

LIVING

BY  
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The

(shh...)

Secrets

(shh...)

Our deepest, darkest  
truths can make us sick.  
Maybe it's time to  
unburden ourselves.

We

(shh...)

Keep

(shh...)

**I HAVE A SECRET. AND SO DO YOU.** In fact, both of us have a slew of secrets. An average of 13 as it turns out, five of which we've never told to a single soul. Does that make us deceivers, schemers and fakers of the highest order? Grandmasters in the art of concealment? Or does it simply prove we're flawed — and oh so human? >

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NEIL WEBB





The stats on the number of secrets we keep are from Michael Slepian, a Columbia University professor considered a leading authority on the psychology of secrets. He examined 13,000 real-life secrets across 10 studies and asked participants if they were keeping any of the 38 common categories of secrets, including lying, theft, adultery, addiction, a traumatic experience, being unhappy in a romantic relationship and harming another person.

Of course, some secrets are necessary. Your therapist, physician and minister are professionally obliged not to spill the beans about you (that is, unless you are a danger to yourself or someone else). And there isn't a spy alive who could keep their job if they couldn't keep their secrets. On a smaller scale, no one wants to spoil a surprise birthday party.

Secrets are often tied to lies, and our efforts to conceal them. They can be small, or not. A lot of big secrets have to do with sex or sexual violence: an affair, abuse, misattributed paternity, sexual orientation, a porn habit, an STI, abortion, rape or incest.

Many of us are burdened by secrets, our own and the ones other people hand on to us, but we learn to live with them. Sometimes they are an uncomfortable moral twinge that flares up like an occasional muscle ache, a reminder that all is not right in our world. Sometimes we're able to compartmentalize them, pack them up in tidy boxes that we keep tucked away in the back of our minds. Sometimes we become obsessed with them.

Not everyone suffers with their secrets. Certain people, psychopaths for example, have personality traits that prevent them from feeling guilt or shame. And then there are the Machiavellian types, who also feel little or no remorse. Think former investment adviser Bernie Madoff, who committed the largest financial fraud in history, bilking almost 5,000 clients out of US\$65 billion in savings. He didn't express any guilt, even after he was finally forced to confess that it was all "one big lie."

For some, secrets can exact a terrible toll. Research shows they can make us lonely, anxious or depressed. They can even affect our physical health: secret-keeping is linked to an increase in stress hormones and a lower immune system response that makes us more likely to get sick. Slepian found that the more preoccupied we are with our secrets, the more they can weigh us down. In one study, people who'd kept quiet about an affair found simple tasks, from carrying groceries to giving directions, more challenging. "The more burdensome their secrets were, the more participants perceived everyday behaviors as if they were carrying a physical burden," he writes.

Samantha Dickson's\* secret was a heavy weight she carried for more than a decade. Because she wanted to protect her family, the university student never told anyone about the childhood abuse she suffered at the hands of her father. "He told me if this were to come out, both of us would get in trouble, and I believed it. I knew what it would do to my mom and brothers and my whole family. I didn't want them to go through that." Her silence made her feel hollowed out inside, she says. Dickson struggled with a severe eating disorder for several years and was hospitalized for a time. She got drunk a lot and started experimenting with hard drugs, such as cocaine. "I had been keeping the secret since preschool. I thought it would get easier as I got older, but it

got harder. I felt like if I didn't tell someone it was really going to ruin my life. I felt out of control trying to keep it a secret."

We long to lay our burden down, but we're scared to do it. We're worried about being exposed — or exposing others. We're afraid if people knew the truth about us, they'd reject us. Or maybe they wouldn't believe us. "Nothing makes us so lonely as our secrets," said the late Swiss physician and author Paul Tournier, best known for his work in pastoral counselling.

Perhaps the most profound impact of keeping secrets is that it prevents us from getting close to other people. We want to be accepted for who we are, but that can't happen if we keep part of ourselves hidden. Secrets invite isolation. They are a dagger to the heart of intimacy.

Before Marissa Almay\* remarried in her mid-50s, she struggled with whether she should tell her fiancé about a brief secret affair she'd had during her first marriage. "I was afraid his estimation of me would go down if I told him, and that he might not want to marry me," she says. "It was the worst possible thing he could know

about me." Almay went to her minister, who advised her that she was under no obligation to share her past history. "She let me off the hook, but that didn't feel right to me," says Almay.

She decided to come clean because she knew it would affect their emotional bond. When she told her fiancé, "He listened quietly and carefully and said, 'It's because you are telling me this that I do want to marry you. Look how honest you are being — that's why I love you.'" And he proceeded to tell her a secret of his own.

One of the hardest things about keeping a secret, says Slepian, is not the hiding but the way secrets exert a gravitational pull on our attention, popping up in our mind despite our best Whac-A-Mole efforts to beat them down. We can't escape our constant ruminations.



