

The 'Not to be Opened' Letter: Family Secrets, Hidden Knowledge and Violated Prohibitions

Hugh Crago

This paper presents a view of family secrets that is informed by their broader biological and cultural context. Two particular perspectives are employed. First, Bateson's biologically-based concept of 'sacred knowledge' is extended to apply to human cultural practices, such as the ban on certain forms of intergenerational instruction. Second, the anthropological concept of 'taboo', as expressed in cultural practices, myth and folklore, is used to provide insight into the mixture of awe and disgust which surrounds secrets, and into the possibilities for both positive and negative outcomes when prohibitions are violated. From these complementary viewpoints, the author explores why family secrets arouse such intensely polarised feelings in helping professionals as well as in family members, and suggests more morally neutral frames within which therapists might view secretkeeping behaviour. A case illustration is used to illustrate potential problems with the assumption that secret knowledge should always be shared across generational boundaries. Finally, the 'not to be opened' letter is introduced as a therapeutic option in cases where the clients and/or the therapist are unclear about the wisdom of revealing a particular secret.

SECRETS AND SECRETBUSTING

At least since Freud, and probably since the Enlightenment, what is hidden has been regarded with suspicion, and the general assumption has been that 'dark' secrets had better be brought to the light of rational consciousness: 'where id was, there must ego be'. Family therapists have generally followed this line of thinking, considering secrets within families to be destructive of life, liberty and the pursuit of individuation. When secrets are mentioned, we professionals tend to think of child sexual abuse, violence against women and children, and sexual preferences that cannot be acknowledged for fear of extrusion from the family. Families themselves are as likely to think of 'shameful' ancestors, unwanted children adopted out, siblings who are not really siblings, 'uncles' and 'aunties' who are really brothers and sisters. Confronted with such concealed knowledge, family therapists have on the whole seen themselves as 'secret busters', bringing to bear the laser-surgery of open communication on the cancers of meaning that

grow within dysfunctional families, and eat away their humanity.

The early consensus within the family therapy literature appears to have been that secrets were bad, and needed 'busting' rather than analysis. In 1973, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark claimed that the 'dignity of open confrontation with truth far outweighs the manifest shamefulness of revelations' (30), a conclusion echoed twenty years later by Imber-Black in an account of a landmark case of her own (Imber-Black, 1993: 4-9). Her collection, *Secrets in Families and Family Therapy* is the only volume since Pincus and Dare's *Secrets in the Family* (1978) to be devoted solely to secrets, and its contributors focus overwhelmingly on the *content* of secrets, and on their *effects*, rather than on what secrets actually *mean*, in systemic terms. The Bowenian belief that a traumatic event kept secret in one generation is likely to 'repeat' in the next (Friedman, 1973-4; Kerr and Bowen, 1988) is rarely discussed explicitly either in Imber-Black or elsewhere, but it seems to have achieved widespread acceptance among family therapists, and has recently been re-emphasised in Bradshaw's self help text, *Family Secrets* (1995), dramatically subtitled, 'What You Don't Know *Can* Hurt You'.

Nor is there much discussion of the conditions under which secrets might be best left undisturbed, although Kerr and Bowen (1988: 308) warn against the automatic revelation of all secrets. The early Milan systemic approach, like the Eriksonian influenced literature of NLP, advocates dealing with the dynamics around secrets without open discussion of their content, a stance

* Hugh Crago is currently Senior Lecturer in Counselling, Department of Health Studies, University of New England, Armidale, NSW. This paper was originally presented as 'Who Ya Gonna Call? Secrets and Secret-Busting in Family Therapy' at the Australian Family Therapy Conference, Hobart, 1996. It was submitted to this *Journal* during 1996, before the author took up his current position as Co-Editor. The paper underwent the standard review process, with assessors unaware of the identity of the author.

that Imber-Black rejects as inadequate. Selvini's later work (Palazzoli et al., 1989) actually *prescribes* a content free 'secret' as a means of creating a crossgenerational boundary in families where boundaries between parents and children are perceived as too permeable. It is not my intention in this paper to engage deeply with these or other existing approaches, but rather, to bring to bear on the topic of family secrets some powerful perspectives from outside therapeutic literature, perspectives which offer the possibility of seeing the whole issue anew.

