



Secret-Keeping

BY ERIKA HEWITT, MINISTER, MIDCOAST UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP, DAMARISCOTTA, MAINE

I found out that something was wrong the same way I find out so many things nowadays: on Facebook. When I first joined that online social network, I was delighted to reconnect with friends from my growing-up years: high school buddies, former prom dates, even my best friend from Catholic elementary school, whom I hadn't spoken to for 25 years. (She's a stripper. I'm a minister. I'm not sure who was more surprised.)

Facebook also reconnected me with Anthony, the first boy I flipped head over heels for as a teenager. We grew up in the same college-and-cornfields town. Though our puppy love would wear off after a couple of years together, the tightly-knit web of small towns doesn't always permit people to stray into different orbits. Such was the case with me and Anthony.

When I was in my 20s, Anthony and my parents bought houses across the street from each another. Whenever Mom and I chatted on the phone, she peppered our conversations with reports of her Anthony sightings: "I saw Anthony using his new lawn mower today." Or "Anthony taught his daughter how to ride her bike this week."

One summer, the reports turned grim: Anthony had testicular cancer, which soon spread to his brain. Over the next couple of years, he sought treatment at clinics across the country. He lost his hair to chemo. His workmates donated months of their vacation time so that Anthony wouldn't lose his job. They held spaghetti dinners at the Elks Lodge, raising tens of thousands of dollars for his medical bills.

Then good news arrived through both Facebook and the small town grapevine: Anthony had returned to health and his job, and was fully living life.

Then....

I knew something was wrong when, one October day, I noticed a flurry of elegiac comments posted on his Facebook page. What was this? He had *died*? How? Not cancer, surely? What happened? I wrote to another childhood friend, a distant relative of Anthony's, and learned only that Anthony had taken his own life. Beyond the sadness of his death, I was rattled by all that was left unspoken.

It took a full week for the breathtaking truth to emerge: Anthony never had cancer, *at all*. He'd been faking it all along, a fact that he confessed to his wife before killing himself, and which was confirmed in his autopsy.

"Anthony," by the way, is not his real name. His story made a dramatic public splash in our hometown, but in this sermon I'm choosing to protect the privacy of his still-grieving family. You might say that his real name is my secret.

I'll admit that this story is extreme; Anthony's secret was of the highest order—concocted, spun and sustained by a troubled individual for reasons that no one will ever understand. His secret was powerful enough to manipulate a town full of caring people. Ultimately, it proved too powerful for Anthony to put back in the box. In the end, he must have been crazed with desperation, concluding that the only way he could escape his out-of-control secret—and sidestep the shame of revealing it—was by ending his life.

What secrets do any of us hold? Which of them have a hold over us? Which of our secrets are too big, or too painful, to keep? How do we discern whether or not to break secrecy—especially when the secret belongs to someone else? Does finding something out make it ours to know?

Quest

Vol. LXXI, No 1

January 2016

The human heart has
hidden treasures,
In secret kept, in silence
sealed;
The thoughts, the hopes,
the dreams,
the pleasures,
Whose charms were
broken if revealed.

—Charlotte Bronte

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT SECRETS

- SECRET-KEEPING
Erika Hewitt
- NOT AS ALONE AS
YOU THINK YOU ARE
Matthew Johnson
- SECRETS AND SILENCE
Meg Riley
- RESOURCES FOR LIVING
Lynn Ungar
- POSTCARDS FROM POSTSECRET.COM
Anonymous

A minister's job description is elastic. On any given day I'm called into service as a preacher, pastor, supervisor, facilitator, or counselor. When I sit with someone in crisis, a box of Kleenex between us, I sometimes remind people that one of my job descriptions is Keeper of Secrets. Actually, the clinical term would be Keeper of *Confidentiality*, not *secrecy*, since there are a few grave revelations that I'm not permitted by law or conscience to keep secret—elder abuse, for example, as well as physical or sexual abuse of a child, and the intent to harm self or others.

By and large, though, there's a wide berth of clarity between those areas of mandated reporting and the confidences that I keep. And I do keep them, whether whispered through tears or offered up casually. I've been a minister for over a dozen years, and countless people have trusted me with their secrets: pieces of their life that they shelter in their souls, invisible from the rest of the world until they're ready to be shared (or not).

