

Well, I Never Knew That!

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In the summer of my 15th year, my parents decided that we would go on a camping trip to Mexico. At that time (it was a long time ago!), folks from the US didn't need to have a passport, but we did need our birth certificates. My dad and I already had ours, but my mother had to order hers from Nebraska by mail.

A few weeks later, the envelope containing it arrived and I was excited to open it up and see what it included. I didn't think it contained any information I didn't already know, but I was curious! So, I wanted to open right there in the car! But, my mother wouldn't let me open it right away. Instead, she said, "There's something I have to tell you first."

That sounded ominous and I spent a bit of time trying to figure out what could be on her birth certificate that she felt the need to prepare me for. I knew my grandma and grandpa, I knew where and when she'd been born - what else could there be?

Later that day, we sat down at the dining table with the envelope and my mother started to tell me a story. "When you read the names of my parents on the certificate, you're going to see a different name than your grandpa's as my father. You need to know that your grandma was married before and she had me with that man. His name was Robinson, so my actual maiden name was Mildred Robinson, not Wilson. Your grandma doesn't like to talk about it."

Those few sentences rocked my world, let me tell you! I had NO idea that this was part of my grandma and mom's past. And, as you can imagine, the questions came to me fast and furious.

"When did she get married? Did she get a divorce? What happened? Where did she meet grandpa? When? Is that why she'll never tell me when their wedding anniversary is? Did you know him? Are you curious about him?" Why doesn't she like to talk about it?"

My mother was born in 1927, a time when it was divorce was frowned upon. My grandma hadn't even shared this information with my mom's half-siblings, which had consequences later on. The whole family kept my grandmother's secret for years, and I was now asked to keep her secret, as well. She asked me not to tell my cousins this information and not to ask my grandmother anything about the past.

I want to let you know that my sermon today deals with the impacts of family secrets, and that may be a challenging topic for some of you, especially if your family kept information, support, or understanding from you for some reason. Please take care of

yourself in the ways that honour you and your needs, if there is something that causes you to feel distress in my words this morning.

This month's Journey Group theme is "learning from our ancestors". While we usually focus on our positive inheritance of wisdom, skills, experience, or history passed on to us from our elders, the truth is that families also teach us by what they withhold, keep hidden, or overlook. When, at some point, we learn of or talk about these "family secrets", it creates a series of consequences.

Some families develop positive ways to react and respond to emerging truths. They confront situations head on, or at least find a way to shed light on what is or has been happening. They get support, they agree to talk and listen, they find ways to understand and reconcile what happened, and so forth. Eventually, they can emerge stronger and wiser to face the future as a family unit.

But unfortunately, for some families, there are more negative consequences, accompanied by strong emotions, confusion, recriminations, and doubts, along with the impacts of changing relationships, potentially being estranged, or brokenness experienced in individuals or in the family unit.

Family secrets cover a broad swath of territory, but all involve hiding information from some or all of one's family and the community. They arise because something happened that caused someone to feel shame, guilt, anger, hurt, jealousy, or some other strong reaction to the events. It may be kept secret to avoid conflict, to protect someone's feelings, to smooth over trauma or pain, to buffer shame or guilt. Perhaps it is seen as important to maintain the "family name" or reputation in the community. And, sometimes secrets are kept to keep peace in a family, when differences in perceived power, influence, or importance cause it to be easier to hide what is going on than to confront it.

If you or your family have secrets, it may be no small comfort to know you are not alone. Films, stories, television, news stories, websites, and social media abound with the stories of families throughout the ages who have felt the need to keep secrets in all cultures, all over the world, through the millenia. It is a human reaction to a challenging reality, not a coping strategy unique to you and your family.

In the example from my own family, the repercussions of my grandmother's secret were not too significant for me. I loved her and my grandfather, was fortunate to spend a lot of time with them when I was young, and finding out this secret didn't change my relationship with them at all, as far as I can remember. I did eventually ask my grandmother if we could talk about her early marriage and what had happened. She shared that, while she was pregnant with my mother, her husband had an affair with her cousin. She felt devastated and could not remain with him, so she took my mother and

left for another state. Eventually, they divorced. Then, my grandmother met the man who was her second husband, my grandfather, and married. They went on to have three more children and live a full life.

One of the consequences of her decision to never talk about it was that, eventually, her other children learned their beloved older sister had another father and their mother had been divorced. I don't think anyone blamed my grandmother for getting that divorce, but they did feel betrayed by her choosing not to disclose this to them. I know it led them to wonder what ELSE had been kept from them and it challenged their sense of identity and trust in their mother.

It is said that some family secrets "go to the grave" with the individuals involved, but more often than not, secrets eventually comes to light. Addiction, abuse, abandonment, trauma, fear of a family member's anger or behaviour - these and other secrets leave deep impacts on people's mental, emotional, and physical health.

When secrets are revealed or discovered, we are left with the task of managing the emotional, physical, and psychological impacts. It can take time, effort, and resources to identify a path to healing and follow it to resolution. Chronic stress from enduring a negative family situation may lead to physical symptoms or illness. Mistrust, suspicion, or split loyalties can strain relationships and make authentic connections difficult or impossible to achieve. Finding supportive and helpful people to help us process our emotions and situational impacts, as well as getting an objective perspective, can be of immense help in our own healing and recovery.

Perhaps you have been in a family that kept secrets. Perhaps you have been the one who courageously chose to be the truth teller, to confront the situation and bring the family history to light. The first step is acknowledging your full range of emotions, reactions, and coping methods in the situation. Finding someone to talk to, or reading about others who have gone through this journey before you, can be a way to validate that you are not alone. If you are the one observing the consequences of secrets in your own family, you will want to identify other family members who share your understanding of the situation and can serve as resources and allies as you take this momentous step for your own health and well-being.

Certainly, our initial reactions to finding out secrets may be shock and disbelief. But, after those initial feelings, as we begin to review the situation and encounter the truth, we find ourselves confronting information that will need to be integrated into the new story of our lives, not to forget the past, but to live more wholly and transparently in the present. Be patient and compassionate with yourself.

I'll close today with these words from the freedomwiththerapy.com

“When family secrets are revealed, individuals and the family unit learn about the importance of open communication, the complexities of human nature, and their capacity for resilience. The revelation can have both challenging and transformative outcomes, ultimately providing a more complete, authentic understanding of the family narrative. While the process can be painful, the revelation of family secrets forces a confrontation with reality that can, with time and effort, lead to redemption, healing, and a more authentic family story.”

I offer you blessings as you consider the narrative of your family and pray for your healing, peace, and authenticity.