My own instinctive reaction to secretkeeping, for most of my professional career, has been one of scorn, and I have counted myself a 'secret buster'. It was, and is, easy for me to feel righteous anger at the way some family members deprive others of full knowledge of the truth, even when they ostensibly do so to protect others rather than themselves. Yet I have recently begun to question my assumptions. My original inspiration to do so came from Gregory Bateson's posthumous *Angels Fear* (Bateson with Bateson, 1987), in which he had the courage to question whether the revealing of all hidden things was necessarily good. Oddly, Imber-Black's volume makes no reference to *Angels Fear*, and few to Bateson's earlier work. Even though the Batesons do not address family secrets specifically in *Angels Fear*, two consecutive sections ('Let Not Thy Left Hand Know' and the metalogue 'Secrets': 69–87) are highly relevant to the subject. *Angels Fear* is at times elusive, since much of it consists of unfinished material, some written in the shadow of Gregory Bateson's impending death, but the directions in which it points deserve our careful consideration.

BATESON ON SACRED MYSTERIES

The Batesons offer three different but related perspectives on secrets. The first, and broadest, is the perspective of biological 'knowing': an organism cannot have knowledge of its own DNA. To rephrase it in our terms, living systems (including of course human beings) embody 'secret knowledge' in the form of the genetic programming that they will pass on to their offspring. That universal 'secret' has until very recently been built into the structure of life itself. When we apply it to family life, the Batesons' principle radically alters the meaning of Daniel Levinson's statement that 'we are required to make crucial choices [especially marriage and career] before we have the knowledge, judgement and self understanding and wisdom to choose wisely' (Levinson et al., 1978: 102). Bateson would say, rather, that we *necessarily* reproduce ourselves before we 'know' what we are reproducing¹. Further, I would add that it is not possible for us *ever* to 'act consciously' in the matter of partner choice (and hence control our children's genetic legacy), since reproductive choices are partly dictated by unconscious forces beyond our conscious control (Hendrix, 1988): our partner choice is driven not by what is best for us as individuals, but by what is 'acceptable' to our genetic/cultural endowment (Crago,

in press). So, to reduce it to its simplest terms again, *our behaviour as humans is partly the result of 'secrets' to which we cannot ever have full and direct access.*

Example One: The Woman Who Dated Her Father

A young adult daughter had been with her father to the opera, the first time the latter had spent more than a few minutes in the company of his daughter's new (and serious) boyfriend. There was some mild friction, as the latter expressed criticisms of the stage set and talked knowledgeably about stage design (to compensate, the father told himself, for obvious lack of knowledge of opera and music in general). The next evening, the daughter and her father talked about the interaction over dinner. 'He *can* be a bit of a smart arse', she admitted. The father in turn admitted that being with the young man had been uncomfortable for him, because 'it was like being with an earlier version of myself'. With an embarrassed smile, the daughter replied, 'you're not supposed to say that!' She was absolutely correct. Replication of a parent in partner choice is not something that is normally talked about, or even recognised. The father had broken a 'taboo' (see below), by alluding to knowledge that is not normally *culturally* transmitted from the parental generation to its offspring.

This ban on the transmission between generations of certain forms of knowledge also helps to explain the relative failure of premarital education programs. Young adults in love simply reject the uncomfortable awareness that their partnership will replicate significant aspects of their families of origin, and understandably so, for acknowledgement of that awareness might prevent their marrying at all. Equally, they reject the attempts of older adults to tell them that a lasting marriage involves compromise and hard work, a body of knowledge that is not *emotionally* available to them at the life stage they presently inhabit, though they may have a rational awareness of it.

The Batesons' next instance is a step removed from the biological 'secret' of DNA, but similar to my example above, in that it shows humans behaving in ways that parallel the way nature behaves biologically. Sol Tax, an American anthropologist, proposed to the members of a Native American peyote cult that he should film their sacred ceremonies, in order to convince the government that their rites constituted a genuine religion, not an orgy of illegal drug abuse. This he hoped might persuade the state authorities not to close down their church. The cult members eventually refused, on the grounds that they would not be able to carry out their ceremonies meaningfully if the cameras were rolling. *The act of filming the rites would destroy their sacredness.* So no film was made, even though the group knew that their decision was signing their own death warrant. As Tax tellingly puts it, they chose 'their integrity over their existence' (Bateson and Bateson, 1987: 72).

In this example, the peyote cult members found themselves unable to apprehend the sacred when *conscious* knowledge (in the form of photographic recording) was introduced into their behaviour, unable to 'be' when they had to 'act' for the cameras. This leads

us naturally to Bateson's third example of a 'secret', that of the centipede in the comic rhyme, which was perfectly happy until someone asked it which of its legs came first when it walked: whereupon it found itself unable to walk at all.

