

POSTING SECRETS
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© February 19, 2006

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READINGS

Tom Roys

Romans 10: 8b – 10

The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim; because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

From *POST SECRETS*

Frank Warren, the creator of POSTSECRETS, writes about the project. In November 2004, I printed 3,000 postcards inviting people to share a secret with me: something that was true, something that they had never told anyone. I handed out these cards at subway stations, I left them in art galleries, and I slipped them between the pages of library books. Then, slowly, secrets began to find their way to my mailbox.

After several weeks I stopped passing out postcards but secrets kept coming. Homemade postcards made from cardboard, old photographs, wedding invitations, and other personal items artfully decorated arrived from all over the world. Some of the secrets were written in Portuguese, French, German, Hebrew, and even Braille.

One of the first POSTSECRETS I received looked like nothing more than a worn postcard filled with two shopping lists. But squeezed into the corner was a soulful admission, "I am still struggling with what I've become."

SERMON

Have you seen this book or been to the *POSTSECRETS* web-site? It's an art project that has turned into a confessional. I'd never heard about it until my niece gave us this book for Christmas. It's fascinating and started me thinking about secrets, confession, and why there seems to be this universal need to share the things that weigh heavily upon our hearts. Most religions and their contemporary equivalents have recognized this and have provided opportunities for people to acknowledge the wrongs they have done.

During the Jewish High Holy Days part of the liturgy brings this to a conscious level with these words: *During this time of reflection we acknowledge our very human capacity for doing wrong. We also believe that people - with all their flaws and limits - have a divine spark within their heart. This holiness is evident in our power to forgive the errors of others, in our power to forgive ourselves, and in our ability to correct our own mistakes. During the Days of Awe we*

are challenged to look at ourselves from a place different than our usual vantage point—to see ourselves clearly, stripped of the external trappings of the things, which define our lives—to see ourselves as we really are, and to see ourselves where we really are. In order to change we must look within and examine that which binds and constrains us. We must acknowledge our shadow self, the self we do not want others to see.

Christianity offers a variety of opportunities: the Roman Catholic confession to the priest, *Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned*: a Protestant general confession, *Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done*: and even Unitarian Universalists sometimes collectively confess that they are not all they might be. Listen to one, written many years ago by a Unitarian Universalist minister, Von Ogden Vogt, for the 1937 hymnal. It has withstood the test of time and is in our current hymnal.

*Before the wonders of life
we acknowledge our failures to see and to revere;
Before the sanctities of life
we are ashamed of our disrespects and indignities;
Before the gifts of life we own that
we have made choices of lesser goods,
and here today seek the gifts of the spirit;*

Before the heroism of life we would be enlarged to new devotion.

But it isn't just religious institutions that recognize this need. The secular world also knows its truth. Psychotherapy provides the secular equivalent of a confessional. Think of what happens when you visit a counselor or therapist. If you are willing to do the hard work necessary for emotional and spiritual healing, you bare your soul and talk about your deepest fears, feelings, wrongs and struggles. The therapist, if well-trained and most are, listens with compassion and without judgment. AA groups offers a similar opportunity to those who are struggling with their alcoholism. In the 12-step program, the fourth step is to *Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourself*.

Raise your hand if you have ever admitted to someone; a friend, stranger, clergy, therapist, AA group, bar-tender or even your journal something which you knew was wrong or something for which you are ashamed. See you are not alone.

It seems to me that *POSTSECRETS* by offering an anonymous confessional has tapped into this universal need to acknowledge our deepest, darkest secrets by taking advantage of modern technology. The success of the web-site and the book proves that on some level it is working. The anonymous confessions are poignant, sad, funny and touching. They also provide the opportunity for people to understand that they are not alone. While each postcard is unique, there are general themes that many people can relate to at one time or another in their lives.

I hate baseball.

My dad used to beat me and call it spanking.

When I'm alone I see myself as beautiful. It's when I'm around others that I feel so ugly and flawed.

I always wait a few days before returning e-mails from my friends because I don't want them to think I have nothing better to do.

I wish my parents could see me for what I am...instead of what I didn't become.

Every time I approach an overpass, I think how easy it would be to simply turn the wheel ever so slightly to the left and find peace, at long last...

During college I worked at a restaurant where we took turns running the cash register. I stole probably about \$5,000 over those 4 years. Most of that money went towards the year I spent backpacking around Europe. I had a great time.

Although I am still trying to come to grips with the technology of *POSTSECRETS*, I believe it has some merits. It provides another avenue for people to share feelings and secrets that may have a tight grip on their heart and mind. It provides a way to begin to release their grip. And this is good. I also helps people better understand that the ideas and feelings that make them feel so abnormal, guilty or different are actually shared by many, many other people. *POSTSECRETS* can lessen, at least a bit, feeling completely alone and worthless. It can be a very cathartic experience. To actually put into words or pictures the thoughts and feelings you've kept locked inside, is to crack open a psychic window so that the light of healing can begin to come in. It is often the case that when someone first shares such a secret, and the world does not collapse, they find the strength and courage to face the demon that has held them prisoner for so long. *POSTSECRETS* also offers to people who probably would never talk with a therapist, counselor, clergyperson or AA group the opportunity to bare their soul. It is a first step that just might lead to sharing with a live person who can offer some guidance and maybe even some help.

