



PRIVACY VS. SECRECY

Carol Kurtz Walsh

Buddha once said "Three things cannot long stay hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth".

Wikipedia

Issues of privacy and/or secrecy, as they impact intimate relationships, have profoundly affected almost everyone's life, including my own. At first glance the issue seems simple, yet in my professional and personal experience I know that the boundaries between privacy and secrecy can become very fuzzy. What is appropriately kept private? When does something held private become a secret? When and where do the boundaries between privacy and secrecy blur? Why does someone hold a secret from their loved one, and how does it affect the relationship? This broad issue contains many subtle complexities, baffling couples, raising questions, and often resulting in serious conflicts and emotional pain.

Before you continue, please read the following scenarios, and decide for yourself which contain issues of privacy and which contain secrecy. It might be interesting to read these scenarios with your spouse or partner and see if you agree. (Please note that any resemblance to real people is totally coincidental. These stories have been created by my imagination, based on my experiences.)

- Janet kept her journal hidden from her husband fearing he would read it.
- Jim heard that his old high school buddy was getting a divorce, but didn't share it with his wife.
- Allison had a therapy session and decided not to discuss it with her fiancé.
- Corey kept track of how much Jerry was drinking every night and he maintained it was none of her business.
- Joy was angry with Jim for being perpetually late for dinner but did not tell him. Conversely Jim never told Joy why he was late.
- Carla's deceased father was manic-depressive, but she never told her husband.
- Carl and Sandra have been dating for six months and Sandra is demanding to know all about Carl's former sexual relationships. Carl is refusing to tell her.

Having read these scenarios, which is a matter of secrecy and/or privacy?

For the purposes of helping couples, I use the following working definitions to differentiate between privacy and secrecy: In an intimate relationship, ***a secret is a need, thought, feeling or action held by one partner, that if shared could negatively impact their partner and/or the relationship.*** On the other hand, in an intimate relationship, ***an issue of privacy is one that concerns only the individual and does not in any way affect their partner or the relationship.***

Secrecy is destructive to a relationship and an individual's self-esteem, while privacy can create ego strength and be personally instructive. Secrecy comes with guilt and fear, while privacy results in a stronger sense of self without guilt. Secrecy is about control and destroys trust, while privacy does not. Secrets are often about addictive behaviors, or old defense mechanisms, while privacy is more often about personal history, values, priorities, dreams, and visions of the future. The decision to withhold a secret, or to keep something private, is a choice reflecting our values and emotional maturity. Choosing to share a secret is a healthy and mature act, even though it may create conflict. Choosing to keep something private, is our right and privilege, however if we choose to share something personal, it has the possibility of deepening an intimacy.

I want to stress that this article pertains only to long-term relationships where achieving and maintaining intimacy is an issue. I am not talking about privacy and secrecy as it pertains to international politics, corporate competition, or politicians and other public figures. These people and systems are not working toward emotional intimacy, but are often adversaries. Their public position and/or their competitive needs necessitate secrets.

The older we become the more likely we will have experienced betrayal caused by the discovery of a secret. Like many of you, I too have been betrayed by secrets. From these personal experiences and from my work as a therapist I know how hurtful and often traumatic this can be to us and our relationships. Some extreme examples of this happened to people I know. In one case, after her husband's death, a woman discovered letters from his current lover. In another example, the husband went to buy something and his charges were denied because his wife had secretly spent

huge sums of money. As I wrote above, Buddha is quoted as saying, “Three things cannot long stay hidden: the sun, the moon and the truth.”

Secrecy creates an illusion about what is real. If the illusion is maintained and the truth not revealed, trust will be broken. Trust is broken because tension or a state of anxiety, will be felt in the relationship leading to distrust. Trust is the foundation of all relationships. So when secrets are held – either by overt lying or by the “white lie” of omission – the relationship is undermined. Once a secret is discovered, trust is very hard to rebuild – if not impossible. As stated by the Wikipedia, nearly 2500 years ago, Sophocles wrote, "Do nothing secretly; for Time sees and hears all things, and discloses all."

There are some things that are obviously secrets, like one person having a sexual or emotional affair, or another person impulsively spending jointly held money. But most issues of secrecy vs. privacy are difficult to discern since many issues *could* contain both secrecy and privacy. Let’s begin by looking at some of the examples I described at the beginning. In the first one it is absolutely okay for Janet to have a private journal. However, if after writing and sorting out her feelings she realizes that she is dissatisfied with certain aspects of her marriage, it is important for her to share these feelings with her husband, otherwise they becomes a secret. By not sharing them there would be no opportunity to work out the issues and ultimately distance in the relationship would occur. (As an aside, this couple would also need to clear up Janet’s distrust of her husband’s ability to honor her privacy.)