Here's what I've learned from the people I've served: holding on to secrets can require tremendous energy, and often imposes terrible loneliness on their keepers. But I've also learned that secret-keeping can sometimes incubate precious new growth within the soul. The bubble of privacy that a secret provides can create safe space for transformation—a motive that therapist David Richo calls "legitimate secrecy."

The notion that secrets can be safe, albeit lonely territory is neither common nor popular. In fact, if you tuned into cultural messages, you'd think that *all* secrets are shameful or threatening. Here's what I mean:

"Secrets are like vampires," says author Jeannette Walls, "...they suck the life out of you."

"Secrets are like stars," counters Martha Beck. "They're hot, volatile concentrations of energy."

"The possession of secrets acts like a psychic poison," writes Carl Jung.

And then there's self-help guru Dr. Phil, who eschews poetic similes in favor of Texas straight-shootin': "When we keep a secret...there is almost always shame involved. If the truth weren't uncomfortable, why would anyone hide, enhance or completely alter it?"

Lots of reasons. There are *lots* of reasons, besides shame, that a person might hide the truth. For every "vampire" of a secret that swaddles danger, deception or deceit, there's a secret that's keeping someone safe or sane. For these reasons, I hold to what philosopher Sissela Bok labels "a neutral definition of secrecy."

As Bok points out, secrecy—the act of concealing or hiding—is not quite the same beast as privacy (although they overlap) because "secrecy hides far more than what is private. A private garden need not be a secret garden; a private life is rarely a secret life." As she explains, secrets protect "the dangerous and the forbidden" as well as "the sacred, the intimate, the fragile."

So much about our lives is fragile. We hold secrets about what we know and about what we've done (or not done). We also guard secrets about who we *are*. And, well, that's where the sacred and the fragile meet. Not everyone is who they appear to be; not everyone *can* be who they appear to be. I've sat with people who wrestle with fundamental questions of identity, like sexual orientation and gender, as they try to find their authentic self. In such circumstances, secrecy can offer a bubble of safety, a cocoon in which the True Self can emerge.

Here's the thing, though: within that cocoon, the risk of keeping secrets about who we are is a splintering of the self. It can be exhausting. Anytime you keep a secret about who you are, you have to present to the world a substitute, inauthentic front that, unwittingly,

snare other people into your false world. Keeping secrets about who we are involves manufacturing a false part of ourselves. Eventually, it can exact violence against the soul—or just outrun our energy to maintain it.

That's why it's so important to have people in our lives who are trustworthy enough to hold our secrets. And that's why we need to be just as mindful and intentional about opening ourselves to *receiving* those secrets.

Some of us know that it can be far more difficult to be party to someone else's secret than to own one ourselves. Being invited into secrets raises "questions of loyalty, conscience, and truthfulness," says Sissela Bok, because learning others' secrets can change us in ways we cannot control. "To acquire any new knowledge is to be changed... [and] the change, moreover, may be irreversible. One cannot unlearn a secret, no matter how unpalatable or dangerous it may be." No wonder that some of us feel angry when we learn another person's secret and are instructed not to tell.

What do we do when secrets—ours or others—become too big to handle? When we can no longer hold onto different pieces of ourselves and preserve wholeness or integrity? *What then?*

The best I can do in the face of such questions is to offer these humble truths that I've salvaged, as bystander and secret-keeper, from the wreckage of Secrets Gone Wrong:

I believe that most people harbor secrets out of fear, and that at times the weight of a secret becomes its own punishment.

I believe that each of us has the right to say to a friend: "I care about you, but I don't want to be put in the position of knowing your secret. Please don't tell me any more."

I believe that it's more important to keep a secret uncomfortably than to seek relief by sharing it, if doing so will undo someone's life.

I also believe that once someone shares a secret with us, that secret never stops belonging to the person who entrusted it to us. (Clearly, matters of mandated reporting are another matter.) Guardians of secrets don't have the right to break secrecy without fully preparing the secret's owner for that breach.

Underlying all of these convictions is a renewed appreciation for how complicated the world of secrets is, and how important it is to stir a generous dose of compassion into the mix of judgment and narrowed eyes. What if someone suffering under the fearsome weight of secrecy had even one compassionate listener to accompany them toward ease, toward truth, towards redemption?

I fell for Anthony, in a fit of puppy love, thirty years ago. I still think about him, and the wife and children who will never unravel the bitter mystery of his secret or the pain of his suicide. And I wonder: did he tell *anyone*? Did Anthony confide in his minister? In a therapist? Or did the weight of his secret break him because he was the only one carrying it?

