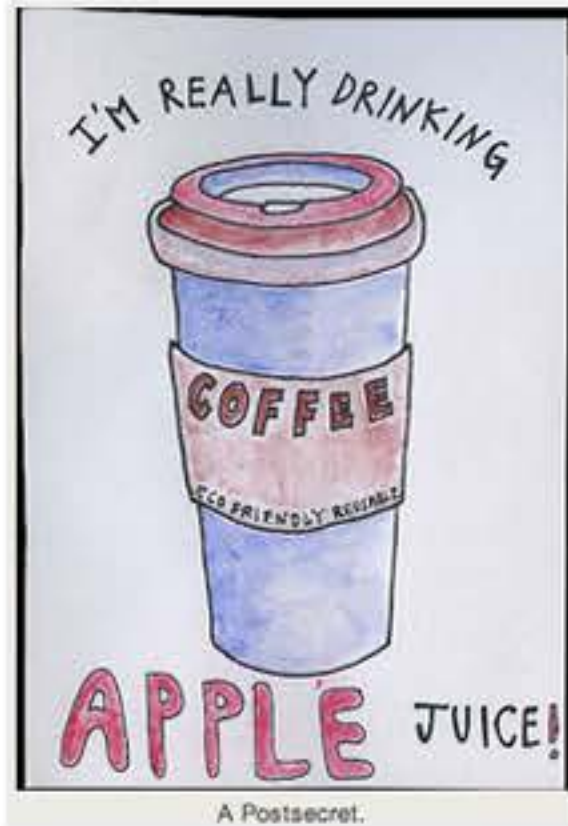


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Inside the amazing PostSecret phenomenon. (You'll never guess the most common confession).



A Postsecret.

 **Ash Anand**
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By ASH ANAND

As a little girl, my brother, who is eight years older, convinced me that it wasn't Santa leaving presents each Christmas, but in fact, 1960's easy listening legend, Engelbert Humperdinck, who was shimmying down chimneys across the world, bestowing gifts.

One Christmas Morning I woke excitedly to find a bag full of wrapped toys hanging from the back of my door. Had Engelbert *really* been? I marveled to myself. As I leapt out of bed to the bag, I saw all the proof my 3rd grader mind needed; scribbled on the bag were the words, "Love, Engelbert". I was elated. ~~Santa~~, my brother, Engelbert had been in my house! But how had the legendary crooner got in? We didn't even have a chimney! My eight year old brain was baffled.

Of course, "It's a secret!", my brother stressed, "So don't tell anyone," he quickly added. So for longer than I care to divulge, I was convinced that if you were good all year round, Engelbert would have your back. That's the thing with secrets – they're incredibly powerful. Sometimes they're harmless and entertaining (ahem. To brothers!); but stumbling across secrets has the ability to truly change lives and divulging secrets can radically alter perceptions people have of each other.

One man who has arguably heard his fair share of secrets is Washington DC resident, Frank Warren. In November 2004 Frank walked the streets of the city, clutching 3000 self-addressed blank postcards, handing them out to strangers. His request was simple: he wanted people to share a secret they'd never told before and mail it to him anonymously.

In time, a steady trickle of secrets found their way to his home address. Frank scanned and uploaded each one to a website he'd created, [Postsecret.com](#). Nine years later, having received over half a million secrets from around the world, Frank's site has become the most popular ad-free blog on the net and last month he toured Australia, speaking about PostSecret to packed auditoriums, including one which I was lucky enough to attend in Melbourne.

Dubbed the most trusted stranger in the world, Frank has been exposed to all sorts of confessional postcards, including those bearing:

Regret ("I exposed myself to herpes because I thought he would marry me");

Vulnerability ("I'm too afraid to ask for the drugs I know I need"); and

Love ("Every day I pray that you will stand up at my wedding when the priest asks if anyone has a reason these two shall not wed. I am counting on you").

Other secrets have been life-affirming, those characterized by:

Defiance ("I can't wait til I prove them all wrong");

Positivity ("I am so thankful that you broke my heart. I've found that I'm actually happy with myself and then I fell for someone who is happy with me too!"); and

Hope ("I tried to kill myself two summers ago. Now I'm living my dream. It's the only failure I've ever been proud of").

Sharing a secret, Frank believes, can be truly transformative. "Sometimes," he cautions, "when we think we are keeping a secret, that secret is actually keeping us". Secrets can build barriers between people but shared secrets can build bridges, connect people on a deeper level and at their very core, believes Frank, connect us to humanity.

At the Melbourne event, Frank called on the audience to reveal their own secrets. I didn't know what to expect but the responses floored me. Some secrets preceded a roar of laughter from the audience; one woman shared, "When I was really little, I was convinced that if you pulled the string on a tampon, it would explode. To this day," she paused, "I'm still wary that I might have an accident!".

As another woman spoke hesitantly into the mic, the despair in her voice resonated in all of us as she explained, "I feel judged by everybody and it makes me feel really guilty." Fear of judgement, Frank concedes, is often why people keep secrets. By revealing our secrets, we reveal our vulnerability.

The exercise appeared cathartic to many, providing a sense of visible relief – a turning point, even, for one woman who held the mic, explaining shakily, "About a year ago my ex-boyfriend raped me and then told me he was getting engaged the next day". She paused. Not a single person in that audience made a sound. "I think," she began, as her voice cracked, overwhelmed, "It's about time...I asked for help".



A Postsecret

Her courage was incredible. As her shocked friends embraced her tightly, it served as a clear reminder just how much strength it takes to share a secret. As Frank explains, by sharing their stories, PostSecret helps people take their first steps on a longer journey – to a place they'd rather be.

Our secrets are our truths – and we may choose to spare ourselves derision or judgement by keeping them from others, but what Frank offers is an outlet, liberation and a sense of release. Perhaps one postcard explains it the best with, "I've given away all my secrets...and I feel so free".

On the site, no secret is too trivial, banal or absurd. Frank has heard it all. In fact, he reveals, the most common secret he sees is, 'I pee in the shower'.

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