

It's one of the most popular things on the internet, and chances are, most of us haven't heard of it. That would make sense though, because it kind of gets its fame from dealing with things no one else knows. Every month, over three million people visit the website, postsecret.com, to view what complete strangers find too intimate to share with anyone else in their life. This site, which has been voted Best Blog of 2007, and regularly appears as one of the most popular websites in the country, began in 2003, when its founder, Frank Warren, literally had a dream about postcards. A year later, Warren began an art installation, in which he invited thousands of people in Washington D.C. to send him the hidden facts of their lives. He passed out cards with the rules for submissions, the same rules that apply to his popular website today:¹

“You are invited to anonymously contribute a secret to a group art project. Your secret can be a regret, fear, betrayal, desire, confession or childhood humiliation. Reveal *anything* as long as it is true and you have never shared it with anyone before.”²

Every week, Warren receives over 1000 postcards sent to his house revealing the most intimate inner lives of complete strangers. When I started looking at the submissions myself, I was surprised at the variety of experiences people shared. The secrets that he collects and publishes range from humorous memories to deep traumas and even criminal activity. I have brought just a few of these examples with me today to share. One individual posted this secret, which I'm sure no one in this room can identify with: “When others pray at church, I bow my head and think about the TV programs I plan on watching.” Another submission reads, “I pretend to know French, because I'm in love with a girl who does.” Many of the cards sent to the website, reveal the struggle of presenting a false self to the world. One person writes, “Sometimes I romanticize my roots (more “ethnic,” more blue collar...) to be more interesting at chic cocktail parties...I'm a good liar.” Some are more shocking: “Everyone who knew me before 9-11 believes I am dead.”

Still, many others give voice to the complex emotions many have hidden for decades. One very recent posting was sent on a picture of an infant in an incubator and reads, “After my son was born, I secretly wished he would die, so I could have my life back. Now, I would give my life so he could live. I never knew I could love someone so much.” It is difficult to read many of the postcards Warren places on his website. Many of the secrets people publish express shame, regret, and deep sadness. Some are vague, reading simple, “I'm sorry” or “I forgive you.” Others are surprisingly direct. On a picture of soldiers storming a building, one person writes, “I will never in my life be as good at anything else as I am at killing people.” One of the things that shocked me most about

¹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PostSecret>

² <http://www.postsecretcommunity.com/news-faq/postsecret-story>

reading these cards, though, is how often people's joys and their greatest dreams, are also their biggest secrets. On of my favorite cards reads, "Sometimes, secretly, I actually enjoy life." Another hopeful one: "I believe I will accomplish something truly great in this lifetime. I am going to be 53 tomorrow."

So what am I doing talking about these people's secrets in a sermon? It seems to me that one of the biggest secrets I sometimes fail to acknowledge is that there is so much going on under the service of life. As Unitarian Universalists, we have inherited a tradition that challenges us to affirm the notion that "revelation is not sealed." We don't know everything. In the matter of our religious lives, we often assert that there is always more truth to be found, that easy answers are not the solution, and that things are not always as they seem. These are convictions to which I try and hold strong in my life. However, I have found that it is often easier for me to apply these notions to the larger theological questions of life than it is for me to think this way about my daily interactions with people. I am sometimes quicker to assume that there is more truth to be found regarding the question of god than I would be in talking to a friend. Anyone else?

Reading the secrets of people's lives splashed on a screen reminds me that everyone's life is complex; there is much going on, much we never see, in the life of each human person. Warren put it this way, "I have been astonished by the frailty and heroism I see in the secrets of ordinary people like you and me, living our everyday lives."³ I don't think that I am the only one here who is sometimes quick to make assumptions about the actions of others. I can draw conclusions based on just what I see before me. It doesn't always seem profound: getting cut off on the highway, less than ideal interactions with someone in a store – maybe that friend who hasn't called in a long time. It sounds so simple, and even a little cliché, but when I imagine the complexity of the lives of those around me - the combinations of frustration, fear, joy, exhilaration, anguish, disappointment – that make up the existence of human beings, I am called to radically reevaluate how I interact with them. When we know that we've all got secrets, it changes things.

In his essay, *Experience*, Ralph Waldo Emerson once expressed a similar sentiment like this, "Let us treat...men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are."⁴ It is an easy exercise to spout off the principles of Unitarian Universalism without thinking of their daily implications. But, when I slow down and read our first principle, it becomes one of the most challenging things I could try and live out in my daily life. Our first principle states that we affirm the "worth and dignity of every person." It would be simple if this meant abstract people, but it does not. It means the inherent worth and dignity of real people, just as they are, just as we are – joyful, tired, scared, lonely, inspired, and sometimes all of the above.

³ Frank Warren, Post Secret, video available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6rTkp1dek4>

⁴ http://www.rwe.org/works/Essays-2nd_Series_2_Experience.htm

It is too tempting to judge my interaction with someone by what I see in front of me. Life is quick - 30 seconds with a cashier, a few moments in line with a stranger or our bank teller. It seems even easier to make assumptions about those with whom I think I disagree. As Unitarian Universalists, I think it is safe to say that we've not been immune from the polarization that has infected our country as of late. I am regularly guilty of thinking that I know all I need to know about a person by how they voted in a given election or the bumper sticker on their car. This is something I'm not supposed to do - I'm a member of an open-minded, thinking community, right? But I fall into the trap all the time. What would it look like to imagine that the people around me are the same people who are sending in those post cards? - to approach the people we meet in a restaurant or the movies and first think to ourselves, "I wonder what secrets you have - what sadness, or inspiration, what embarrassment or great love has changed your life." What if we tried to treat people as if they were real?

