

Are Secrets Good or Bad?

By John Howard Prin

The simple answer is both. As voters casting our ballots, we rely on secrecy to protect our vote from the knowledge of others. As planners of a surprise birthday party, we create a benign conspiracy that conceals our plans from the person being honored. As scientists, we study the secrets of nature to learn more about ourselves and our world. As lovers in private, we protect our privacy by closing the curtains, shutting the bedroom door, or taking a vacation to a secluded setting.

All of these qualify as harmless secrets, secrets that aren't "bad," shameful, or morally foul. We often engage in keeping such secrets—intentionally hiding or concealing information from others to protect what is vulnerable—without giving it a second thought.

But negative views of secrecy are common. "The link between secrecy and deceit is so strong in the minds of some that they mistakenly take all secrecy to be deceptive," writes Sissela Bok in her definitive book, *Secrets* (Vintage, 1989). "To confuse secrecy and deception is easy, since all deception does involve keeping something secret."

And it is the deceptive nature of keeping secrets that concerns us. For anyone striving to move from addiction to recovery, the essential question is this:

Do secrets play a role in my behavior?

If the answer comes back "often" more than "hardly ever," then for individuals aiming to enhance personal growth or wishing to make vital changes in their lives, the next question becomes:

Can I move from living a secretive, closed, deceptive life to living an open, transparent, honest one?

"Yes" is the answer, given a determined effort at truth-seeking.

The above examples—voters, surprise birthday planners, scientists,

and lovers—are all acting without guile. All depend on the protective aspect of secrecy: protection of a democratic right, of a surprise party,

a file of taxes private, or underwear in a drawer or prescriptions in a medicine cabinet. We take for granted the legitimacy of hiding silver from bur-

"We call him a good man who reveals himself to others."

—Meister Johann Eckhart, 13th Century
German Theologian

of intellectual curiosity, of intimate acts. That's the good news about secrets.

A look at Bok's statement above hints at the bad news: "all deception does involve keeping something secret." To discern the destructive power of secrecy, it helps to distinguish between *secrecy* and *privacy*. Both are closely linked. Often they overlap, so let's carefully separate them and see how they differ.

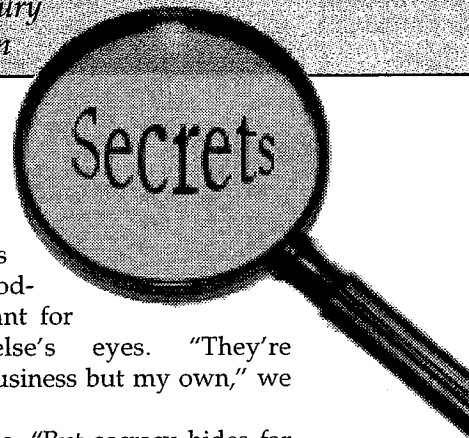
Secrecy vs. Privacy

Privacy can be defined as *limiting unwanted access by others*. Privacy means, something kept from the view of strangers. People rightly seek protection for the innocent, harmless, legitimate activities of life. One keeps

glars and personal documents from snoopers and busybodies, all meant for nobody else's eyes. "They're nobody's business but my own," we might say.

Bok adds, "But secrecy hides far more than what is private. A private garden may not be a secret garden; a private life is rarely a secret life. Conversely, secret diplomacy rarely concerns what is private, any more than do arrangements for a surprise party or for choosing prize winners. In each case, one's purpose is to become less vulnerable, more in control."

"Secrecy (helps) guard against



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unwanted access by others—against their coming too near, learning too much, observing too closely,” notes Bok. “Thus you may assume that no one will read your diary; but you can also hide it, or write it in code, or lock it up.”

