

PostSecret: Frank Warren's community art project **A review**

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According to Wikipedia, PostSecret is an ongoing community mail art project, created by Frank Warren, in which people mail their secrets anonymously on one side of a homemade postcard. Select secrets are then posted on the PostSecret website, or used for PostSecret's books or museum exhibits.

The origin of PostSecret

PostSecret started in the autumn of 2004, when Warren decided to participate in a community art exhibition. He printed 3000 blank postcards, put his own home address on them, and an invitation to anonymously send him a secret: something that people had never told anyone before. He left these postcards on benches in the parks, between the pages of books in libraries and bookstores.

Warren received back about 100 postcards out of 3000, with pictures, artwork – and secrets. Frank displayed them at the exhibition, and he was amazed at the interest people showed in the secrets of others. He felt that something important was happening: people get a peep into the lives of others, and something resonates with them and, as a result, they

understand themselves better. He had a firsthand experience of this happening: about three weeks into the project he received a postcard where a man told about a humiliation he experienced in primary school. Frank remembered that he himself experienced a very similar thing and never told anyone about it. So he told his wife and daughter, and then made a postcard and mailed it to himself. This ritual had a healing effect for him.

Warren had thought that the project would be over after the exhibition, but he found out that the exhibition really was just the beginning. Those who attended the exhibition told their friends and acquaintances, and the idea spread virally, and people started making postcards themselves, writing their secrets on them and mailing them to Frank. He has by now received about 200,000 postcards, and their stream does not dwindle, he receives up to 200 postcards every day. The postcards come from all over the world, and some of them are not even in English.

Frank understood that this project filled in some special niche in the society's life, people seem to need it, so he created a blog in the Internet, which can be found now at <http://www.postsecret.com>. There are links to published books, to the schedule of Frank's presentation, to the virtual community <http://www.postsecretcommunity.com> and to the Hopeline suicide prevention hotline.

Nowadays there are several branch-offs from this projects – the rss-feed <http://syndicated.livejournal.com/postsecret/> and the community <http://community.livejournal.com/ljsecret/> at the LiveJournal platform, and also analogues of PostSecret in other languages. It is possible to argue that Frank Warren created a particular cultural phenomenon.

The mission of the project

When Frank is asked what is the mission of PostSecret, what can PostSecret teach people, he usually answers that every person has a secret that could break our hearts if we knew it. And, if we remember about it, there would be more compassion and peace in the world. When people share their secrets, they not only come in touch with their own humanity, they also come in touch with other people in a very meaningful and important way. Each of us carries their own burden and feels their uniqueness in it. But when we know that there is another person carrying the same burden – it becomes a shared burden. It does not disappear altogether, but it becomes a little lighter. PostSecret offers anonymity: if you share your secret there, this will not influence the way your family, friends and acquaintances treat you.

Warren believes that new technologies open new opportunities for communication. Yes, people now spend less time communicating in person. Yes, there are more 'weak' connections (vs. 'strong' connections with few people). However, if one finds the correct form of interaction, loneliness and anomie can be brought to their logical limits, transcended and transformed into their opposite – which we can see at <http://www.postsecretcommunity.com> where many people find acceptance, belonging, opportunity to be themselves, and to be heard and acknowledged.

Frank does not think that PostSecret is a fruit and a reflection of a 'diseased society'. People have reasons to keep certain things secret. However, Frank believes that the very feelings, fears, desires and dreams that we hide are in reality the things that bring us together – our shared humanity.

More postcards come from women than from men; teenagers and youth send in their secrets more frequently than adults. Many postcards come from gay, lesbian, transgendered people, from representatives of ethnic minorities. In other words, it is marginalised groups who make the most use of PostSecret. The members of dominant social groups rarely encounter sanctions for being who they are. Because of that, Warren perceives PostSecret not only as a community art project, but as a form of outreach social work. It is very important for him to create a space where the voices that are seldom heard, would be heard. PostSecret does not represent any particular religious or political beliefs or practices, although of course there are secrets that have to do with politics or religion. In general, Frank agrees with those who think that PostSecret can become a social movement.

The secrets and their themes

Many secrets are very sad: they tell about loneliness, longing, depression, regret, fears, self-hate, etc. And this is probably not surprising. It is easier to share good news. People often are frightened by the idea that someone might know 'the whole truth' about them. But the paradox consists in the fact that, when you know you are not alone with such worries and problems, when you know that other people somehow manage to survive, to overcome this and find happiness, this brings hope and a sense of relief. It is always easier to live when you don't feel that you are 'the only one as wrong, abnormal and ugly'.

The most frequent word to be encountered in the secrets is 'sometimes'. As if the person did not fully accept this aspect of his/her life. 'Usually I am not like that, but sometimes ...'

Each week the collection of postcards on the website is dedicated to a certain theme. Of course, Frank does not choose the postcards to display at random, but the theme appears 'subconsciously'. The themes of the secrets are the same that are represented in more traditional forms of art, literature, cinema: intimacy, trust, meaning, humour and desire. But the most common secret, according to Frank, is not as lofty: 'I pee in the shower'. One can see such a secret and think that this is silly, but then comes the realisation that some of our own secrets are of similar form, shape and nature.