That consciousness destroys instinctual sureness is hardly a new perception: it was, in part, this insight that formed the basis for the original formulation of 'paradoxical interventions' and 'positive connotation of symptoms'. But at its broadest, it is actually a statement about the unique position of human beings in the natural world. We, alone of all earthly creatures (as far as we know) possess the highly developed cerebral cortex that enables us to remember the past, to predict the future, to pass on accumulated knowledge through culture rather than relying on inherited, species-specific instinct, and to know our own deaths. Our possession of new brain consciousness *alongside* the older brain functions that we share with life forms as primitive as reptiles (MacLean, 1978 in Kerr and Bowen, 1988: 33–38), creates most of our problems. Langs (1996) points out that the conscious mind has no direct communication with the 'deep unconscious'; they are semi-independent of one another, just as the neocortex appears to operate semi-independently of the biologically more primitive limbic system, and the even more primitive R-complex.

The technology of reflexive consciousness which we have increasingly invented over the past century (photography, movie film, audiotape recording, CD-ROM interactive programs) has in fact replicated or extended in mechanical ways the biologically based paradox of the 'higher' and 'lower' brains. Seeing ourselves in a mechanical or electronic mirror makes us 'self conscious' and stops us reacting instinctively—at least, for a while. Edmund Carpenter (1976) recognised this in his analysis of the fear of the photographic image displayed by many Niugini Highlanders: the belief that a camera 'stole their souls' is in fact a perception that reflexive self consciousness destroys the ability to live semi-instinctively, like a lower animal. This sort of 'knowledge' is analogous to the 'biological secrets' we discussed earlier, in that if humans knew what genes they would reproduce, they might not reproduce at all, and if we 'play back' ourselves to ourselves, we become centipedes which no longer know how to walk. To make the unconscious conscious is a powerful tool for change—but a double edged one. Just as every new technological development offers both benefits and destructive 'side effects', so each new extension of the self consciousness that makes us human can lead to both good and ill. Paradoxical interventions 'worked' by paralyzing pathological patterns of interaction, but as many of us found, the effect would wear off as the system developed 'tolerance', and the longterm result might well be 'more of the same'.

Example Two: The Family Who Played Themselves

Several years ago, the BBC television documentary *Sylvania Waters* became a shortlived *cause célèbre*. It was

intended that an 'ordinary' Australian family would be filmed in its own home, doing 'real things': clearing up after a party where everyone had had too much to drink; quarrelling over wedding preparations; disputing about whether a teenager's homework had been done. It would be more dramatic than *Neighbours*, because the audience would know that it was 'true'. It didn't turn out that way. The film-makers found that far more editing and even scripting was necessary than they had originally thought. A 'voice over' narrative had to be provided by the adolescent son. The dialogue was so repetitious (as real conversation inevitably is) that even when a good deal of the repetition had been edited out, it still sounded 'unrealistic' (standards of 'realistic' dialogue having been established by *Neighbours*!). In other words, to make the documentary convincingly *real* the producers had to make it more *fictional* (destroying its integrity in order to preserve its existence). However, the result was still something quite distinct both from *Neighbours* and from more conventional documentaries.

The showing of *Sylvania Waters* provoked intense audience reactions, which we shall consider later, but even more intense was its effect upon the family which had volunteered itself to be filmed. Nola and her husband reported that their marriage was under strain, and they announced their intention of leaving the country, although in the event, they did not. This may not have been simply the result of unanticipated, prurient curiosity from the public, but may also have been a consequence of having to 'be themselves' for the cameras, and of being forced to view their previously unacknowledged behaviour patterns on public television. Having seen their 'reality' turned into 'entertainment', the family could no longer 'act naturally': the centipede had lost the power to walk.

In place of inherited DNA, with its potential to perpetuate both adaptive and maladaptive characteristics, human cultures have handed down bodies of 'sacred knowledge' which automatically, and necessarily, are available only to certain groups within society. The rites of the peyote cult are known to its members, but once they become known to non-cult members, who misunderstand their significance, they lose their efficacy. We are all familiar with this type of 'secrecy', within religion, freemasonry, psychotherapy, and many analogous phenomena. Again, this helps to explain why new therapeutic techniques like paradoxical interventions lose their impact after they become widely known, and indeed, even after they become routine to those who practise them. EMDR will in due course go the same way. 'Sacredness' is lost through overfamiliarity as well as through popularisation and misunderstanding. Traditional cultures understood this, and limited contact with the sacred, even for initiates, to certain times and places.