Secrets can break people; they can also liberate people. In the words of Sissela Bok, "These conflicts are rooted in the most basic experience of what it means to live as one human being among others."

May we each embrace this life, as one human being among others, calling forth compassion as we discern our way out of brokenness into the ways we become whole. ■

Not as Alone as You Think You Are

MATTHEW JOHNSON, SENIOR MINISTER,
THE UU CHURCH, ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS

So, here's a question to get us started: Who do you tell your secrets to? Now, don't go and say you don't have any secrets. Because that's just not true; everyone has secrets. *Everyone does.* Maybe your secrets are things you've done in your life, or things that happened to you that you don't want to share. Maybe they're things you've thought or felt in the privacy of your own mind and that's where you want to keep them.

Dreams and fears, joys and pains, wonderings, wanderings, loves and heartaches—we all have secrets.

So, again, the question: Who do you tell your secrets to? A best friend? Your sister? Your dad? Your minister? Your therapist? Your spouse? Your God? If you are like me, you probably spread them out a little—some to colleagues, some to friends, some to loved ones, some to professional listeners of one kind or another. And some, I'm sure, you keep to yourself.

The telling of secrets—and the receiving of them—has long been a religious function. People told their secrets to a religious official, or to a religious icon, to a god or to a community of faith. And religions have often thought about what to do with those secrets: Do we say, "You are forgiven and free"? Do we say, "Okay, now you must do *this* or *that*"?

In recent years, millions of people have found a surprising way into that sacred function of sharing secrets. A man named Frank Warren, who lives in suburban Maryland, started an art project. He handed out postcards and said, *write down a secret and send it to me.*

The idea spread. Now he receives thousands of secrets every year. Every Sunday, Frank posts about a dozen postcards to his website,

postsecret.com, and millions of people around the world go to see them. For some, it is entertainment or voyeurism. For many, it is a religious act, a way to remember the most lucid secret: that all our loneliness is just an illusion.

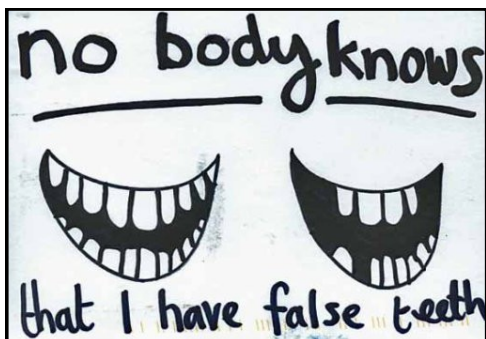
Secrets can be a little fun, sometimes. They can be exciting to have and exciting to tell. Exciting to invent, even. But they can also be very painful. Our secrets can be shameful. Those at Postsecret are no different. There are many secrets about sexuality. Affairs, fantasies that "you are not supposed to have," ways in which people have been hurt or have hurt others. There are secrets about body image, eating disorders, illness, poverty and other things which make some folks feel ashamed.

Other secrets are about families, about what happened to our ancestors, about what they did



or didn't do, or what they had done to them. Secrets can arise from a divided sense of loyalty. We are often, for instance, loyal to our parents, and we want to respect them, so we don't talk out of school about them, don't tell their secrets, even if, sometimes, telling or even just acknowledging them honestly to ourselves would heal old wounds and allow us to move forward.

There are a lot of secrets about folks who don't feel like they fit in. Call it self-image, or social respectability, or an inability to color within the lines. Folks confess to doing things to make themselves seem more "normal." Sometimes we humans make excellent peacocks, displaying all our colors for the sake of others. But it's not real, is



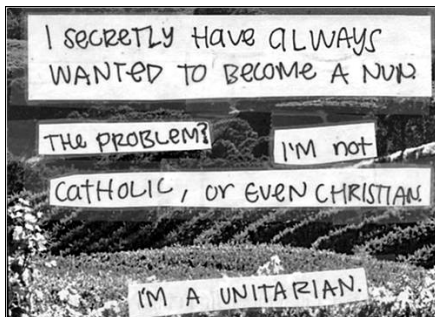
it? There are so many secrets about folks not quite fitting in, and hiding it, that you pretty quickly realize that really, nobody fits in perfectly. There is no normal.