Warren says that he tries to choose and arrange the postcards in such a way that there could be a sort of dialogue between various postcards, so it would be more than a sum of individual voices. In some way he acts like an editor of a book of stories.

The same attitude is maintained when Warren chooses postcards to be included in the books. He takes these snapshots of human life and tries to arrange them in a way that they become a coherent narrative, in which there is place for yearning, humour, and always hope. The book 'A Lifetime of Secrets' contains secrets of people aged from eight to eighty. In each of the books compiled by Frank, there is one secret that is his own. Frank says that the most moving secrets for him are the secrets of elderly people – something that they have borne for decades, perhaps – and the secrets of children.

The major part of the profits from PostSecret project (that is, from selling books – more than a million sold by now – and from presentations), and also prize money (PostSecret often wins in different contests of Internet-projects) Frank transfers to the account of the National crisis hotline organisation 'Hopeline' (8-800-SUICIDE). Frank lost a family member and a friend to suicide, and struggled through some difficult times himself. He is a believer in the helpfulness of the services that give people in despair the opportunity to talk about their plight, to be heard and to regain foothold.

Spreading out and going on

All the time Frank receives emails from people whose life is transformed after they saw some postcard with a secret. He tells that he is honoured to be a witness to some special and important moments in people's lives, to the courage it takes to share one's secret. Although sometimes knowing so many secrets does feel like a burden. The postcards come without return address, and sometimes Frank wants to reach out and help, but has no way to do so directly. So he channels all this energy through Hopeline. He enjoys making presentations at campuses, because most college students are at the age when they are most vulnerable to normalising judgement and loneliness. Frank relishes the atmosphere of *communitas*, communion, trust, acknowledgement and acceptance that is created during these presentations, when he finishes speaking and people come up to the stage to share their own stories.

Frank's insatiable curiosity drives him forward, and semi-jokingly he says that he is searching for 'the perfect secret'. He enjoys the fact that this community art project broadens the range of what could be possibly understood as art. He likes that in this project the old medium (postcard) is united with one of the newest (blog) to create new possibilities. Some people imbue their postcards with so much personal meaning that the postcard turns into an offering. Sometimes speaking about expression of secrets, Frank uses the metaphor of exorcism. The postcard allows the secret to get embodied and obtain presence outside the person. Letting go of the secret physically can become an important event in the new storyline of the person's life.

Frank never worries about the 'trueness' or 'falsehood' of the secret. When the postcards are perceived as works of art, he can be aware that works of fiction can transform lives in a very real fashion. Even if the secret was not true for the sender, it definitely would resonate with at least someone from the audience. Many secrets are like lines from a middle of a story, of which we cannot know the beginning or the end. This is wonderful, because it makes people reflect upon what they read into this story: What was the first thing that came into my mind? Why? What does it tell me about myself? The secrets somehow allow Warren to look into the future of the society: what was a secret yesterday, today comes into the open, and the secrets of today can predict the directions of awareness development of the society at large.

Frank tells that he is always happy when someone takes his idea and creatively modifies it, adapting it to their own life circumstances.

One possible understanding of PostSecret from the point of view of narrative practice

A secret is something that we are not able to 'just forget and let go', but at the same time we don't want this fact of our biography (or a dream, or a feeling, or a belief, etc.) to become known to a wider audience. Thus, on one hand, a secret is something very important, something that shapes our identity, something that could explain a lot with regard to why our lives unfold in one particular manner. On the other hand, it may be something unacceptable, indecent or plain wrong in relation to dominant cultural discourses- something that does not fit the norm. We do not tell our secrets because we are afraid – afraid of rejection, persecution, mockery, of being considered stupid, dirty or unworthy. Sometimes we don't share our secrets because we are afraid that letting our wishes into the open will hurt our loved ones. So, a secret brings into focus both the preferred story, what a person holds precious in life, and the limitations imposed by cultural discourse. (In some cases, the whole life of a person becomes a struggle, a protest, a defiant march against these culturally-imposed limitations.)

Another important aspect of secrets is that they can give us an opportunity to experience directly the multi-storied nature of our lives. Let's assume that we have chosen a particular story as our preferred story and we are living it out. We like the life we lead, but at the same time we want something opposite, something that does not fit in the range of actions possible for us within the chosen story. Sometimes we still commit the actions that do not fit into our preferred story, and in some ways, if these actions were known, they would undermine our perceived commitment to the preferred story, and thus harm our credibility. So we act, but tell nobody about it. We cannot let go of the desire, because it is really important to us, and at the same time we cannot acknowledge this desire: telling about it could qualify as ambiguity at best, and as betrayal at worst. A secret usually captures a contradiction in life.