Looking at the next two examples, the same principle applies. What Jim finds out about his friend’s marriage has no impact on Jim’s wife. However if Jim, upon hearing of his friend’s imminent divorce, ponders his own marital dissatisfaction, it becomes a secret if it is not shared. And, in the example about Allison’s therapy the issue is the same. I often have clients whose spouses question them about what has been discussed in a therapy session, or even more intrusively, demand that my clients discuss certain subjects with me. Things such as therapy sessions, dreams, and journals deserve to be held private, for these are vehicles for working out personal issues. However once again, if the worked-through issue concerns their partner it needs to be shared, or it becomes a secret. The boundaries between privacy and secrecy are subtle and often hard to detect. Sometimes

those that seem to not concern our intimate partners could in fact be subtly held secrets.

In the third example, Corey was keeping track of Jerry's alcohol consumption, because he was overweight and she knew his father was an alcoholic. Jerry's alcohol consumption (this could also be true for the consumption of food and the amount of exercise needed for someone who is overweight) is basically his business. However, when it becomes a health issue it evolves into something that could potentially have a powerful effect on the relationship. Additionally if Jerry's personality changes when he is drinking, that also affects the relationship.

So, where are the boundaries between privacy and secrecy? How and when do we draw these lines? In general, to maintain and increase the intimacy in a relationship we must share anything that would affect our partner and/or the relationship – no matter how we fear the outcome. No matter how difficult the situation, a discovered secret will result in a far greater consequence. Dr. Edwin Friedman, rabbi and family therapist, is quoted as saying that “secrets are the plaque that clogs the arteries of a relationship.”

We need to be truthful with ourselves, as well as with the other. In my next example from the beginning of this article, it would be hard for Joy to discuss her feelings about her husband's lateness, because he may then “speak his truth”. Perhaps he avoids coming home because he doesn't want to face the chaos created by four young kids. Perhaps he delays his homecoming because work is more personally satisfying than his relationship with his wife. Or, perhaps he is engaging in an affair and spends time after work talking on his cell phone to his lover. Joy has no way of knowing, unless she checks it out by first sharing her concerns. Then, if joy discusses her feelings, her husband must also reveal his truth. Then together they can reach a resolution. For example if avoiding the chaos by working is the real issue, perhaps a mother's helper could be hired for a couple of hours just before dinner to help with homework and dinner preparation. But, if the real issue is that her husband is having an affair, then couple's therapy would be in order.

Speaking our truth is the opposite of being co-dependent, but to speak our truth means we must know ourselves. Perhaps Joy's husband doesn't really understand why he perpetually comes home late. This is a core issue;

people who have not developed self-awareness react out of old patterns of behavior and defense mechanisms. Because they don't know themselves they are often in denial about what they feel, think, need or desire. Instead they "stuff" uncomfortable emotions, memories, and thoughts down with food, alcohol, over-work, sports, or acting out their fantasies.

When we are in denial about who we are – about our motivations, needs, etc. – we are keeping secrets from ourselves. When we stuff things, or are in denial about their impact on ourselves or our significant other, then we do not have intimacy with ourselves. ***If we have no internal intimacy, we cannot create external intimacy.*** If we are not intimate with ourselves, then what "self" are we going to bring into a relationship?

These repressed parts of ourselves are often referred to as our "shadow side". The *iloveulove.com* website's section "Jung's Archetypes" states that Carl Jung defined the shadow as "the personification of that part of human, psychic possibility that we deny in ourselves and project onto others." We have all had the uncomfortable experiences of being on one side or the other of projection. The goal of the mature adult is to discover and understand that which is buried deep within us, and to then integrate these denied parts of ourselves into our whole being. In this way we will stop projecting our shadow onto others.

The shadow within us is so hidden we don't know it exists or what it contains. For example, a workaholic is probably totally unaware of why he/she works so hard and what feelings they are trying to suppress. For example, if one person in a relationship feels inadequate, that feeling may be projected onto their partner by experiencing him or her as inadequate. Knowing the true Self (as much as humanly possible) and then being able to present that in a relationship heightens the level of intimacy.

If a revealed secret can ultimately help a marriage (if the partners are willing to work on the issues) why do we hold onto them? The common reason is fear – fear that if we discuss the issue with our partner/spouse – it will cause a conflict and we will have to deal with it. In my example from the beginning of the article, Carla never told her husband about her father's mental illness because she was terrified he would not marry her and have children. She knew that any child born to them could carry the biological predisposition to bi-polar disorder. However, should they have a child that develops that mental illness; the truth would eventually come out. The

thought to keep in mind is that our personal history is private, unless it would affect our spouse, or unless we choose to share it out of love and a desire for more closeness.