And when we can't be honest, when we act high-and-mighty, this makes it hard for others to connect with us. We distance ourselves from others. Everyone has doubts, and nobody's perfect. The question is, can we admit it?

Sometimes the secrets are about folks realizing that they might not be on the right path. We are told, or we think, that if we do X then we'll be happy. And when doing X doesn't live up to expectations, this can be very confusing. Cognitive dissonance, it's called. Many of the comments shared on Postsecret fall into this category, whether about relationships, geography, or professional lives. It seems that a lot of folks are in jobs or careers that they are not really sure about. Even folks who are supposed to be following their bliss sometimes discover that it turns out not to be as blissful as they thought.

Secrets reveal the bankruptcy of stereotypes. We have desires, hopes and dreams, yet we feel ambivalent, afraid or ashamed about sharing them. The parts of our lives don't always make sense together, and so we train ourselves to reject part of who we are because being our full self confounds others. It even confounds us.

It takes courage to tell a secret. And yet it can be liberating. To just say it aloud can be a breath of fresh air. Even if we say it to nobody we know, even if it goes anonymously into the mail and never gets posted anywhere, the act of



speaking or writing our secret can free us from some of the pain about it.

What is clear from the secrets on the postsecret.com website is that folks who can honestly see themselves in the mirror, who understand themselves well, have fewer regrets. Not *no* regrets. But fewer. Sometimes regrets aren't about what we did, but about what we didn't do. Like regrets about the secret we didn't speak until it was too late.

Now, it is clearly not appropriate for us to tell every secret to every person we meet. Sometimes, the best course of action is to keep quiet. We should not betray confidences. Sometimes we think our loved ones are about to make a big mistake, but the best thing we can do is just support them, as a friend, so that we're still there for them when they figure it out, too.

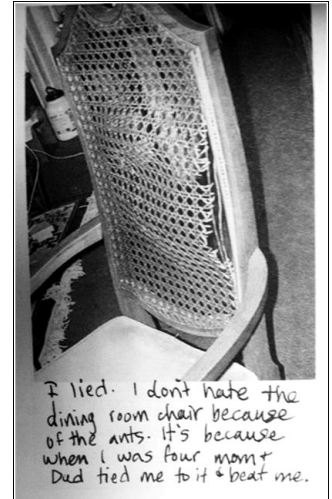
But there are times we should speak up. *Yes, I sent the flowers. I love you. Yes, I want to change how things are. Yes, I'm hurting and need help..*

Some secrets simply have to be told. As a society we are beginning to see how abuse thrives in a culture of secrecy. A lot of our world has finally shifted toward understanding that secrets about child abuse are not okay, that children should tell a trusted adult, that religious communities need to be honest about what they know, that we don't keep these kinds of secrets anymore. Cover-ups and such lies have been declared dangerous and illegal. To protect others, some secrets have to be told, hard as it is to do so.

A big part of telling our secrets is learning how not to be afraid. Many of our secrets are about things that frighten us, although we don't think they should.

But more than anything else, the secrets on Postsecret speak to the paradox of loneliness. Many people share their secrets with Frank Warren because they don't have anyone else to share them with. But Postsecret isn't always just a one-way communication.

Folks write to Frank and ask him to pass along messages, to share so that others can find themselves in a secret that is held in common. The secret sharer, anonymously through the website, is



congratulated, affirmed in their struggle, prayed for and loved and told, *I've been where you've been*. And the reader just might find their own life reflected in a postcard-sized story, and know that they are not alone.

We each carry a secret fear: that no one is like us, that no one will understand. But the real secret is exactly the opposite: our loneliness is just an illusion. These moments of connection remind us that we are *not* alone in this world. As a minister, I'm sworn to keep identities private, and I do. But I can't tell you how many times someone has told me their story and finished with, "I'm sure I'm the only one who..." And I respond: "No, I've heard stories just like yours before. You are not the only one. You are not alone."

Not all our secrets are heartbreaking or painful, or about not fitting in. Sometimes the secrets that get sent in to Postsecret are happy secrets. Joy that bursts through. Sometimes that joy seems so profound that it feels secret, because we don't know that anyone can understand, or because we don't want to brag or rub it in. Sometimes secrets warm the heart. They remind us of what matters, what's real. In a world of illusion, some secrets show us the truth. Sometimes secrets are about changing our assumptions, making a new beginning.

Who do you tell your secrets to? I hope you have someone, or a few folks.