Thus the Batesons are alerting us to the fact that 'secrets', in the broadest and deepest sense, are built into human life, indeed into all life. Notions of morality do not belong to them, any more than moral judgements can be applied to the behaviour of living systems when considered at the level of process. Secrets in this broad sense are neither 'good' nor 'bad': they just *are*. This helps us to understand, in part, why families cling to

their secrets, and feel so intensely about them. Every family secret is (for those family members who possess it) a 'mystery', the revelation of which may result in the loss of some hard-to-specify 'power', the exposure of which may be felt to lead to the end of sacredness, and even to paralysis: the family will no longer be able to 'be itself'. But we are leaping direct from the Batesons' grand theory of biological process to the behaviour of individual humans in families. There is an important intermediate step between biology and microculture, and this is the concept of *societal taboo*. Cooklin and Barnes (in Imber-Black, 1993: 292–330) invoke the concept of taboo in the context of family secrets, but do not explore its significance in any depth.

FROM 'SACRED MYSTERY' TO 'TABOO'

Example Two (ctd)

The showing of *Sylvania Waters* in Australia provoked intense reactions, ranging from distaste to fascination. If this was what families were really like, then people both did, and didn't, want to know. The mingling of curiosity and disgust (see below) signals that a taboo had been in operation. What sort of taboo? A taboo, in the first instance, on the making public of what society agrees to be private (unless you happen to be rich, famous or royal, in which case your lives and relationships are public property, and partake of the fictional). The nature of ordinary family life is sustained, in part, by the existence of a very strong boundary around the family's private space. While quarrels may be overheard by neighbours, or family members may gossip and confess to intimates, nobody ever sees the whole of what happens within the family itself—until now. *Sylvania Waters* crossed this boundary.

What was at stake was not the particular secret that Nola drank 'too many bourbons', but a *societal secret* that all of us had tacitly agreed to keep. It was as if 'family life' were being laid bare, the mystery revealed as banal, depressing, and lacking in sacredness.

The Tongan word *tapu* or 'taboo' came into English in the late eighteenth century, following European contact with Polynesian peoples, although similar concepts and practices have been found all over the world. Generally, 'taboo' indicated something *both sacred and forbidden*, that is, a place, object or action which could be visited, handled, or performed only by certain privileged individuals (e.g. priests, males) and which was forbidden to others (e.g. laypeople, women). Sometimes it was an idea or a name which could only be spoken by those same privileged individuals, and then only under strict conditions. All of this reflects the assumption, discussed above, that sacred knowledge needs to be restricted if it is to remain 'holy' and retain its power. If the taboo was violated, the violating person him/herself became 'taboo' and hence cursed, under a spiritual 'shadow'. The violation of some taboos was believed to result in death. The Christian church's placing Galileo under house arrest (for the 'heresy' of proposing that the earth revolved around the sun) and the later wide-

spread vilification of Darwin (for his evolutionary theory), testify to the fact that such thinking, and associated practices, have by no means been absent from Western European culture in the past, and no doubt will continue to be in evidence in the future.

Interestingly, the concept of taboo embraces both the sacred and the obscene. What is sacred is often considered loathsome or disgusting, at least, if accessed by the 'wrong' people, or at the 'wrong' times. Menstrual bleeding, for instance, may be thought of as a mysterious process experienced by women only and therefore simultaneously awesome and repulsive to men (or even, at some times and places, to women too). The fact that current tampon advertisements never mention the purpose of the product and refer delicately to 'moisture' and 'absorption' is sufficient evidence that 'enlightened' Western attitudes to the body have not yet dispensed with this particular taboo!

What is the link between the sacred and the obscene that allows this peculiar blend of fear and disgust to be aroused by the saying of what ought not to be said, the seeing of what should not be seen? Perhaps the most powerfully explanatory principle is the structuralist theory proposed by the anthropologist Edmund Leach², who pointed out in a classic paper (1963) that menstrual blood (like excrement, urine, saliva, semen, cut hair and cut finger- and toenails) constitutes a *liminal object*—neither 'part of the human body' nor 'independent of the human body'—which by its borderline status calls into question the orderly mental categories into which all human languages sort the natural world³ (the heroin user's 'fit' is a similar liminal object, which introduces into the bloodstream a powerful substance external to the human body, which then becomes a temporary part of it. And interestingly, heroin induces momentary nausea as well as longer-lasting, though still transitory, pleasure). *Liminal categories attract ambivalence*.

