



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Sacred Secrets

Rev. Lissa Gundlach, Senior Minister

September 16, 2018

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

In 2005, artist Frank Warren started an online project called [Post Secret](#). The premise is simple — people send him a postcard bearing the text of a secret they are carrying. At the peak of his project, he received about 1000 postcards a week. Today, Warren still receives a steady stream of new cards every week and sifts through them to post a new 20 secrets on his website every Sunday. How does a secret make the cut? Well, for one thing, the secret has to be true, and it has to be something the person has never shared with anyone else.

Warren says:

I'm selecting secrets that really have a ring of authenticity to them, that express any human feeling, whether it's humor, fear, sexuality, a shocking secret.

After reading over 200,000 secrets, Warren has begun to see patterns in the secrets he receives:

One of the themes that occurs again and again in this project is that there are two kinds of secrets: the secrets that we hide from other people and the ones that we keep from ourselves.

Secrets are essential to our humanity. Sisella Bok is a Swedish philosopher who has dedicated her research to understanding the nature of the secret, which she identifies as what is "intentionally concealed."

a path, a riddle, a jewel, an oath—anything can be secret so long as it is kept intentionally hidden, set apart in the mind of its keeper as requiring concealment.

It may be shared with no one, or confided on condition that it go no farther; at times it may be known to all but one or two from whom it is kept.

She urges a neutral definition of secrets, and acknowledges how closely other concepts are associated and projected onto the nature of secrets—"sacredness, intimacy, privacy, silence, prohibition, furtiveness, and deception."

"From the Latin word meaning something hidden, set apart, sift apart." Secrets help to create boundaries and to define who we are and who we are not.

We are creatures who live in the tension of what connects us and what separates us, and secrets live in that liminal space. In our early lives, we learn to differentiate our separate selves from our parents through boundaries and understanding the concept of privacy.

Think back to a first diary you might have kept, where you began to share more about your personal experience of the world you lived in, your private thoughts. You may have documented things you wished to keep private, and those you wished to keep secret. I remember the wish to find the perfect hiding spot for my diary where no one would ever find it. Secrets help us first to confront the nature of our deepest desires, hopes and fears.

Secrets also help us learn how to be in relationship. As we grow, we learn how to use secrets to gain trust and to betray it, within our families and our friendships. As we enter into romantic relationships, trading secrets is

a part of the currency of vulnerability. Bok writes that secrets are necessary “to preserve something precious—love, friendship, even life itself.”

Learning to share our own secrets and keep other people’s is a part of our moral development. As the secret keeper, we must learn to discern what is important to remain secret and what requires revelation. As the sharer of secrets, we must learn how to take risks and share our secrets with others, developing the valuable qualities of loyalty and trust in our friendships. To share and receive a secret is to risk betrayal, but it is a risk which also builds trust.

From an early age, we understand the concept of the sacred as being connected to something secret, something mysterious and holy. Religious institutions are dedicated to the sacred dimensions of life: to cultivate a sense of awe and reverence, and to nurture a connection with the nature of God, often described as “the ineffable,” or “inutterable.”

Several years ago at All Souls, I was leading a children’s chapel service on the concept of “sacred space.”

“What do you think “sacred” means, I asked.” A six year old beckoned me close to her, then whispered in my ear.

“It’s like a secret that no one knows but you.”

I repeated the answer to the group, mirroring her hushed tones.

“It’s like a secret.”

The congregation of twenty children under 10 giggled and nodded.

Religious institutions like ours are entrusted with the power to help our young people discern the beauty of the sacred. Our sense of moral and spiritual development is shaped by religious institutions where we learn religious wisdom and moral lessons.

We are living in morally trying times where the foundational institutions of our nation are embroiled in scandals where painful secrets are coming to light with monumental ethical implications. In these times we are witnessing the unearthing of painful secrets whose depths are finally being revealed. This is painful, but positive... only when secrets come to light, healing can begin.

As people of faith, we need to be very concerned about the nature of the secrets being kept and coming to light in our nation. The #metoo sexual harassment scandals which have rocked so many industries... the secrets and lies of our highest offices... What are these secrets telling us about what we value, and what we protect?

I want to address one of the secrets we are seeing come to light on a massive scale— the horrific specter of abuse which continues to come to light in the Catholic Church. The Pennsylvania grand jury report released two weeks ago has revealed new depths of abuse.