Even if it is in a journal or a postcard in the mail, I hope that you have a place to share, to know that others care about you in your fullness. The parts of ourselves that we keep secret are complicated. They don't quite fit, and we don't always know what to do with them. But guess what? Neither does anyone else.

The answers to life don't come on a postcard, and nobody's life is one-dimensional. No matter our age or how smart we think we are or our religion or anything else, we're all just trying to figure it out. Actually, this makes me happy. It means there is space for discovery. It means that we can cross the distance between us. It means that we need one another, and can be friends.

Share what you need to share. Listen when someone wants to share with you. Hold the secrets of others with tender love. Hold one another with tender love. We are all human; we are all complicated; we are all beautiful. We're all trying to figure it out together.

And that might just be the secret of life. ■

The biggest secret at CLF is that we **need your support** to sustain

Quest Monthly!

With nearly 700 members in prison, and hundreds



more on fixed incomes, many of our congregants are unable to contribute financially. We could not continue on without the generous support of those who are able to give. Please make a \$100 contribution or give what you can.

You can give by visiting www.clfuu.org or by calling **1-800-231-3027**. ■

Secrets and Silence

BY MEG RILEY, SENIOR MINISTER, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP



In her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* one of the essential writings of 1970s feminism, Adrienne Rich wrote: "Whatever is unnamed... will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable."

That is how we move towards holding secrets, I think; how something that might begin as a simple boundary can turn into a secret. It is unspoken.

I never meant to go into the closet in the mid 1980s when I became a director of religious education. I was a young lesbian accustomed to being very open. But the long-time senior minister resigned right when I arrived, and I didn't know how to navigate coming out along with other changes at the church. I couldn't figure out how to communicate to this system in flux. So I did not name or speak particulars of my life.

And, quite quickly, it became unspeakable. That time in the closet taught me enduring lessons about what it means to have a chronic secret. The secret becomes the sun around which the other planets of your life keep their orderly orbits.

Adrienne Rich's whole quote is this:

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable.

My time in the closet, wondering if everything would come crashing down if people knew the truth about me, ended one day when one of the church pillars came into my office and said in a friendly, no big deal, voice, "So am I

crazy, or are you a lesbian?" It felt like Niagara Falls started rushing through my head. I could hardly stand up.

Finally, I managed to stammer, "You're not...crazy." This woman, seeming not to notice that the ground was tilting below me, went on, "Well, I mean, I assumed that the first time I ever saw you and I know we talked about it at the board before we hired you but then you never talk about it so I started to wonder..."

The board had talked about it? What I had thought was unnamed, omitted, censored had been talked about at the board meeting?

So many secrets are like that: people protecting each other from what we already know. After September 11, my preschool child's teachers instructed us not to talk to our kids about it, to protect young ones from this knowledge which was too big for them to understand. Well, I didn't want to create the situation where my kid ruined it for everyone, so I followed their advice.

In typical UU fashion, I kept asking probing and vague questions, like, "Did anything unusual happen at school today?" These kinds of questions kept eliciting responses of *no, nothing, just another day*. The attacks were on Tuesday, and the kids went to school all week. I was out each night leading services in various churches in Washington DC, where we lived. It was a very intense time.

Friday morning, Jie's school was cancelled and I planned to stay home from work to recoup. I called Jie down to breakfast. Jie, who couldn't read at all yet, arrived at the table with two books—one was a plain adult book with nothing but text, which Jie could not possibly have known was called "Talking to Children about Death." In the other hand was the 2001 War Resisters League calendar. "I'll have breakfast on the airplane, Mom," Jie announced.

I took a hard look at this small child. "We need to talk," I said. "Something

really painful has happened.”

“WHAT?” “Well, a plane flew into a building.” “Actually, mom, two planes flew into two buildings, and it was done on purpose. Why did someone do that on purpose?” So much for protecting the children. Following orders, I had left Jie alone, allegedly to protect the other kids.

We keep secrets to protect each other, and in the end, who are we protecting?

In this culture, there is a long list we could make of what is unnamed, omitted, censored, until it becomes unspeakable—in essence, a secret—in mainstream media. Or at a typical Minnesota nice potluck.

Our loneliness and pain are often things we try to protect one another from, along with the whole range of human suffering: abuse, all kinds of oppression—racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, cruelty, indifference, greed, fear for the planet, grief—this list goes on and on.