Liminal objects (and liminal states and experiences) become taboo precisely because of this violation of deep-seated human assumptions about what is 'God-given', 'natural', 'right'. Leach evidences the case of domestic pets, which straddle the boundary between 'human' and 'not human', to which we talk as if they were people, and which cannot be eaten, as other animals can. Consequently, says Leach, words like 'dog', 'bitch', and 'pussy' acquire a second set of connotations as 'obscenities', not just in English but in many languages, and are commonly used to refer to aspects of sexuality which are also taboo because they cannot be talked about openly, or because they cross the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour. Our current understanding of the word 'taboo' has retained the sense of 'obscene' as well as 'mysterious', 'not to be tampered with'.

Yet Leach's association of the taboo with the liminal does not seem entirely to fit with the Batesons' notions: for Bateson, something is a 'sacred mystery' because it *cannot* be known, or life itself would come to a halt. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that it is a defining characteristic of a living system that some parts of it

contain 'knowledge' that is unavailable to other parts: 'in mental process information must be unevenly distributed among the interacting parts' (1987: 85). Societal taboos of the kind Leach considers, on the other hand, *announce their potentiality for being violated* by the very secrecy with which they are surrounded: the existence of the taboo draws attention to the thing to which it refers. (Mary Catherine Bateson recognises this phenomenon too: 86.) In this sense, taboos correspond better with 'open secrets' in families than with biologically 'closed' knowledge: everyone knows there is a secret, but its content cannot be talked about.

It is the awe/disgust that the breaking of taboos inspires in human beings which most clearly signals their commonality with Batesonian biological 'secrets': in both cases, people 'don't want to know' what has been withheld from knowledge; in both cases, an 'old brain'-governed shudder of fear and revulsion is the automatic response to being told. Such visceral reactions are extremely compelling, because they seem 'true' guides to understanding and action. Societal taboos, although cultural rather than biological in origin, attract the 'visceral clutch' that in its oldest substrate appears to have functioned to stop living beings from transgressing the laws that govern their existence. The same visceral clutch is activated by family secrets; hence the vehemence with which families cling to their secrets, and the terror and disgust that greets the possibility of the secrets being unveiled.

FROM SOCIETAL TABOOS TO FAMILY SECRETS

We have been establishing a hierarchy of secrets. Clearly, Bateson's 'biological secrets', which are common to all life forms, constitute a more fundamental, overarching category than societal taboos, which vary from culture to culture, and which may be more, or less, connected with the underlying processes of life. We may think of family secrets as constituting a subordinate category within the larger category of societal taboos. Most family secrets do, in fact, *reflect* societal taboos; they relate to liminal events, transgressions of the social and sexual 'rules' of particular communities. But behind these taboos, socially constructed though they are, Bateson's 'sacred mysteries' can still be glimpsed. How many secrets have to do with either *bringing life into being* outside the boundaries society decrees (children born out of wedlock, teenage pregnancies), *violating 'natural' laws of kinship and consanguinity* (incest, adoption), or *taking life prematurely* (murder, abortion, suicide)? And, just as societies erect taboos around their most culturally central principles, which may in some cases also be biologically functional ones (the incest taboo, for example, has a clear genetic purpose: Darlington, 1969: 52-54), so too do families *behave as if* longheld secrets embodied some central truth about the family, some condition of its very existence.

Family thinking in relation to secrets is indistinguishable from the 'magical thinking' we associate with

taboos. Family members talk as if *the word produces the event* ('if you tell her about that, it will kill her'); as if *the raising of upsetting topics makes things worse* ('let sleeping dogs lie'); as if *silence protects human dignity even beyond the grave* ('never speak ill of the dead'). The notion that a person who violates a taboo will herself become taboo is preserved in the idea that if you reveal the secret, the family will never speak to you again. Such threats are not necessarily idle ones: plenty of families carry them out, or at least attempt to. And the power of emotional sanctions exercised by family members against kin who have 'sinned' in this way is quite sufficient to bring some of the taboo violaters to the paralysis of depression, chronic illness, or an early grave.

Sophisticated Western professionals can also display this kind of thinking. I have heard a prominent gerontologist assert vehemently that family members who refrain from talking openly about a relative's dementia are showing 'caring' and that a professional who reveals to family members that their aging parent has a degenerative condition is 'violating human rights and professional ethics'. Many professionals (even, I suspect, many family therapists) can on the one hand urge their clients to dispel secrets and share 'loaded' information openly, while on the other hand shrinking in superstitious horror from the thought of doing so in their own families of origin, or 'saying the unsayable' within their work contexts (Roth, in Imber-Black, 1993). All this evidence is useful in reminding us, as therapists, that the power with which secrets are protected in families is not to be taken lightly, or simply dismissed as 'irrational'. Secrets are indeed irrational—in the broadest sense of that word: they pertain to areas of experience and meaning that the neocortex does not govern; that does not mean they are irrelevant or unimportant.