Keeping secrets from our partner is not only destructive to the relationship; it is the “chicken” way out. We “chicken-out” because truth is often a terrifying thing to face. Another reason may be that the secret contains a fantasy, which is much more fun than facing the conflict – until the secret is discovered, as in the case of one partner spending a good chunk of the family money. Another way to look at it is what Dr. Edwin Friedman says in his article “Secrets and Systems”. He says, “I used to think people did not tell others bad news in order to spare their feelings, now I believe it is so they won’t have to deal with their (*own*) feelings.”

I think that the worst form of a secret is the direct lie. It is one thing for a secret to be held, but if one partner is confronted by their spouse, and their response is a lie, the power of the secret is magnified. People lie when confronted because of fear or shame. They also lie in order to preserve their fantasy, or their self-image. Scott Peck talks about lies in his book People of the Lie. He describes those who are, “utterly dedicated to preserving their self-image of perfection.” He goes on to say that in this form of lie, people are concerned about their “image and “appearance” and are “unceasingly engaged in the effort to maintain the appearance of moral purity.” Furthermore he states, “Their ‘goodness’ is on a level of pretense. It is, in effect, a lie. This is why they are ‘people of the lie’.” This self-preservation of one’s false image creates a profound secret – both from themselves and their spouses. Because of the devastating impact these secrets and lies can have, Scott Peck refers to this as evil.

Where do we learn to keep secrets? Secrets are often learned patterns of behavior and defense mechanisms created in response to our childhood experiences. What was modeled for us is what we tend to carry into adulthood – until we learn otherwise. So, if our parents were clearly keeping secrets from each other, or lying to us as children, then as adults we would have a tendency to carry on that behavior. Modeling has a powerful impact. For example, I had a client who was three months pregnant and ready to move out of the country. Her mother took her shopping and bought some lovely clothes for the newborn. After returning home, the mother asked my client to not talk with her father about this purchase. The joy the daughter

felt about buying the clothes was squashed by the knowledge that this had to be a secret from her father.

Family held secrets are often direct lies and in turn very destructive. James knew his mother was an alcoholic, but when, at the age of ten he questioned his father about his mother's drunken behavior, he was told that his mother was just "tired", or "not feeling well". By not validating James's reality, his father was skirting the issue and lying to cover up for the mother. James's then began to question his own reality. During therapy he "claimed" his reality and realized that his mother's drinking was a family secret.

Another family pattern of behavior that rewards lying (and in turn secrets) occurs when a child lies and gets away with it. When a parent asks a child, "Did you do your homework?" and the child says "yes" even though the parent knows differently, the child's lie will be rewarded and he/she will lie again – particularly if the parent is too tired, or doesn't care to deal with it. The child needs to be confronted and taught that lies are not okay, or this behavior will become a pattern. In another example, if two brothers are fighting and the parent punishes the wrong child, the one who lied will be subtly rewarded. In a more obvious example, if an adolescent gets caught drinking and the parents never confront it by pretending it didn't happen, the activity becomes a secret held by the whole family. In all of these cases the fact that the truth is known and yet not dealt with, turns the acceptance of the lie into a secret.

* * *

Shifting from secrecy, let's take a look at privacy. Marlon Brando is quoted in the Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, as saying, "Privacy is not something that I'm merely entitled to, it's an absolute prerequisite." I believe this is true for each individual. It is our human right to maintain privacy.

Privacy can be equated with independence, autonomy, anonymity, confidentiality and individuation. The need for a child to keep something private reaches a peak when a child enters puberty. At this point an adolescent tries to assert their independence by having private hiding places, a journal, or private crushes on rock stars, or someone at school. If a parent is overly intrusive into a child's privacy, when the adolescent needs to test the water's of independence, they will learn they have no right to privacy.

For example, if a parent is constantly looking through their child's drawers, or reading their journals, listening in on phone conversations, or quizzing them when they come home from a date, the child/adolescent will learn their privacy is not valued. Intrusion into someone's privacy can backfire, for they may become resentful and rebel even further by keeping more and more secrets – i.e. by acting out sexually, or using drugs. Once again, there is a fine line between a child's right to privacy and when something is held as a secret from the parents because the child knows they are doing something wrong.

I recently heard an interesting discussion on ABC T.V. concerning the controversy over the legal rights of college kids to maintain privacy about their grades and conduct, despite the fact that the parents are paying for their education. This is a huge issue, because these young adults have a right to develop his or her independence and prepare for adulthood. Yet, parents also have a valid point. They are footing the bill and thus feel they have a right to know what they are paying for. This is where good communication and trust become very important in a family.