I am no longer living in the closet as a lesbian, and yet every day I navigate whether or not to come out—to people on planes or at the hair salon, to chatty people in waiting rooms and at the dog park. Marriage equality doesn't change that. We are all, whatever our sexual orientation, deciding whether or not to come out multiple times a day about who we really are.

I grew up in a family shrouded in silence. (The big secret we all danced around was my father's violent temper.) And early in my life a default to shame and secrecy clicked in, then resonated during my time in the closet. As a child, I was saved by the few times when my siblings and I were honest about our feelings. I still remember the surge of joy and relief I felt when my sister said, one day, “Let's kill him!” She denied ever having said this about our father when I brought it up as adults, to thank her for the expression of rage which I couldn't verbalize. But that moment of having

the ability to see and be seen saved me.

We who grew up in families where we learned to be isolated from ourselves and each other need to work hard to create lives where we tell other people about the things we want to try to hold in because of shame.

I don't live alone, but neither am I in an intimate primary relationship. And I do not want to turn to my housemate, who is also my child, to process the pitfalls and challenges of my life (though we do have great conversations about important things).

So, for my life right now, I've built in two phone calls a day with people I can talk to about pretty much anything. Early in the morning, I wake up and talk for half an hour with a friend and sister religious professional about the challenges of my day—awkward situations at work, parenting challenges or questions, frustrations with conversations that went badly the day before... whatever I need to process.

And in the evening I talk for a bit to another friend, right before bed. Sometimes we pray, or do particular spiritual practices, and for a while we shared haikus. These conversations tuck me into my life in a way that keeps me current, that keeps me naming things so they don't turn into shame or secrets.

But what if our loneliness and isolation is the core secret in our life? I think it's imperative, for our health and wellbeing, that we reach out and make changes. I'm here to say that if I can find my way out of the maze of distortion in a family where my mother literally spoke in two different voices, depending on whether or not my father was in the room—if I can build a life with openness and trust, anyone can.

Some of you may be saying, well, you have all these cool friends who are willing to talk deeply and honestly with you, and I don't. I'll challenge you on that. I'm humbled to

tell you how long it took me to figure out that I could trust other people, and it's an unending process.

There are ways for anyone to find someone to whom we can tell our truth, talk about our shame. One thing I love about CLF's online services is that, in our joys and concerns, people share deep honesty with one another—honesty that might not be shared in a bricks-and-mortar church. Maybe you'll find those people in one of the small groups or classes online, or in a bricks-and-mortar church, or in a community center.

You have to take the risk to go deeper with people. Maybe in a 12 Step group or another place where some folks will joyfully volunteer to spend half an hour a day talking to other people as their sponsors. Maybe there is someone in your family or a friend who would respond well to your request to talk each day on the phone if that would be of use to you.

I don't know your secrets, but I do know your longing—your longing to be whole, your longing to be happy, your longing to do what you are here on this planet to do, rather than using up your energy keeping secrets.

Fundamentally, we come together to remember who we are, and to remember that we are not alone. We come to hold one another's biggest selves, to see each other as both imperfect and holy. And we can be held, secrets and all, whether we dare to speak our truths or whether we take them with us to the grave. ■



REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

What does it feel like when you have a secret? We asked folks on the CLF Facebook page: *How does it feel in your body to carry a secret?* Here are some of the answers we got:

- Antsy.
- Like being stuck in a glass box.
- ...always ends up affecting my stomach... twisting and churning... then my brain won't turn off so I can sleep...
- Always wondering if I should have said something differently.
- The biggest issue is that it can take over everything. My mind and heart don't have room for anything else when it expands and permeates everything.
- It feels like a panic attack to me, chest tight, unable to take a deep breath, pinching.
- If it is a joyous secret, it makes your heart lift up and shoot sparks out of your eyes. If it is one too painful to share, it catches in the back of your throat, your shoulders tense and droop, your breathing is halting and shallow.
- A certain tightness in the throat that spreads to the shoulders and upper back and won't go away. Even if the secret is something there are good reasons to keep.
- It's electrifying, like energy racing through my body. I have to keep moving and avoid eye contact. Breathing is something I have to remember to do and I wind up sighing a lot.
- Like energy racing. It can take over everything.

Clearly, how it feels to have a secret depends a lot on the kind of secret you have. If you got the lead role in



the play or a new job or you've fallen in love but aren't ready to tell your family and friends yet, you might feel kind of tingly and

bouncy and butterfly-ish. If you're planning a surprise party or a wonderful gift you might be a bit jittery, but in a happy, maybe almost smug, kind of way.

