich published a monograph entitled *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying*. It remains my definitive guidebook to our covenant “to speak our truths in love.” She says that honorable relationships, which she defines as those in which we have the right to use the word “love,” are “a process of refining the truths” we tell each other. “It is important to do this,” she writes, “because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation.... It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us.”

“Truthfulness,” writes Adrienne Rich, “is not something [that] springs ablaze of itself; it has to be created between people.” And here is my favorite passage:

“When someone tells me a piece of the truth which has been withheld from me, and which I needed in order to see my life more clearly, it may bring acute pain, but it can also flood me with a cold, sea-sharp wash of relief....

“It isn’t that to have an honorable relationship with you, I have to understand everything, or tell you everything at once....

“It means that most of the time I am eager, longing for the possibility of telling you. That these possibilities may seem frightening, but not destructive, to me.... That we ... know that we are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth between us.

“The possibility of life between us.”⁸

⁷ Gretchen Rubin, “Secret of Adulthood: Pay Careful Attention to Anything You Try to Hide,” 4/15/14. Please see gretchenrubin.com/happiness_project/2014/04/secret-of-adulthood-pay-careful-attention-to-anything-you-try-to-hide/

⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying*

Beloved spiritual companions,

“Sometimes when we think we are keeping a secret,
the secret is actually keeping us.”⁹

“We are not what we think. We are what we hide.”¹⁰

“Nothing makes us so lonely as our secrets,”¹¹
and we are only as sick as our secrets.¹²

May we declare an end to keeping bad secrets;
let the end begin with us.

May we commit to a “Strategy of Clarity,”¹³
“speak our truths in love,”
and so create honorable relationships.

Here, may we choose to extend the possibilities of life among us.

*Here, let us use the word “love.”*¹⁴

⁹ Frank Warren

¹⁰ André Malraux

¹¹ Paul Tournier

¹² slogan, Alcoholics Anonymous

¹³ Gretchen Rubin

¹⁴ Adrienne Rich