

If keeping certain secrets can hurt a relationship, keeping others can enhance it

by Bette-Jane Raphael

Two years ago, a friend of mine fell in love. (She'd already done so several times in the course of our ten-year friendship, but never before with the force of a piano falling from a twelfth-story window.) The man she fell for had a number of admirable and attractive qualities. He was handsome, successful and smart. But he was also indefatigably curious about my friend—obsessively curious. He wanted to know everything she was thinking when they were together, everything she did when they were apart, and he badgered her with questions about her past.

Being in love, my friend didn't seem to mind any of this. But there was one particular thing she didn't want to tell him. While the secret was not especially terrible, she said, she was ashamed of it. (Thank God I don't know what it is so I'm not burdened with the decision of whether or not to blab it here.) Once her lover knew there was something she wanted to keep to herself, he became obsessed with finding out what it was. He took the position that withholding the information from him meant she didn't trust him. He even hinted that not telling him meant she didn't love him. My poor friend was at her wit's end, until she had a brilliant solution: She told him

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about an event that sounded like something she might want to hide. This satisfied both of them, and they have been together ever since.

My hat is off to her for finding a comfortable way to deal with what is often an uncomfortable issue: keeping secrets from our partners. When it comes to reconciling the need for private thoughts, feelings and experiences with the need to be open with our mates, a lot of us are in a quandary. This isn't surprising. On the one hand, we were taught that it's dishonest to keep secrets from the person we love; on the other hand, we probably noticed somewhere along the line that our mothers didn't feel it was imperative that our fathers know everything that went on in the family (thus the haunting refrain many of us heard through the years: "Don't tell your father").

Complicating the issue is the fact that few of us are so sure of ourselves that we think we have nothing to hide. Who among us can risk telling every less-than-brilliant thought, every less-than-perfect deed? Who among us doesn't harbor some secret about herself she'd rather not reveal to the one person whose opinion means more than any other?

My own juggling of the disparate needs for privacy and openness is usually off balance. While I realize that my partner isn't entitled to know everything I do, think and feel, I also know that keeping too much to myself would indicate a serious lack of trust, and could easily turn our connection into an estrangement.

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So I veer between a yearning for total transparency and a rebounding desire for tight-lipped secrecy. It is the latter, however, that fills me with guilt. For in some deep part of me, I feel that withholding any information about myself from my partner is wrong.

I'm not alone. Most of my women friends have confessed the need for withholding some things from their partners, and the guilt this need has often caused them. They're not talking about "big" secrets. None of them is having an affair. We all agree that once a woman is having an affair, the notion of secret-keeping is irrelevant. An affair outside the relationship indicates a basic breach of trust; once you start one, what does it matter whether or not you tell your partner you've spent an unconscionable amount of money on a pair of shoes? My friends' sins are more venial than mortal.

Not everyone agrees on the definition of a secret, of course, and my own has distinct boundaries. I don't consider it a secret when I refrain from telling my partner that I notice a few gray hairs on his head—or on my own. I don't think he should be privy to every thought that wanders through my mind on its way to the dump. If keeping certain secrets can hurt a relationship, keeping others can enhance it; they fall under the heading of discretion rather than secrecy. We continuously censor ourselves, not only for our partners, but for everyone we know. It is part of civilized behavior—and the reason we're just as happy that our inner thoughts are unreadable by the public at large.

For me, a secret is some piece of information about my doings or my feelings that I deliberately keep from my partner, either because it feels too private to reveal or because I believe it would cause unnecessary problems between us, or needless grief for him.

Squarely in the last category came a confession from a generally candid friend who's been involved with a man for the past four years. She had dinner with an old boyfriend who was in town for a couple of days, but didn't mention the fact to her partner, who happened to be away on business at the time. "I feel guilty about not telling him, but it was a totally innocent meeting," she says. "My old friend and I are both happily attached to other people now. We had a nostalgic evening, and neither of us was tempted to make anything more of it. But I knew that if I told my partner about the meeting he'd feel betrayed. So I didn't tell him. I just tucked it away as my own private memory. I think I'm entitled to a few of those."

My friend Sally's attitude toward keeping secrets from her partner is more practical and less guilt-ridden: "I believe it's easier not to tell something than to fight about it," she says. This philosophy allows her to keep to herself things she knows her partner would disapprove of. For instance, she doesn't mention that she's been to the kind of movie that he thinks of as "pseudo-artsy," because she knows that by not mentioning it, she'll be spared a lecture on the disintegration of the arts in America. She also keeps to herself minor mishaps that arise from habits her partner happens to hate. If she forgets to fill the car with gas—a chronic oversight that infuriates him—and finds herself stranded on some road in the middle of nowhere one afternoon, she keeps the event to herself.

Another woman told me how she keeps secret from her husband those actions that she believes he wouldn't understand. For instance, after a fire in their home destroyed most of her and her husband's possessions, the first thing she did was go out and charge three hundred dollars' worth of cosmetics at a department store. She later managed to disguise the bill to her husband as post-fire cleanup expenses. She feels that the entire episode comes under the heading of extraordinary circumstances, and that if the truth were ever revealed to her husband, she could claim temporary insanity. The fact is, she *needed* those cosmetics—even if the reasons were more emotional than practical—but she'd just as soon not have to exonerate herself in his eyes.

One friend admits that she is both philosophically and practically opposed to telling her partner everything that is going on in her life. "I hate the idea of The Couple as an entity that supplants the individual. I feel it's important to maintain my separateness from my husband. For instance, I don't tell him secrets that other people confide to me." Nevertheless, she knows there's a fine line between separateness and separation, and worries that she may err on the side of secrecy. "But," she concludes, "that still doesn't mean I'm going to tell him when I use his razor to shave my legs."

Another woman told me that she keeps one episode in her past from her boyfriend. Once, during a wild time in her life shortly after

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college, she made love in a taxi—with the driver whom she had just met. She's not ashamed of it; she simply believes that it would be incomprehensible to her boyfriend since it took place in another part of her life, when she was someone slightly different from the person so well known to him. Not only does she think that he'd find the revelation more confusing than anything else, but that telling him would somehow reduce the experience itself. She feels she has a right to keep this secret—and I agree.

I believe that we all have the right to decide what to disclose to our partners. Some relationships are more open than others, but that doesn't necessarily affect how they finally fare.

No one, not even my partner, is entitled to know everything about me. Why should he know that I once stole crayons from Woolworth's when I was a little girl? He met me and fell in love with me as I am now, the sum of all my previous experiences. Why should he be privy to my passing fantasies about the plumber who replaced our sink? It has no relevance to our relationship.

Besides, keeping a secret is *not* telling a lie. I even suspect that holding something apart from my lover might be essential to our relationship: Guarding my perimeters keeps me whole, a total person with whom he can relate, and not merely an extension of himself. But even if keeping a particular secret *didn't* seem good for my relationship, I might still choose to keep it. For my first duty is to my own needs, and, finally, the welfare of my relationship is determined by my own well-being. One person's secret is another's private property, and each of us has a right to determine the difference for herself. ■

Bette-Jane Raphael categorically refused to divulge anything about herself.



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