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And yet — secrets fascinate us. Curiosity about long-hidden family secrets is partly what drives people to spit in a test tube and wait for DNA results that let the genetic genie out of the bottle. As of 2019, more than 26 million people have taken an at-home ancestry test, unleashing a tsunami of destabilizing secrets, from misattributed parentage to unexpected siblings. Many people are realizing that they have been lied to their entire lives by the people they love the most.

Secrets can also be entertaining, a key plot device in popular culture. The hit HBO show *Big Little Lies* is about a group of women whose lives start to unravel because of a common secret they share. The 2019 movie *The Farewell* is about a Chinese family who doesn't tell the grandmother that she has cancer and only a few weeks to live. Confessional memoirs revealing long-held family secrets consistently make the bestseller lists: consider the traumatic religious abuse suffered by Tara Westover in *Educated*.

Celebrity secrets may be the most compelling of all. Supermarket tabloids and gossip sites such as TMZ peddle in salacious headlines: “Meghan and Harry Already in Couples Therapy!” “Bezos’ Divorce! The Cheating Photos That Ended His Marriage.” The private lives of the famous have enthralled us for generations, from aviation hero Charles Lindbergh’s three secret families to singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell keeping her baby daughter’s adoption a secret for 30 years.

We can’t help but be curious. Maybe that’s because learning about celebrities’ secrets can make us feel less alone with our own. Their grandiose misdeeds can make our transgressions look like minor sins — or maybe make the stars seem more human, just like us.

**FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH,** one way to unload a secret is in prayer to a benevolent and forgiving God. Another is confiding in a religious leader. Among his friends, Rev. William MacKinnon is known as “the vault” for his ability to keep his own counsel. He believes the church can play an important role in helping people who are wrestling with their secrets (even suggesting it’s a form of free therapy for those who can’t afford the hefty fees of a psychologist). He’s heard hundreds of secrets, both from parishioners and people living in the community, throughout his three decades as a United Church minister.

“Often it’s a very sacred moment when someone tells you something they’ve never told anyone before. I don’t find it a burden at all; it’s more of a privilege,” he says. “The fact that somebody trusts you enough to share that with you and has the confidence to know it won’t go any further — there’s a lot of grace that can come out of that.” MacKinnon says people sometimes look to him for advice, but mostly they just need



someone to listen. “Usually they’ve been carrying a lot of guilt, and I can see the relief when they talk to me. There is less of a burden for them, even though it now becomes my knowledge to carry.”

MacKinnon has a lot of empathy for those who open up to him. “I know what it’s like to carry a secret, and there comes a time when you can’t keep it in anymore.” The 67-year-old kept his homosexuality hidden until his early 30s. “I grew up in a small village in New Brunswick, and there was absolutely no

one to talk to. Your whole mission in life is to ensure no one knows your terrible secret. So when you tell it for the first time, it's pretty amazing."

That happened for MacKinnon when he confided in a staff member at the church's national office. "I knew he would be safe to talk to. And he told me, 'You have no idea how many clergy have come to tell me the same thing.'" This was before the church accepted gay ministers in 1988. MacKinnon was

they've failed and hear that sort of ringing word of forgiveness and absolution," she said in an interview with NPR. To make it easier for people to share their secrets, she was scheduled to launch a podcast in April called *The Confessional*, with the hope that it will provide "freedom from our own shame."

**MARY O'REILLY\* GREW** up in a strict Catholic home, a home she calls "a house of secrets." Her father had severely injured a man in a drunk driving accident when he was young and never spoke of it. Instead, he kept on drinking. "We all had miserable lives because of that," she says. When O'Reilly became pregnant from a casual relationship at 19 in 1974, she had an abortion. "I never would have confessed that to a priest," she says. Instead, she told her best friend. "To this day, she knows everything about me. We're so close. If I had a soulmate, she would be it."

O'Reilly is fortunate that she has a best friend to confide in. Not everyone does. Maybe that's why so many people find themselves spilling their secrets to a complete stranger — a seatmate on a plane, a bartender in a city away from home, a telephone crisis counsellor or even a newspaper advice columnist.

Getting our secrets out is a good thing, and even just writing them down in a diary can be transformative, according to James W. Pennebaker, a psychology professor at the University of Texas and co-author of *Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain*. "Giving concrete form to secret experiences can help categorize them in new ways," he wrote in *Scientific American Mind*. "We start to think about them in a simpler, less menacing context...talking or writing about a disturbing event helps us understand it better. And things we do not understand cause greater anxiety."