It is a big enough challenge to try and approach other people in this way. But I have to be honest with you in saying that most of the time, I find it just as difficult to treat myself like I'm real, too. I wonder if anyone else here finds that it's really easy to define themselves in ways that are too simple and nowhere close to accurate. It is deceptively tempting to think that I am my resume. I often stop and catch myself constructing a vision of who I am based on what I didn't cross off my to-do list for the day, or remember that one mistake, that one criticism more than the number of things that went right.

There is plenty in our society that survives off of telling you that you are not yet good enough. I am proud that we are part of a religious tradition that affirms without question that you are good enough. We have a long history in this religious movement proclaiming that you do not need something outside of yourself, outside of this world, to tell you that you have value. Our connection to meaning, to what is sacred, to what gives life here and now will never leave us because of where we were born, who we love, what mistakes we have made. There is more to who we are - so much more. Each one of us lives a full, complex life. And it is not always easy. Unitarian Universalism's message of radical acceptance, of making justice in this world - not somewhere else, of the transformative power of each individual - this is not just meant for some nice abstract platitudes. It is meant to be experienced in the lives of real human beings. Some of the best advice I ever got in seminary was to write each sermon imagining that the character Job from the Hebrew Scriptures would be in the congregation listening. It has not taken me long in training for the ministry to realize that he is, she is, we are.

We have value in this world and in our community, not in spite of our frailties, our imperfections, and our complexities, but because of them, and what we have to offer one another. Like in the cards I read, I am astounded that what is great within us is sometimes kept a secret, even from ourselves. We often forget just how strong we really are, how compelling each of our stories is. What you have to offer in being present here, just as you are, can and will change the lives of other people. Take yourself seriously, you deserve it.

A religion that will not settle for easy answers challenges us to encounter a fuller version of the world and ourselves, and I think we have that in Unitarian Universalism. There is power in coming together in this community. Just as there is more going on in the lives of individuals than we know, there is more happening in our community, too. We have a right to take this church seriously also. We don't just offer the sacrament of coffee after the service. I have to admit that it is scary to imagine that what we do in this religious community really matters, because it endows us with a great responsibility. This movement, made up of imperfect people, full of life's secrets, has the power to do great things. The vision of a truly welcoming spiritual community devoted to building justice – there's no reason that should be hidden from the world.

It might sound strange, but in some cases, Unitarian Universalism saves lives. The UU minister Rev. Stephan Jonasson tells the story of receiving a letter years ago from a high school senior living in a rural town in Georgia. Her convictions did not match what she experienced in her religious communities there. She thought something was wrong with her, that she was alone, and she had even considered suicide. While working on a project for school, she had stumbled across the entry for Unitarian Universalism in the encyclopedia. Wanting to know more about our liberal faith, but worried about her community's response, she asked the minister to "Please send the pamphlets in a plain, unmarked envelope."⁵ She had found her religious home. This woman soon became a Unitarian Universalist. After years of correspondence, she eventually admitted to Rev. Jonasson that "Unitarian Universalism had saved her life, both figuratively and literally."⁶

The stories of this community in people's lives are not always this explicit, but they are out there. My own life sorry was changed radically by one person inviting me to a Unitarian Universalist church. I was shocked and so grateful to find that I could join in a community of people looking for meaning who actually asked me to question what I heard in church, to bring my doubts as part of who I am. I had never been to a place so committed to the notion that everyone, no matter your gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, etc was welcome in community. But until I went into college, I had never even heard of UUism, and I was a religion major. It was a secret. This place and its work are real. People who are searching for community, people who are full of hopes, dreams, regrets, sadness, and insecurity, will find that Unitarian Universalist churches are filled with people just like them, and yet each person's story is unique. We do not have easy answers. There is more truth to be found. But we can live lives of compassion and justice with one other, not inhibited by the things we carry with us constantly, but encouraged in knowing that we are not alone.

My friends, this faith challenges us to continually reject the easy answer, the simple view of life, others, and ourselves. This is not a rose-colored glasses view of the world that

⁵ <http://clf.uua.org/gatherings/ga04/sermon.html>

⁶ <http://clf.uua.org/gatherings/ga04/sermon.html>

says be nice to everybody. This is a view of the world which says everything in creation and everyone we encounter is filled with all the varieties this life has to offer, including ourselves. There is more happening inside others than we will ever know, and there is more potential for greatness, more value in each and every one of us than we have let ourselves admit. A religion that has something to offer to offer this world will meet people just where they are. Let us find compassion in remembering the secrets of others, inspiration and strength in accepting ourselves as full human beings, and a calling in our shared life together as a community that welcomes all within its walls. Let us treat others, ourselves, and our community as if they were real: perhaps they are. If I may borrow from what was said on one card I mentioned earlier, I believe [we] will accomplish something truly great in this lifetime. What better time than now?

Amen.