The report was the result of a two year investigation and had remained confidential pending court challenges from clergy. It claims that the church protected 300 predator priests who had abused more than 1000 child victims during their ministries.

A massive rupture in the fabric of Catholicism is now happening worldwide, causing clergy resignations and calls for justice. Churches around the nation are holding "forgiveness masses," encouraging the local parishes to confront the abuse and ask for forgiveness and move towards healing.

Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York said in an interview this week. "This is extraordinarily painful, it is embarrassing, it is humiliating, it is nauseating, but we believe in a God that can bring good out of evil." Even the Pope seems to be admitting his complicitness in keeping this unconscionable secret, and is begging for forgiveness "We showed no care for the little ones; we abandoned them."

I'm not sure about you, but it feels too soon for talk of forgiveness, even on this cusp of the Jewish holidays, when forgiveness is in the air. Exploring forgiveness should always be in freedom: the freedom to forgive or not to forgive.

Forgiveness can never come without a kind of serious reckoning with the systemic conditions which allowed this kind of evil to take root in the church and manifest itself in decades of abuse. No God I believe in can bring good out of the hideous circumstances of abused children.

With the report, we've been able to see more faces and voices of those abused coming forward to share the depth of the pain they have endured, and how they were told to keep their abuse secret and to suffer in silence to protect powerful clergy members. As you hear the stories of how clergy members manipulated their authority to take advantage of others for their own gratification, it is hard not to be deeply shocked and disgusted. And yet, this kind of abuse has been allowed to persist.

I have searched my soul for what is driving this awful manipulation of power clergy sexual abuse. What secret is underneath this kind of abuse?

My hunch is that the secret is that human sexuality, if not allowed full and free expression, and controlled so rigidly as it is in the priesthood, will be distorted into dangerous and inappropriate channels. The secret is that priests are not closer to God or above the law, but perhaps more even more deeply flawed than ordinary people because of being drawn to a vocation where their individual needs, desires, and identities are so suppressed and distorted.

My hunch is the secret is that religion, particularly highly conservative religious traditions like the Catholic church, creates impossible standards which not even its leaders can uphold, and that it's easier to conceal this from view than to have the standards challenged.

I want to return to Sisella Bok's views about secrecy, which seem to speak some truth to this crisis:

Secrecy is paradoxical, she writes: it promotes and endangers what we think is beneficial, even necessary, for survival. Every misdeed cloaks itself in secrecy unless accompanied by such power that it can be performed openly. And while secrecy may heighten a sense of equality and brotherhood among persons sharing the secret, it can fuel gross intolerance and hatred toward other. At the heart of secrecy lies discrimination of some form, since its essence is sifting, setting apart, drawing lines. Secrecy, moreover, preserves liberty, yet this very liberty allows the invasion of that of others.

I don't have the inside knowledge to understand what needs to happen for this terrible pattern to change. But I do know that whatever the secret underneath the secret of clergy misconduct might be, the truth is that the church is sifting, setting itself apart, and drawing lines by its own inability to address its secrets and to take

accountability for the deep harm it has caused. Forgiveness will only come when all of these secrets come to light and are given the proper accountability process that follows the victims.

It's important for us to think questions she poses for us as people of faith. These institutions are a part of our human family of people of faith, what Christians call the body of Christ, and when a part of our human body is in pain we don't turn away. We have an opportunity to declare ourselves a different kind of church, a place where we can trust one another with our sacred secrets, and help one another, and our institutions, to heal.

Gail Seavey is a minister in our tradition who has taken great risks in her career to speak openly about the abuses of power in religious systems, including ours, and the possibilities of healing and forgiveness. She write:

She writes:

Critics tell us that when we talk openly about the traumas of our society – encountered in our homes, schools, criminal justice system and faith communities – including child abuse, sexual harassment, abuse and rape, bullying, generational patterns of trauma caused by war, mass migration, family violence, oppression or slavery - people will leave our congregations. We have found the opposite is true.

Instead people join and tell us that because our congregation doesn't keep its own secrets they feel safe to get involved, face their deepest vulnerabilities and become empowered to change social conditions. Covenants allow us to create social safety so that we dare tell these sacred stories.

In these trying times, we have the opportunity for a deeper compassion to run through our ministry with one another. We can look one into one another's faces and see the longing for a connection across the bridges of our secrets and our separateness... the light within us, longing to shine.