I also have some serious reservations about *POSTSECRETS*. I understand that *POSTSECRETS* was initially intended as a therapeutic art project, but it has grown into something more. It has tapped into something deeper, the very human need to bare our soul. And therein is the dilemma. As it currently exists, there is nothing to address the issues opened by such a confession.

I believe that as valuable as it is to share secrets and hidden thoughts and feelings, such voicing is only the beginning, the first step in a process. This is a major flaw with *POSTSECRETS*. As far as I can tell there is no process. The whole thing begins and ends with the anonymous postings. The secret is acknowledged, but there is no opportunity to do anything about it. There is no opportunity to take any sort of responsibility for one's actions. There is no opportunity to explore one's ideas and feelings and to come to make some sort of peace with them. In other words, I believe that *POSTSECRETS* is somewhat like Cheap Grace. It offers absolution without accountability.

I believe it is necessary to give voice to our personal secrets, fears, foibles, cares, concerns, doubts and sins; but giving voice is not sufficient. Simply sharing is like admitting a wrong and adding "the devil made me do it." Or forever rationalizing egregious behavior by chalking it up to a difficult childhood, bad genes, unusual stress, or addictions. They may contribute to the secret, but they can not be blamed for causing it.

I believe that this is the critical dimension that religion, AA and modern-day psychotherapy provide. They offer the opportunity for confession, for sharing secrets, but they also challenge us to accept responsibility and if necessary, to make restitution.

The Jewish liturgy asks us to individually and collectively acknowledge the ways we have erred and provides a means to rectify them.

The Catholic priest listens to a confession, offers counsel and penance. Prayers are recited, promises made and forgiveness is granted.

Protestant prayers ask us to reflect on the individual ways we have been less than God's wants us to be. We are invited to examine our own lives, take responsibility for our behavior and to make amends. It is not easy.

The 4th step in AA lays out very clear steps of acknowledging, admitting, confessing and making restitution. I'm sure many of you have experienced this step as either confessor or recipient. A few years ago my spouse, Paul, received an old-fashioned wind-up alarm clock in the mail. It was from his senior year roommate, who had taken Paul's clock when he cleaned out their room and disappeared. Until Paul received the alarm clock, he had forgotten the incident. His roommate had not.

I do want you to know that *POSTSECRETS* is trying to do more. On their web-site and in the book they list a 24-hour suicide hotline. But I worry about the people who are struggling with guilt over past wrongs or sexual identity or who are victims of rape, incest or molestation. I worry about the children and teenagers who don't know what to do when they are harassed or bullied, when they have no friends or whose parents have unrealistic expectations or simply don't care. I worry about the people who are in a real spiritual crisis, who question God, their beliefs and all of life. I worry about the people who are mourning the loss of loved ones and those who feel guilty because they are not. What happens to these people when they discover that simply voicing their secrets provides only temporary relief?

As part of the closing meditation, I offer you an opportunity to make a confession. If confession or posting your secrets appeals to you, I invite you to take one of the cards provided in each pew. Anonymously write your confession or secret on it. If you want you may come forward after the service and do one of three things. 1. Put the card in this basket and it will be posted. 2. Put it in this basket and it will be mailed to *POSTSECRETS*. Or 3. Run it through the shredder.

But this is not the end of my invitation. I ask that you remember your secret or your confession. Find a real person who you can trust and share your story with them. Explore the possible ways you might reduce the hold your secret has on your heart. Do you need further counseling? Do you need to apologize, ask forgiveness or make restitution? Do you need to learn to be less harsh with yourself and with others? Do you need to learn to trust your inner voice? To trust God? To trust other people?

Confession, sharing our fears and foibles, posting our secrets is the first step in our spiritual and emotional healing. It is the beginning of a life-long journey of transformation and hope. Or so I believe. May it also be true for you.

MEDITATION/SILENCE/RESPONSE

I invite you to join me in a time personal confession
After I say a line, you respond by saying
May the Spirit of Life be merciful as I begin in love.

We examine our hearts for the wrongs we have committed.
May the Spirit of Life be merciful as I begin in love.
We acknowledge the ways that we have sinned.
May the Spirit of Life be merciful as I begin in love.
We admit that we have made choices of lesser good.
May the Spirit of Life be merciful as I begin in love.

We recognize those moments when we have disrespected ourselves and others.

May the Spirit of Life be merciful as I begin in love.

We ask for the courage and strength to make the changes we need.

May the Spirit of Life be merciful as I begin in love.

We ask for forgiveness.

May the Spirit of Life be merciful as I begin in love.

We begin again in love.

May the Spirit of Life be merciful as I begin in love. -slh