Secrecy, Privacy and Intimacy
A service presented by Rev. Tom Rhodes
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Raleigh
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A Reading

In late 2004 an artist named Frank Warren printed up 3000 self-addressed postcards and gave them to friends and strangers and left them in public places to be found. On one side of each postcard he invited people to write a secret and send the card to him anonymously. He had only three rules: The secret must be true. The secret must not have been shared before, and the card should be brief, legible, and creative.

The results have been a poignant insight into the human condition as people have shared some of their most private thoughts. As Anne Fisher writes in the forward of the book which reprints many of these anonymous postcards, “Frank has tapped into the universal stuff of being human... at this universal level lie the depths of spirituality... direct access to healing, and personal transformation.”

What follows is a brief sample of the hundreds of secrets which have been shared in the Frank Warren’s book, which is entitled PostSecret:

- During college I worked at a restaurant where we took turns running the cash register. I stole probably about $5,000 over those four years.
- I write the same thing on all my thank you notes, and I worry that my relatives will compare them and find out.
- I steal small things from my friends to keep memories of how much I love them.
- My dog knew all my secrets but one. I put rat poison out back to get rid of a family of rats. In around five days I had no more rats. Around two weeks later I had no dog... Max, I'm sorry. We miss you so much.
- There was no deer. I was just driving too fast.
- I tell people I don't believe in God, when really I just refuse to worship a god that would let my grandfather hurt me like he did.
- I wish my parents could see me for what I am, instead of what I didn’t become.
- The night he died he tried to call me. When I saw it was him, I didn’t answer [the phone].
- I sent myself flowers on Valentine’s Day so people at work would think I was dating someone.

SECRETS
Rev. Tom Rhodes

I’d like to spend some time this morning talking about secrets, privacy, and intimacy. The word “secret” is in fact closely related to the word “sacred.” Both of these words come from the Latin “secrena,” which means, to sift, to separate or set apart. Those things we hold sacred, we set apart as valued above all others. Likewise, the secrets we hold set us apart from those who do not share our special knowledge. And just as sacred rituals, objects and persons can hold great power, secrets also have great power to strengthen – or to destroy people and relationships.

I’d like to begin with a story, and in the interest of full disclosure I should tell you that I have Ticie’s permission to share this. But every grown woman I know likes to keep her age a secret, so I won’t tell you how old Ticie was when this incident happened except to say that she had a “significant” birthday coming up several years ago when we lived in Knoxville. Now, birthdays aren’t really a big deal with us, but this was a special one, and I was looking for a special way to celebrate. It just so happens that we had met a young woman named Jillian a month or so previously, and Jill also knew that Ticie’s birthday was coming up. We talked about how to plan a surprise party without arousing Ticie’s suspicions, where to hold it, whom to invite, and so forth. By the time we had finished, we had decided on having a picnic in a local park with about a dozen friends. Ticie and I would spend
the first part of the afternoon running errands, and then “just happen” to drive by the park on our way home. Meanwhile Jill would get the cake and decorations.

There was only one problem. The morning of Ticie’s birthday it was drizzling, and it wasn’t expected to let up all day. I was still in our bedroom mulling over options when the phone rang, and it just so happened that Ticie, who was in the kitchen, picked up the phone extensions just as I answered. “Hello?” I said. It was Jill, her voice soft and a little breathless on the phone. “Oh, Tom – thank God it’s you. What are we going to do?” At which point Ticie interjected, “Hello! What’s going on here?”

As you can imagine, it took a bit of time to get things straightened out. Of course I had to tell Ticie what we were up to, and convince her that it was absolutely nothing more serious than a surprise birthday party. We ended up inviting everyone over to our house after all, which was a lot less trouble than the surprise picnic would have been. Jillian and her husband have remained good friends for more than a dozen years now.

My point here is that it is not always the content of a secret that is problematic. Sometimes the very existence of a secret, as innocent as it may be, can create suspicion and distrust. As Frank Warren says in his book *PostSecret,* “sometimes when we believe that we are keeping a secret, that secret is actually keeping us.”

We have all experienced the power of secrets. Childhood friends share secrets all the time. Usually these secrets are harmless (at least from an adult perspective), but they can be used to cement friendships, or to exclude others from a circle of confidence. Gay and lesbian people struggle daily with how much to disclose about their true selves and their deepest longings. Alcoholics and addicts often live in fear that their secrets will be exposed. College fraternities and sororities have secret rituals which set them apart from outsiders.

On a national level, WikiLeaks has recently been publicizing thousands of secret documents which show that our diplomatic corps have actually been doing… well, a pretty good job in international relations. This past week a new Vatican memo shows more damning evidence of the cover-up of priestly pedophilia. Secrecy shrouds the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, raising our suspicions about abuse even as it protects our troops from enemy attack. Corporate secrets allow new products to be developed, but often raise questions of propriety.

