

Secrets

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I spent five winters in upstate New York. The Longfellow poem Snowflakes recalls for me so much of the beauty and the melancholy of the snow fall. But I have one particular memory of snow that has stuck with me for more than 20 years. One of the qualities of the snow is that it beautifully covers many imperfections – and much ugliness. In my first winter I lived in an apartment about mid way down a steep hill.

Everyday I passed this one busy corner. As winter turned to spring, each day of snow melt revealed something on the ground at the corner where I caught the bus. Everyday a bit more was revealed – until one day I realized that it was a mattress, a crib mattress. The snow had been hiding this mattress on a busy corner for almost 4 months! I wondered how it got there, did it fall out of a truck? Did someone throw it out. I knew there was a story behind that mattress, but the thing that stuck with me was that the snow had kept it hidden from view for so long, kept its secret.

Longfellow associates snow with secrets as well, but for him the snow doesn't hide the secrets - each flake is a secret unto itself, a confession of the troubled sky. In the way of poetry we know that the sky

and the snow are analogous to a confession of our troubled heart – This is the poem of the air- he says- slowly in silent syllables recorded, this is the secret of despair, long in its cloudy bosom hoarded, now whispered and revealed to wood and field.

It is wintertime here in California, and though we don't have snow, we do have the cold and the rain and the darkness. A good time to contemplate deeper meanings. I have been contemplating secrets this winter, my own, and those of others. I first heard about the Postsecret project on NPR more than five years ago, and knew that I wanted to share it with you.

As we know there are many type of secrets – not all bad or shameful. Some are fun and exciting. A secret crush, keeping a pregnancy secret until you are sure, a planned surprise for a loved one. There is exquisite delight in the keeping – and the telling - of these types of secrets. Celia sang a song about secret love. The song has all the elements of keeping and sharing secrets of delight: it captures the sense of urgency of a secret – All too soon my secret love became impatient too be free; anonymous confession –so I told a friendly star, and joyous release – now I shout it from the highest hills. At last my hearts an open door. How wonderful.

Other types of secrets are more complicated, or at least they can be. Its tricky when someone offers you a secret, one that you are not supposed to tell. You are asked to hold it for them. It is normal to be caught up in the specialness of the sharing and agree – but this can be a big burden, something to regret if the secret could be damaging to the secret giver or to someone else. Your friend tells you that she is having an affair. Your co-worker tells you they are stealing from your employer. Promise you won't tell anyone, they say, this is just between you and me. They have passed some portion of their burden onto you.

Physical and sexual abuse fits into this category of secret. The abuser is passing on their shame, often shame from the abuse they themselves suffered. Secrecy is a big part of the currency between abused and abuser – and the intensity of the shame is what keeps the abused person silent.

Those of you who are parents appreciate how complicated secrets can be with children – you want them to have their privacy, but you also want them to be safe. Children can be burdened with their own secrets, or those that are given to them by others. Secrets can hide despair and abuse. But secrets can also be fun and special. It is critical to help you child distinguish.

In the postcards that we viewed, each person is sharing a secret that they have not told to anyone else – that was the request from Frank Warren when he launched the project. You can sense that some of these secrets have been held for a long time. These are some of the most difficult secrets, those held the longest, for they can become larger or more painful over time. We hold the secrets in our bodies, and they can be felt as a pain or an ache in our heart, a little wound that keeps us from being fully present to love. Or, if the secret has been held for a long time, the wound becomes a scar – a covering for the unhealed wound underneath. I think of the grey blur they use on TV to cover-up for confidentiality on some ones face or other body part – that grey blur covers over the part of my heart that holds the secret, and that part of me is closed off. For me, the divine is expressed through love and interconnection, and that little spot of pain that holds the secret, and like static on the radio keeps us from connecting with the divine love. If the secret is something we particularly want to keep from our loved ones, the little spot of pain in our soul is a disconnect from them in particular – the people we want to feel closest too.

Maybe the worst type of secret is the ones we keep from ourselves. These secrets can erode away at us. These are usually the darkest and most scary ones – you can sense that some of the

postcards revealed secrets that might have fit this description. These types of secrets are often too painful to contemplate, “I am terrified of not existing,” one of them said. “I don’t really love my husband”. One of the most poignant postcards for me shows a picture of a manila envelope with the little string tied it says “I have finally spoken my secret out loud... into this envelope and sealed it forever.”