But as we have moved in our hierarchy from the macro-level of biology to the micro-level of family behaviour and meanings, we have, so far, avoided the question of morality. At the macro-level, secret keeping behaviour seems 'natural' rather than 'right' or 'wrong'. But, as humans create *cultural analogues* to biological processes, at what point do secrets become a problem? At what point does the fact that the content of a secret is *culturally* constructed become a justification for viewing that secret as dysfunctional? Societies can, and do, 'outgrow' particular taboos—although they never outgrow the need for taboos in general. Once outgrown, taboos can seem ludicrous and even destructive to those who are no longer under their sway (a decreasing number of young people now take seriously the taboo that used to prohibit sex before marriage). Are family secrets an instance of a 'natural' process gone wrong (analogous to cancerous cells), which becomes destructive as the original meaning of withheld knowledge within a family is transmuted into something that functions very differently? The 'natural process gone wrong' theory would seem to explain the negative outcomes associated with secret keeping.

However, the fact that secrets in one generation tend

to replicate themselves in the next is simply one instance of a broader pattern, in which families reproduce *every* aspect of themselves, not merely the negative ones, and in which we seem to ‘relive’ significant events in the lives of our parents in various symbolic forms, at the corresponding ages (Earnshaw, 1995; Crago, in press). Traditional societies recognised this up to a point, in the form of generalised expectations that each new adult would follow in the footsteps of his or her parents, and that each generation would embody the ancestral spirits of those who had gone before. The fact that Western cultures have largely lost awareness of generational repetition and ‘cyclic time’ (Bleibtreu, 1970) does not mean that those phenomena no longer exist, simply that we have directed conscious attention away from them, and ignore or rationalise their manifestations. In a sense, the phenomenon of families reproducing themselves in non-genetic as well as genetic ways is in itself a ‘sacred mystery’ which it is taboo to discuss openly, as those who address it in print soon discover.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLATING TABOOS

Societal taboos, by their very nature, are viewed as leading to dire consequences if they are violated, and as we have seen, this kind of thinking carries over into the micro-system of the family. However, myth, folklore and literature offer us an even richer context within which to view the breaking of taboos³, and one which qualifies the ‘paralysis’ outcome that Bateson describes in the case of the violation of biological secrets.

To be sure, the notion of a prohibition which, when violated, brings disastrous consequences, is very common. Thus Pandora, in the Greek myth, opens the forbidden box, and unwittingly releases all the evils of the world. Similarly, when Persephone eats six pomegranate seeds in the Underworld, she breaks the taboo on eating Otherworld food, and thereby condemns herself to being confined there for six months of every year. However, the motif of ‘prohibition violated’ can sometimes generate good results as well as bad.

Prometheus violates a prohibition in order to bring the use of fire to mankind. He is punished for eternity for his sin—but humanity benefits from his bold and altruistic action. In ‘The Frog Prince’ (and a multitude of other folktales containing similar motifs) the princess must (in the unbowdlerised versions) *kill* the frog in order to break the spell. Similarly, in the Scots ballad Tam Lyn, the mortal Janet breaks a prohibition by going to the Fairy Place, Carterhaugh, and lying with Tam Lyn (a mortal ‘taken’ by the Fairies); she then conceives a child by him. He tells her how she can rescue him from the Fairies, and by her willingness to ‘hold him in her arms’ despite the monstrous shapes into which the Fairies turn him (a metaphor Donald Winnicott would surely have approved of) redeems him into mortal life and love. In Milton’s version of the *Genesis* myth, Eve’s

violation of the prohibition placed by God on the eating of ‘the fruit of that forbidden tree’,

... brought Death into the World, and all our Woe,

However, it also led to the coming of Christ and the salvation of Adam’s descendants.