Secrets abound in religious myths and stories as well. Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Prometheus was punished for sharing the secret of fire with humanity and Pandora was told that her box held great secrets. Even Jesus told many of those he healed not to reveal what he had done – the so-called Messianic Secret.

Of course, not all secrets are bad or shameful. Some secrets, like surprise birthday parties or a magician’s secrets, can be fun. The anticipation of reading a novel or watching a movie is often heightened because we don’t know how the story will end. Some secrets, like those related to our health or finances, are intended to protect our privacy. Sometimes we learn a secret that we are not ready to share until we can consider the consequences. And sometimes disclosing too much about ourselves early in a relationship can be destructive – I remember going on a date in college with someone who told me in great detail how much she hated her parents. It was our first and only date.

There is a fine line between secrecy and privacy, a distinction which has been blurred by any number of politicians who have been caught in clandestine affairs. Secrecy, like the Latin word on which it is based, separates people – those who know from those who don’t know. But this isn’t always a bad thing. We all need a degree of separation from others, private time and space in which to grow within ourselves. As the poet Kahlil Gibran said, “Let there be spaces in your togetherness, and let the winds of heaven dance between you… Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each of you be alone, even as the strings of the lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.”

Without privacy there would be no independence or individuality. Can you imagine having your innermost thoughts constantly on display like the PostSecret postcards? Or having webcams in your bedroom, or your bank statements, library records, and employee reviews freely available for anyone who was curious? Even those who are epitomes of virtue would likely balk at having their private information made public, and rightly so. After all, it’s our right of privacy that gives us the chance to develop as individuals, to develop a personal conscience and learn to make our own decisions rather than blindly following the crowd.

But where does privacy end and secrecy begin? Psychoanalyst Carol Kurtz Walsh makes this distinction, which I have paraphrased somewhat. She says, *an issue of privacy is one that concerns only the parties involved, and does not in any way affect others.* On the other hand, she says, *a secret is thought, feeling, or action held by one party that, if shared, would negatively impact others and/or their relationships.*
Of course there is still a gray area between what is private and what is secret. A person’s sexual history, for instance, is generally regarded as a private affair. But when that history involves the betrayal of a spouse, a sexually transmitted disease, or sex with underage persons, it crosses the line into secrecy. Likewise, a person’s health is generally considered a private concern. But if that person is running for public office, concealing health risks could rightly be seen as an inappropriate secret.

I encountered this issue myself last spring, when I was diagnosed with depression. At first, I saw my depression as a purely private issue, and indeed there is nothing more personal than one’s own mental health. But when I realized that my depression was affecting my ministry with you, I realized that I had to be open and honest, as difficult as it was. Even if I were to suddenly take leave last summer and give no reason whatsoever, it would have created confusion and distrust. As I said before, sometimes it is simply the presence of a secret, and not its content, that causes problems.

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When I consider the postcards printed in the PostSecret book, I realize that nearly every one of them – whether it is a person’s private thoughts or a confession of criminal activity, carries with it the burden of shame, guilt, or embarrassment. And this is the power of secrets. They not only separate those who know from those who don’t know, but those who learn someone else’s secret may find themselves in a no-win situation. If they share the secret, they betray the trust of the person whose secret it is. And if they keep the secret, they betray those whom the secret may affect.

I remember several years ago when someone came to me with just this dilemma. Her best friend had confided to her that she was having an affair, and she didn’t know what to do. We talked for a while about friendship, the expectations of marriage, confidence and betrayal. In the end, I didn’t have any answers for her. But in the end it wasn’t answers that this woman was looking for. As she told me later, she simply needed to share her secret and work through her feelings in the privacy of her minister’s office.

While sharing secrets which involve others may impose a burden, sharing our deepest hopes, fears, and longing – whether anonymously or with a trusted confidant – can be transformative. Several people who had shared their secrets via the PostSecret postcards later wrote to Frank Warren to say that they felt much freer for having written down their most private concerns – even though the postcards were anonymous. As one writer said, “Sometimes just the act of sharing a painful secret can relieve some of the pain.” I know from personal experience that sharing my own journey with you these past six months has been instrumental in my own recovery.

The confidences we keep – and those we share – are indeed sacred for they have the power to bind us together, to set us apart from others, to burden us with responsibilities we did not ask for, or give us the freedom and privacy to explore the deepest longing of our souls. As Frank Warren himself writes in PostSecret, “I believe that each of us has the ability to discover, share, and grow our own dark secrets into something meaningful and beautiful.” May it always be so.

Amen, Shalom, and Blessed Be.