Can you imagine the courage it must have taken that person to speak their secret out loud? We don’t even know what the secret is, but we can viscerally feel the pain and the release that must have come with the disclosure – if only to the air around him. That I think is the power of the post secret project – giving people a anonymous, safe place to reveal their secrets. The Catholic church understood this need, - confession was done in the dark, you did not see the priests face, did not face him. Frank Warren served this function for the people who sent him postcards – 200,000 postcards at last count. Anne Fisher, a psychotherapist who wrote an introduction to the Post secret book makes this statement. “In both psychotherapy and in Post Secret the goal is to bring experience to conscious awareness and to express what is deepest inside and not have it be the end of the world.” I think that is a critical aspect of why we hold our secrets, we believe that if secret is revealed, something terrible will happen, something irrevocable. For

some secrets we may be afraid that we have too much power – that the secret of what we have done will hurt someone beyond repair. For other secrets the fear is even deeper, the fear that telling the secret will reveal that we are unacceptable, unworthy of love. When these are the stakes it is easy to see why we hold onto our secrets. Another part of the power of the Post Secret project is in the viewing of secrets held by others – either on the web site or in the books. Sometimes we can see our own fear and secrets in these posts – and makes us realize that we are not alone in our fears. The sharing of others can help us with our own pain.

I held onto a painful secret for about a decade. I was very active in music in high school, played flute in the marching band and concert band, piano in the jazz band. My parents were extremely active in the parents club. Most of my friends were in the band. My secret was that I was being molested by the music teacher. “It was our little secret, he said. I was the special one.” It went on for most of a year. I almost told my guidance counselor but I was not confident that she would believe me, I almost told my best friend but the teacher was a deacon in her church and I thought it would be too difficult for her. I never considered telling my parents because I thought it would ruin everything, all the band trips, all the fund raising events. I thought that my parents and my

friends would not forgive me for ruining everything. I covered up my secret and tried to forget about it.

Ten years later when I was in graduate school, my parents told me that some junior high girls had accused this teacher of molesting them, but that is was his word against theirs. This was in the 80's when attitudes towards sexual abuse were very different. I couldn't bear the idea that someone who had the courage to tell would not be believed, so I told my parents what had happened to me. My father called the district attorney, I gave a deposition. The teacher pled guilty.

As soon as I heard about those girls, I knew in my heart that I would be telling my secret, the one I had some carefully covered-up. It was not a pleasant process, my secret was uncovered like the ugly mattress revealed by the melting snow. There was some relief in finally telling.

But the telling part itself was not that positive for me. When I told my parents about the abuse – their main concern was why I hadn't told them at the time. I think that is a natural response – they felt that somehow they had failed me. But the painful part for me is that never in the process of revealing my secret was I given love and support for the hurt and trauma that had been caused to me. Worse yet, the whole matter was handled over the phone- both the discussion with my

parents, and the deposition to the district attorney – there was no one present with me, for love and support. I didn't realize how difficult that was for me until years later when I understood how my disclosure was unfinished and that a critical piece of healing was missing.

Maybe something in this service will bring forth a secret that you fill the need to share – maybe you will send in a postcard to the Post secret address, maybe share with someone you love. But for me an equal goal is for you to have increased appreciation for being to one to hear a secret from someone else. People send their secrets to Frank because it is safe, it is anonymous. If someone you know and love bring a secret to you it is not anonymous. Can each of us be a safe place for our loved ones to share their deepest secrets. The psychotherapist Anne Fisher says that sharing of secrets is has mutual healing: she says “It is about one human being expressing authentic caring and concern for another, offering comfort, witness, acceptance, assistance and hope.” I also think its about respect – respect for their concerns and feelings even if you don't understand them, respect for their courage.

As Frank Warren says in the introduction to the book“ we all have secrets: fears, regrets, hopes beliefs, fantasies, betrayals, humiliations. We may not always recognize them but they are part of us – like the dreams we can't always recall in the morning light. Some of the most

beautiful postcards in the collection came from very painful feelings and memories. I believe that each one of us has the ability to discover share, and grow our own dark secrets into something meaningful and beautiful.”

I offer this prayer – Divine spirit - Let our prayers of love and support go all to all those in the world who hold secrets. May they find the courage to release their fears and find hope. May we be strong enough, compassionate enough to be a loving witness for those secrets revealed. Blessed BE.