Today, millions of people find relief sharing their secrets on the internet. The #MeToo hashtag, popularized following the exposure of widespread sexual-abuse allegations against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein in October 2017, allowed formerly silent victims from around the globe to publicly share their experiences of sexual assault and harassment. (Weinstein was convicted earlier this year on two charges.) In Canada, the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported went viral in 2014 following allegations against former CBC

ordained that year, although it took him another few years before he came out to his congregation.

Church is an ideal place for people to find comfort from the secrets that plague them, according to Nadia Bolz-Weber, a progressive Lutheran minister and the author of *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*. People "need a place where they can experience confession and absolution — where they can confess the ways...they can't live up to their own values and the ways



radio host Jian Ghomeshi, who was tried for accusations of sexually assaulting three women and later acquitted.

Unloading online can allow us to share without consequence. And there are plenty of ways to do it. Whisper is a popular app where users get a random nickname so they can post anonymous confessions with text superimposed on an image. And PostSecret is a curated compendium of secrets artistically rendered on postcards and anonymously mailed to founder Frank Warren, who selects 20 to post on his website each Sunday. Samples include “Everyone who knew me before 9/11 believes I’m dead” and “I give decaf to customers who are rude to me,” written on the side of a Starbucks cup. In the past 16 years, he’s received more than a million postcards.

Religious leaders who have lost their faith in the supernatural can turn to the Clergy Project, an anonymous online community, to talk to others about their hidden disbelief. The organization has over 1,000 members, about 70 from Canada, many of whom are still in the pulpit and risk losing their salaries, housing, social network and sometimes their marriages if news of their atheism gets out.

Members are predominantly Christian, and board member John Lombard of Langley, B.C., who served as a missionary in China before losing his faith, says the Clergy Project is often the only place where people like him can unburden themselves, find support and get free counselling. “If they reveal to their church that they have lost their faith, they go from being the beloved, respected leader to being despised and attacked at a time when they most need a support system.”

While anonymous confessions represent a type of controlled release that can benefit psychological health by lessening the impact of a secret, nothing beats admitting it out loud. Sharing a secret with someone, anyone, reduces the rumination that can lead to distress. It doesn’t even have to be the person most relevant to the secret. An objective third-party professional is a good place to start.

That’s exactly what Samantha Dickson did. The first person she told about her childhood sexual abuse was her therapist. Then she told a relative, who encouraged her to tell her mother. She did, and her mother promptly left her father. Releasing her long-held secret is finally allowing Dickson to turn her life around. “For the first time, I feel like I am starting to build a life that’s more honest, and I can figure out who I want to be as a person because I’m no longer consumed by this secret that was eating me up,” she says. “Every day is still really hard, but I don’t feel that I’m carrying the burden all by myself anymore. I’m carrying the memory but not the secret.”

While sharing secrets one-on-one can be cathartic, so can sharing them in front of an audience. Tracey Erin Smith runs

Toronto’s SOULO Theatre and works with students to craft short stage performances that are often based on experiences they’ve generally kept quiet about in their lives, like growing up in an alcoholic home or living with a mental illness.

“The invention of the confessional was a brilliant and insightful psychological tool that got embedded in religion,” she says. “Now that we’re in an age where a lot of people aren’t involved in organized religion, we’re seeing people stepping out of the confessional booth and onto the stage. People love storytelling because we are interested in hearing what goes on behind closed doors. We want to know we are not alone in our struggles...You release the story, and the story releases you.”

Smith herself has shared profound experiences from her own life in her one-woman shows, including her full-length play *Snug Harbour*, about her father’s suicide. “I was able to stay medication-free because I was literally working with the material and sharing it on stage with the hope that it would help others.”

And it did. She recalls one night when a woman in the audience came up to her after the show to tell her she was worried her depressed father might be suicidal. The next night, the woman’s parents were in the audience. “If that father could hear from my show how much he would be missed, then the show was worth it. It was an incredible reward for me to share that story.”

Some family members questioned her need to be so public about what might be considered a private experience, but Smith says shame is what allows secrets to thrive. She quotes author and researcher Brené Brown: “Shame cannot survive being spoken. Shame needs three things to survive: secrecy, silence and judgment.”

While a brave few like Smith might be able to talk about their private sorrows in front of an audience, others will spend a lifetime keeping a tight lid on their secrets

— only to allow them to finally escape on their dying day.

Suzanne Foreman, a palliative care volunteer who lives near Kingston, Ont., has heard a number of deathbed confessions, including one from a man who admitted to killing someone in the war. Another shared that he’d known his whole life he was gay, but it would have hurt too many people to live the way he always wanted to. And then there was the married woman who told her about a “glorious” affair she’d had.

What did she say to these people in their final hours? “I don’t think they expected a response,” she says. “They just needed to be heard.”

*Anne Bokma is a journalist and author in Hamilton.*

**READ “DNA Secrets Revealed: When You Aren’t Who You Think You Are” EXCLUSIVELY ON BROADVIEW.ORG**

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