An extreme example of private identity guarded by secrecy is that of the fictional main character Winston Smith in George Orwell’s novel, *1984*. Orwell portrays a ghastly view of the future—where Big Brother watches every citizen every minute of every day. We see an ordinary man with ordinary thoughts take extraordinary measures to think for himself. Alone in the evenings in his miserable flat, Smith sits in a nook writing in his diary attempting to evade the Thought-police—at the risk of death. To even keep a diary means capital punishment, let alone to write private thoughts in it. Smith, an anonymous clerk in a government bureaucracy, even risks death rather than forego the chance to set down his private thoughts in secret.

“To be able to hold back some information about oneself or to channel it and thus influence how one is seen by others gives power,” states Bok.

So, it stands to reason that privacy can be healthy and beneficial. To have and maintain control over how we direct the flow of information to others increases our personal power. Keeping a secret, therefore, is not automatically unhealthy or damag-

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ing or “bad”—depending, critically, on the nature of what is being kept secret. If it is something shameless, not shameful or nasty, then secrets aren’t “bad.”

Secret Keepers

The opposite is also true, however. Some people’s secrets have power over them and can motivate them to misbehave, become sick, or violate others. Burdened by

openly and deceive. Whether they are your next-door neighbor, the person ahead of you in the supermarket line, the driver beside you on the freeway, or maybe even *you*, they are human beings with two opposing selves existing in one body.

Projecting a wholesome self for all to see and approve of, Secret Keepers carefully hide their secret selves so no one can discover and denounce them. Meanwhile, the competing selves within them wage war and, over time, wear down the person until a crisis (still another secret unknown to everybody) threatens their sanity. Unavoidably, their inner warfare then leads to a

buildup of pressure to disclose intimate knowledge to somebody, wreaking daily suffering until they surrender or “do something.”

If these traits describe you or someone you love, there is help available.

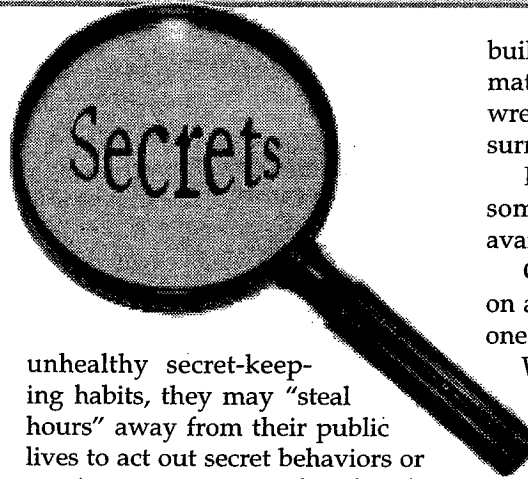
Consider that we live and breathe on a continuum where *openness* is at one end and *secrecy* is at the other.

What determines how open or secretive we act and behave?

In the case of privacy, we guard the intimacy of personal information we believe is ours, as well as our need to control the flow of this information. In the case of secret-keeping, the stakes are much higher. Because of the shame and guilt attached to the information we are trying to hide or cover up, we *block* the flow of information and *shut down* avenues of communication or discovery as a way to protect our vulnerability. Secrecy allows people to maintain facades that conceal. It shuts off the safety valve between the inner and the shared worlds.”

Ultimately, truth-seeking is required, because shameful and discreditable information that remains hidden by deceptive secrecy will hurt the Secret Keepers and those who care about them until it becomes known, acknowledged, treated, and healed.

“Secrecy serves as a shield should the boundaries of privacy fail.” —BOK



unhealthy secret-keeping habits, they may “steal hours” away from their public lives to act out secret behaviors or passions—sometimes for decades. These people are plagued by self-defeating behaviors such as alcohol/drug abuse, compulsive gambling, sexual addictions, habitual Internet use, and eating disorders.

These Secret Keepers, live in a parallel universe based on the intentional concealment of what is shameful or discreditable beyond the limits of privacy. By their very cleverness, Secret Keepers elude getting caught.

And so they live a double life continuously, whether stealing hours to act out or not. Secret Keepers may be too smart and too clever to overstep legal boundaries. They may skirt the law, but hardly ever get arrested or labeled as criminals. They may be alcoholics or drug addicts, but not the obvious ones who abuse