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JUNE 2001

Confessions of a Recycled Secret Keeper

By John Howard Prin

From ages 11 to 51 I lived two parallel existences. Based solely on outward appearances, I looked normal, made a good impression, and was a high-functioning person. The volcanic drama of my hidden addictive life, however, and the ways it gained control over me, made me a Secret Keeper. It also made me ill.

In time I learned the simple truth: *We are as sick as our secrets.*

My double life flourished long before I took my first mood-altering drug and it persisted well after I'd established a life of recovery based on abstinence. My experience in the sordid, ugly, slippery domain of double-mindedness was a detour, but I've discovered I was hardly alone. Indeed, I was among the 24 million Americans who are secretly addicted and still function in their jobs, in their homes, and with their families.

Appearing normal

At the root of double-mindedness—the constant shifting back and forth between two opposing mindsets, “normal-on-the-outside” and “abnormal-on-the-inside”—is addiction. For me, daily life became a burdensome struggle that led to a breakdown, to bottoming out. For 40 years I lived in two worlds, ricocheting between public respectability and private delinquency. They were years I would never choose to repeat, although they taught me invaluable lessons that eventually led me to the joys of whole-mindedness.

Today, as an addictions counselor, I often sit in my office or

in group sessions and hear stories from clients who tell of *their* double lives. Unlike those who practice their addictions openly—such as heroin or crack addicts on the streets—the clients I counsel are sabotaged by their hidden double lives. They have ended up hating their split reality and doing harm to themselves or others.

Consider the hard-working mother with three kids who hides bottles of vodka in the laundry room, then binges when the kids are at school. Or the successful defense attorney who litigates high-profile cases in court by day but devours pornography alone at night to settle his nerves. Occasionally these sufferers show up at a counselor's office, deep into medicating the agony of splintered lives and highly opposing realities within their torn bodies, minds, and souls.

Secrets lead to destructive, violent living

Keeping secrets can make us neurotic. Secrets can be so toxic that a person is driven to self-destructive and insane acts. Then come the addictions, the violence, the lying and alibis...even suicide.

Everyone keeps secrets to one degree or another, often starting with fairly innocuous ones. A young student sneaks a peek at her classmate's test answers and gets a better grade—but tells nobody. An underage driver takes his dad's car out for a joyride and returns it home safely—but never tells anybody.



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Only the Secret Keeper knows what happened. Nobody's harmed. Not really. But keeping secrets creates a guilt pocket, a place where dark knowings accumulate.

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Secrets are harmful when they blur our judgment to the point where we start living a double life. Over time, a double life severs us from those we love. It splits us into two personalities: a public, acceptable person and a private, unworthy one. Ultimately, it isolates “me” from “myself.” It commonly means acting one way (smiling or cooperating) while feeling another (angry or frustrated). An entrenched double life, resulting from a pattern of secret choices an individual makes for long periods of time, inevitably makes even the best person sick. Numerous normal-appearing people are card-carrying Secret Keepers.

A mother to hate and to hide from

One of these was my normal-appearing mother. An attractive and ambitious lady, Ellen Prin made sure her social graces radiated in public. Anyone meeting her could never have guessed she would be anything but charming. In private, though, she was hyper and anxious. Over the years, she went crazy from taking too many prescription drugs. Because my dad was a popular entertainer, it meant he was away from home day and night, six days a week, 50 weeks a year. Dad’s absences wore her down. The lonelier she became, the more her pill bottles filled up the medicine cabinet.

When I was 11, she made an announcement that changed my life. My twin brother, Dave, and I had just crawled under the covers and turned out the lights. Mom came into our bedroom and sat quietly on the edge of our bed. “Boys, I have exciting news. We’re moving to a big, new house!” She told us how her dream house would be nestled on the shore of beautiful lakeshore property for all the world to see. Both Dave and I pleaded to stay where we belonged, not go to some unfamiliar suburb, but it became obvious that we were helpless to prevent an already adult-made decision.

From that day on my double-mindedness became a pattern—outwardly I showed respect for Mom; inwardly I seethed with smoldering anger toward her. I held this secret inside me and began doing what came to be a habit, acting

one way while feeling another. My insides slowly stopped matching my outsides.

Over time Mom’s projects for us boys multiplied, accompanied by her increasingly bossy orders, and we realized to our chagrin that the house came before anything. Our free time for homework from school classes took a back seat to working for her: tiling floors, painting bedrooms, building shelves, planting flowerbeds. After school. Weekends. Holidays. Even meals hardly

Secret-keeping depends on acting one way while feeling another.

mattered; we boys fixed our own while she often pouted.

Her obsessions kindled hatred in me, deep hatred. Life became warped, upside-down. Our needs as children were neglected and subordinated to meet hers. School became a refuge, a safe place where the bells announced a sane, predictable world. Tommy, Dave, and I kept the secrets of our home life to ourselves.

Those years of upside-down priorities overwhelmed my ability to cope and led to escapist—secret-keeping—behaviors. Dave and I eventually tired of complaining to one another and started playing a new game called “Getting Lost.” Evading Mom before she could trap us after school, we ran from the house and stayed out for hours, sometimes until dark. We knew we’d face her wrath when we got home, but soon we became numb to her shrill scoldings.

I struggled to reconcile my love for her with the intense, clashing tensions I harbored toward her in my private world. By my sophomore year in high school, I had to keep buried the biggest secret of all: my thoughts of killing Mom.

For the next several years, I operated at an even deeper level of duality that took great amounts of energy and led eventually to a stomach ulcer, nail-biting, high blood pressure, paralyzing headaches, and alcohol/drug abuse.

Signs of secret-keeping

Perhaps my story strikes a familiar chord with you. Maybe you had similar experiences when you were growing up. As I learned, a secret life can start long before addiction to mood-altering chemicals or activities.

If you take a moment to revisit your childhood, you may find evidence of secret-keeping. Look for signs such as these in your life, then and now:

- Secret-keeping depends on acting one way while feeling another—your insides gradually no longer match your outsides.
- Skewed priorities imposed on children

set up the conditions for secret lives to fester and grow, at times leading to grossly distorted emotions like hatred or homicidal urges.

- A secret life demands high levels of calculation and hair-splitting between two worlds, especially escaping from the source of pain.

• Secret lives are learned and may take the form of stealing hours away from “reality” by isolating oneself geographically or psychologically from persons we are meant to connect with.

Are you one of these people, too? Perhaps everyone battles the compulsion of double-mindedness to some degree in their lives. There are ways to unlearn secret-keeping habits, and to free oneself of the resulting dysfunctions. A great way to start is by attending a good 12 Step group and meeting folks like yourself. You may also wish to seek professional help.

The simple truth? *We are as sick as our secrets...but there’s hope.*

John Prin works as a licensed alcohol and drug counselor at a treatment center in the Twin Cities. You are invited to send your comments, questions, or insights to him at Secretfolks@aol.com or to call him at 952-941-1870. (If you use your real name, your confidentiality will be protected). He is currently writing and researching a non-fiction book, Secret Keepers Living Secret Lives. Its broad theme will show the kind of tightrope between two worlds millions walk every day—and the many kinds of hope that are available.