If our privacy is held sacred as we grow up, we will continue to value it when we become adults. Let's look at the situation I described at the beginning, about Carl and Sandra. Carl has a right to his privacy, about who he dated, and how many sexual encounters he had. What occurred in his past relationships is a matter of privacy, as it does not affect Sandra. However (and here is where the line blurs) the exceptions would be if he has a sexually transmitted disease from these encounters, or if his sexual encounters formed a pattern of secrets from his previous wife, then these would need to be revealed, for the tendency to have affairs could affect his current relationship. At this point though, the secret is not about his history of relationships, but that there is something physically or emotionally dysfunctional which could affect a new intimacy.

We have a right to keep private our thoughts, dreams, wishes, feelings, opinions, and yes even sexual fantasies. We have a right to maintain our privacy about our religious, political, and moral points of view. We have a right to keep our history private. We also have a right to keep our inner processing private. What is private can then be shared at the discretion of the individual. When we share something private, it is a gift of trust and one that feeds connection and closeness. Sometimes we just want to share

something because it makes us feel closer to our loved one. What a joyous experience that is.

One caution is important here. If we share too many private things too quickly, it could be a matter of co-dependence, or an issue of testing. Karen was very fond of a man she had been dating a man for months. Unfortunately, she spent a lot of their time together telling stories about her dysfunctional history, her addictions and her traumas. Of course her boyfriend became scared and fled. Upon reflection she realized that she was testing him to see if he would accept her as she was. She needed to share slowly and with discretion as the relationship developed. She also needed to balance her sharing with giving her boyfriend time to share. She could first share something personal and then wait until he did the same thing in return.

When you wish to share *difficult* private issues, do so slowly, allowing the person to get to know the best parts of you. Then gradually, one by one, let them in on anything you choose to share, mixing negative issues with the positive. Andy Rooney is quoted by Simpson's Contemporary Quotations as saying, "The closing of a door can bring blessed privacy and comfort—the opening, terror. Conversely, the closing of a door can be a sad and final thing—the opening a wonderfully joyous moment."

* * *

What are the clues that someone is holding a secret? Obviously we never really know if a secret is being held, but we can use our observations and our intuition. Clearly if our spouse/partner is acting strangely, or doing things that are out of the ordinary, then we have the right to question. For example our partner may suddenly become more withdrawn, more critical, or suddenly change their work hours or style of dress. On the surface these may mean nothing, but we have a right to check it out. It is important in an intimacy to not make assumptions, but to check out our reality. When we do, we can only trust that our partner will be honest.

Hopefully our partner will divulge a secret before they are questioned. The timing and circumstances in which to share a secret are critical. It should not be during the heat of an argument or it will not be received well, and could further damage the relationship. My mother shared with me that on a couple of occasions when she and my father had some rough conflicts, they wrote each other letters, until the issue was resolved. This may be a

great way to begin a discussion in a less threatening way. If the issue is very serious, i.e. one person is having an affair; it may be that a compassionate, impartial third party needs to be present.

When sharing a secret, it will hopefully be for the purpose of healing the wound created by the secret. In this case it is important to use “I-statements”, and not blame the other person for their own behavior. For example, someone who spent too much family money when they had committed to maintaining a budget must own their issue and not blame the other. Using “you-statements”, such as “I bought what I wanted to because your controlling behavior made me angry” will never work. The person holding the secret must take responsibility for their behavior. On the other hand, people will be more likely to share a secret if they do not feel criticized or intimidated their spouse. However, not sharing a secret out of fear of being criticized could also be the person’s excuse to cover their own fear of creating a conflict.

I cannot stress enough what a relief it is to finally reveal a secret and then to have it dealt with. No matter how difficult the outcome, or if the end result is not what we hoped for, it lifts a huge burden by taking the emotional weight off our shoulders. It also builds our sense of Self, for we will have spoken our truth – even if in revealing our truth we are vulnerable by admitting a mistake or wrong-doing.

Issues of privacy and secrecy can make or break a relationship. They can be used to build trust, which is the foundation of a relationship, or they can destroy it. Dr. Edwin Friedman said in his article “Secrets and Systems”, “When secrets are revealed it is almost as though relationships deeply locked into one another in one particular way suddenly uncouple, and are given an opportunity to recouple in different ways.”

I believe there is nothing more powerful and spiritual than a committed, honest, and loving relationship. When there are no secrets and trust grows stronger and stronger, the intimate partners are able to support each other in their emotional and spiritual growth process. A relationship with no secrets provides a secure foundation for both partners to face new challenges and grow together in a mutually enhancing way.

Carol Kurtz Walsh LCSW-C is a psychotherapist in private practice in Bethesda. For information about her services, including psychotherapy and “Create-a-Vision” coaching, look for her half-page ad in this issue of "Pathways" or consult her website, www.ckwalsh.com, or call (301) 656-6420.