Sometimes contradictions are considered a driving force of development. This is true when it is possible to overcome/remove the contradiction by moving to a higher level of awareness. But not everybody is able to do this. A secret can be a heavy burden, and the tension inherent in the contradiction can be too high. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) wrote about three responses to self-presentation. When a person states in some form or another, 'This is who I am', as a response to this s/he can get confirmation ('Yes, this is who you are'), or negation ('No, this is not who you are'), or ignoring ('You don't exist altogether'). Both negation and confirmation are different forms of acknowledgement. Watzlawick et al. suggest that acknowledgement leads to mental health and development, and ignoring leads to mental illness.

So let us imagine a situation in which the crucial thing in a person's possible self-presentation is something s/he cannot mention. *De facto*, the world does not acknowledge this person in something that is most important for him. The person presents himself to the world as something like, 'Actually, this is not quite me'. If this person receives any confirmation or negation, it will be confirmation or negation of something that the person cannot fully identify with. And what is 'really me' gets ignored by the world, which may lead to a very deep feeling of isolation, not being understood, separation from other people and desolation. To keep herself sane, the person has to invest a lot of effort and time in acknowledging herself and, to achieve that acknowledgement, she might constantly tell and retell herself the story about her failure, crime, timid hope, or forbidden dream. Such a fixation can lead to mental strain, distress and illness too.

Frank Warren used the particularities of contemporaneous forms of communication to give people (a) a medium, something that would become a cultural tool for the expression of the secret (handmade postcards where there is only a little space to write upon, but something could be drawn or glued), and (b) the audience would acknowledge this performance of meaning without gossiping, tarnishing one's reputation, judging, teaching how to live, and so on.

The fact that this 'space for confession' is limited, makes people choose the most important few words to be shared. As a result, the secrets represent the crux of the plot of the story ('When the results arrived confirming your infertility, I did not show them to you. It's a girl!') or the essence of experience – the core of a potentially 'good story', where the viewer has to 'read into' it quite a lot.

People 'fill in' the stories that are just mentioned or sketched in the secrets. The material to 'fill in' the gaps in the stories is taken from people's personal experience. So the 'inner coherence' of the narrative is created: how should circumstances have been evolving so that X became true, where X = the secret? And of course this inner coherence is based upon the principles of the operation of the world which the reader or viewer believes in. If a coherent narrative is construed, then the reader or viewer feels a certain 'relatedness' and 'understanding' towards the author of the secret. If the reader or viewer cannot compose a

coherent narrative (“I just don’t get it!”), then she can critically review her own beliefs. It is quite probable that, in doing so, she may discover that some beliefs are ‘outdated’ and have become ‘clutter between one’s ears’. In this case, the person can get rid of those beliefs or replace them with something better fitting to her life situation – and feel freer.

Possible applications for practice:

I am very grateful to David Denborough for introducing me to *PostSecret* in January, 2008. It gave me some insights that I have been applying to my practice. I will briefly list these insights here in the hope that they will, in turn, engender some creative ideas and be helpful for readers’ practice.

Each person has some secrets, and there is some probability that these secrets would in some way be implicit in the reason that brings the person to the consultation room. Sometimes the secrets’ presence is almost tangible (like an invisible elephant that takes a lot of space, but nobody speaks about it). I have been exploring ways of introducing conversations about secrets in a way that does not breach secrecy but encourages reflection. For example, I may introduce the topic of secrets by saying that every person has some, and perhaps there is something relevant to the issue we are discussing, but the person would nevertheless like not to tell about it. I explain that I am not asking the person to tell what the secret consists of, but to consider why it is important to carry the secret and not just forget about it, and why it is important that certain information stays hidden. These questions can be answered in writing, and the person keeps the writing and I don’t even look at it. I can then ask about the main themes the person can see in this reflection — something that is important to him/her, and something that has to do with the prescriptions of discourse. Then I can ask whether the person is interested in exploring any of those themes.

I can externalise the secret and explore its place in the person’s life and the actual and preferred relationship between the person and the secret. While working with young people (for example, with groups of undergraduate students), I find it helpful to introduce them to *PostSecret* and *PostSecretCommunity*. The postcards with secrets can be used to ‘make the invisible visible’, that is, to unpack the cultural context of problems and to discuss collective responses to what makes the continuation of suffering possible. The witnessing or reading of the *PostSecretCommunity forum* can be used for the discussion of possible traditions of acknowledgement and their relative helpfulness.

I am sure that there could be many other possible practical applications of these ideas (narrative/storytelling community art projects etc., for example), and I would be interested in learning about the roads people take them to.

References

Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J.H. & Jackson D.D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies and paradoxes*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

www.postsecret.com – new secrets each Sunday

www.postsecretcommunity.com – the forum

www.community.livejournal.com/ljsecret – the livejournal equivalent of PostSecret (with cards made electronically)

PostSecret books at Alibris.com: [PostSecret: Extraordinary confessions from ordinary lives](#), [My secret, The secret lives of men and women](#), and [A lifetime of secrets](#).

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PostSecret> – Wikipedia on PostSecret

The materials for this review were collected from the following interviews with Frank Warren, retrieved on the 17th of February, 2009:

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