But then there are the unhappy secrets. If you know you've done something wrong—something that will hurt another person—you might feel heavy and tight. If someone has trusted you with an unhappy secret of their own, you might feel squirmy with the knowledge. And, worst of all, if someone has done something bad to you, but is making you not tell, your body can feel caught in a trap or a cage, where you want to struggle, but can't go anywhere.

The thing about secrets is that there isn't really a rule about when you should keep a secret, and when it really would be better to share with someone. Not everything in the world needs to be out in the public. Sometimes a person tells you something in confidence, so you need to live up to their trust and keep the knowledge to yourself.

But some secrets are flat-out damaging. Someone you love can be just as hurt by the fact that you lied and hid things from them as by the fact that you did something wrong to begin with. And people can convince you to keep secrets in a way that protects their doing wrong, and keeps you from stopping their bad actions.



So how do you know when a secret really shouldn't stay a secret? Like I said, there isn't a rule that works for every part of life. But I would suggest that you start by asking your body. What does this secret feel like in my stomach? What does it feel like in my chest? What does this secret feel like in my throat or my back or my hands?

And then imagine telling the secret. Imagine the person's reaction. And check in with your body and see how it feels. When you imagine telling your secret, does your heart race, but then some of the heaviness in your stomach goes away? Or does your heart feel like it sinks in your chest when you share something you said you wouldn't?

There are always plenty of things to think about when you consider sharing a secret: Who will this help? Who will this hurt? Why am I holding this secret to begin with? Who is this secret keeping safe, and who will be safer with this secret out in the open?

But sometimes it feels like your brain just keeps going in circles, giving you the same unclear answers over and over. And then maybe it's time to ask your body. Often the secrets that really need to be shared are the secrets that we keep because we feel shame—shame about what we did, shame about what happened to us, even shame about who we are. Shame has a way of making our bodies feel tight and closed in, trapped and heavy.

Sometimes those feelings in our bodies are the best way to tell that shame has gotten a hold of us, and is telling us stories that very likely aren't true: that we are not good enough, that no one will care, that no one could possibly love and accept us the way we are.

If you are carrying around those untrue stories, heavy as rocks in your stomach, it might just be time to tell someone, to make the secrets not so secret, and let some lightness and space back into your body and your life. ■



Church of the Larger Fellowship
Unitarian Universalist
24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BOSTON, MA
PERMIT NO. 55362

Did You Know

that you can share in real-time worship with other CLFers, or watch services on-demand after they run live? Check out www.questformeaning.org/worship

Quest Editorial Team: Meg Riley; Janet Lane; Jordinn Nelson Long; Kat Liu; Jody Malloy; Beth Murray; Cindy Salloway; Jaco ten Hove; Arliss Ungar; Lynn Ungar, editor



Copyright 2016 Church of the Larger Fellowship. Generally, permission to reproduce items from *Quest* is granted, provided credit is given to the author and the CLF. **ISSN 1070-244X**

CLF Staff: Meg Riley, senior minister; Jody Malloy, executive director; Lynn Ungar, minister for lifespan learning and *Quest* editor; Jorge Espinel, Latino ministries; Danny Givens, prison chaplain; Mandy Goheen, director of prison ministries; Lena K. Gardner, director of membership & development; Lori Stone Sirtosky, director of technology; Beth Murray, program administrator; Cindy Salloway, fiscal administrator; Hannah Eller-Isaacs, social media coordinator and administrative assistant; Andrea Fiore, webmaster; **Learning Fellows:** Kimberley Debus, aesthetics ministries; Bob LaVallee, military, worship & congregational life ministries; Jordinn Nelson Long, pastoral care & congregational life ministries; Slim Moon, worship & podcasting ministries; Sarah Prickett, family ministries

Web Site www.clfuu.org — **Email** clf@clfuu.org — **Toll-Free Line** 800-231-3027 or 617-948-6150 — **CLF Jewelry at the UUA Bookstore** 800-215-9076
CLF Unitarian Universalist, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston MA 02210-1409 USA



"Part of me is so Beautiful. I don't know how to let that part win."



"When I started, I wanted to die. Now I want to live, but I can't quit."

Postcard images in this issue are from www.postsecret.com.