So when a taboo is violated, the full field of outcomes includes *both desirable and undesirable consequences*. Shattuck (1996: 14–15) reminds us that in Hesiod’s original, the story of Pandora formed the sequel to the story of Prometheus, so that the whole myth balanced both fortunate and unfortunate outcomes of the violation of prohibitions. A further ‘moral’ of such narratives is that the *spirit in which we approach the taboobreaking* is crucial, rather than the act itself. Janet’s motivation, like Prometheus’, is life-affirming and redemptive: so to her, the consequences are positive (the ballad does not tell us whether Tam Lyn suffered PTSD as a result of his sojourn in the Fairy Court!) Eve’s motivation (at least in the version created by Milton) is the human spirit of curiosity, the ‘technological imperative’ that has led us, in this century, to the atomic bomb and the possibility of universal destruction. Curiosity is not ‘wrong’ in itself: rather, the message is that as we became fully human, began to exercise our rational intellects, we inevitably lost the innocence of our animal existence, and embraced the pain, frustration and foreknowledge of death which makes us more than animals. Ken Wilber’s *Up From Eden* (1986) is well worth reading on this subject, and William Golding’s *The Inheritors* movingly illustrates the same theme by contrasting the innocent Neanderthals with the exploitive Homo Sapiens who will destroy them.

These literary and mythical examples suggest that, as human consciousness has evolved, notions of redemption and positive transformation have joined the originally negative consequences of violating mysteries and prohibitions. Humans, being human, have created issues of right and wrong around liminal phenomena that were originally simply ‘awful’ (in its literal sense, ‘full of awe’). As we have come to envisage the possibility of good outcomes (not only bad ones) from the revelation of ‘secrets’, so too have we come to sort ‘secrets’ into necessary mysteries and evil influences to be exorcised. Within families, it is common for secretkeepers to feel that they are ‘protecting’ others from knowledge that might ‘harm’ them: secretkeeping, as well as secret-revealing, can be framed within the notion of altruism and ‘higher good’.

The following example shows how applying a blanket expectation that all secrets must be ‘busted’ can lead to a less than fully satisfactory therapeutic outcome. The quality of fairytale in the ‘secret’, and the influence of ‘magical thinking’ within the family, are very clear.

Example Three: The Man Who Was Engaged To His Mother

The Ohms came to see me because they were worried about their fourteen year old son, Jeremy, who kept getting into fights at his new school. He’d got into fights at his

old school, too. They couldn't understand why, and neither could he. We did a session or two of harmless (and probably useless) work on how he could control his temper more consciously, and then I asked to see him with his parents. In her initial phone call, Jeremy's mother had mentioned a serious car accident seven years before, in which, although the lad hadn't been injured, both she and his father had. The father, Steve, was still affected by the injuries he had received, and by the diminution of his physical capacities (he had held a well-paid job, requiring physical strength and coordination, as well as leadership and initiative: now, he was reduced to distributing junk mail, while Jeremy's mother Bibi worked at a halfway house for schizophrenics). Steve now got angry a lot, and I wondered how much Jeremy might be somehow carrying his Dad's anger. The fights certainly didn't seem to fit with the rest of Jeremy's personality: he seemed a mild, easy-going kid.

It transpired that although the family had been dragged through endless medical and legal proceedings, ending in an unsatisfactory compensation payout, Jeremy had never really heard the full story of the accident (he'd only been seven at the time). It seemed important to let him hear it in full. Over two sessions, I asked each of the three in turn to tell in detail what they experienced at the accident, and what had happened to them subsequently (Steve and Bibi had both been hospitalised, and Steve had not been expected to live). The result was that Jeremy's aggression at school vanished, and Steve and Bibi continued to see me as a couple. It seemed that they had lived together for fifteen years now, but Steve had no intention of their ever marrying. 'What's the point?' he asked scornfully, 'it doesn't mean anything'.

I had asked earlier about serious accidents or illnesses in the families of origin of both Steve or Bibi. Bibi had been shocked, and said that there were 'no problems whatsoever' in her family, back in Denmark. Now, with Jeremy absent, Steve volunteered that *his* mother had committed suicide when he was a child. How old had Steve been when it happened? He had been seven, Jeremy's age when the car smash had occurred. How old had Steve's mother been when she took her life? She had been thirty-two, the age that Steve himself had been when the accident occurred. As a result of the accident, Steve had lost the successful life he had forged for himself in the wake of his mother's early death. He had travelled the world, achieved mastery over men, and found a female partner in a far country. They had had Jeremy, but he could not marry his son's mother, despite his lasting affection for her, because 'there wouldn't be any point'. It then transpired that Steve's mother had given him her engagement ring the night she died. Steve himself saw no connection between this and his lack of interest in marrying Bibi, but interestingly, both the suicide of his grandmother and the fact that his parents were not married had been kept secret from Jeremy.

I pointed out these parallels in a letter, softening a little those that seemed too uncompromisingly Freudian. The couple offered little comment when I asked them their reaction to the letter. I suggested that it might now be a good idea to tell Jeremy about his grandmother's suicide. 'Why?' they asked, with rising panic. I explained to them that if Jeremy were not told then he might some day be tempted to kill himself—or, more likely, to marry someone potentially suicidal. As I said the words, rain began drumming down on the roof. 'And with that, you've brought the rain!' commented Steve dryly. Bibi seemed alarmed, more obviously so than Steve. At the next session, Steve came

alone: Bibi sent a message that she did not need to come any more, because the work that remained was for Steve to do by himself, with me.

I did not push the point further, and worked with Steve for several more months, in which he was able to come to terms with some of his losses, and begin to look ahead in a more hopeful and planful way. His relationship with Jeremy had improved markedly, and they were planning an extended trip together. When we terminated by mutual consent, the outcomes seemed all good. Steve indicated that he 'would probably tell Jeremy' about one of the secrets while Bibi was away at Christmas. Bibi sent me a Christmas card, and later called in to thank me for all I had done for them. She referred other clients. I retained great admiration for both of them.

Over the years since I saw the Ohms, however, I have remained uneasy. By insisting on the revelation of the secret to Jeremy, I wondered if I had expelled Bibi from therapy and curtailed the work she might have done. A psychoanalytic supervisor would almost certainly have seen it that way.

It seems that in this family there were three levels of secret. Bibi alerted me to the first in her initial call, when she made an appointment for Jeremy. This was the 'secret' that the accident seven years ago was somehow connected with Jeremy's problems at school, via the trauma suffered by Steve. Bibi had given me permission to deal with this secret by opening up the accident as a topic for whole-family discussion. In this respect, I followed Milan practice, analogically communicating that I was aware of the 'secret' by my invitation to the family to talk about the accident, but avoiding making any verbal connection between Jeremy's fighting at school and his father's anger and grief at the loss of his first life structure.

The second level secret, isomorphic with the accident, was the suicide of Steve's mother. The symbolic re-enactment of that suicide in the form of Steve's accident exemplifies Earnshaw's (1995) principle that significant events in the lives of individuals are precisely age-linked to significant life events in the lives of the same sex parent⁴. I was given permission by Steve to discuss this secret—but only within the adult generation. When I attempted to get him and Bibi to share the secret with their son, Bibi withdrew. My belief that secrets must always be 'busted' had led me to become part of the cycle of repeating trauma—albeit in a minor and symbolic way—for I had confronted Bibi with something she felt she could not do, and so in a sense 'killed Jeremy's mother'. I had attempted to violate the prohibition Steve and Bibi had placed on the sharing of the secret across the generation boundary.

The third level secret is hypothetical, but probable. I now strongly suspect that Bibi's reticence about her family of origin cloaked a secret similar in intensity, if not in content, to Steve's, and that Bibi's 'visceral clutch' reaction to the idea of telling Jeremy about his grandmother's suicide reflected this. Bibi's profession (working with the mentally ill) and the Bowens' theory of mate choice both support the likelihood that her family of origin would contain serious emotional instability

to parallel Steve's. I had ignored the warning signs, as Steve's father had no doubt ignored the warning signs that indicated his wife's potential for killing herself. It may even have been the case that Bibi had never told Steve about the secret in her own family, and felt she had no option but to withdraw from therapy, lest this secret too be forced into the open.

Let us return to our earlier attempts to construct a hierarchy of secrets. The secret of the accident was an 'open' one, in the sense that I was alerted to its existence from the beginning, and thereby given tacit permission to raise it for discussion. The adult generation (or at least Bibi) were consciously aware of its importance for the next generation (Jeremy) although probably unaware of the element of symbolic acting-out in Jeremy's current difficulties at school. They *wanted* him to know, as a teenager, what he was not capable of understanding as a seven year old. However, they did *not* want him to know what lay a generation further back on one (and probably both) sides of the family. This was knowledge that they, as children, had been subjected to in a traumatic fashion, without being given any choice. They were happy for the information about Steve's mother's suicide to be discussed openly, *provided it did not cross the generation boundary*.

This was not an 'open' secret. It concerned a societal taboo (death by suicide) and was directly linked with another (the fact that Steve had never married Bibi). Two taboos had been violated in the family, and when I raised the issue of the taboo violation continuing into a third generation, Steve—an intelligent and well read man, for all his lack of formal education—reverted to magical thinking of the most primitive kind, suggesting that my words had 'brought the rain', i.e. invoked a malevolent fate. We had entered the vexed territory where the family was acting as if 'sacred knowledge' was involved. If this secret were revealed, the family might no longer be the same. And indeed, I think Bibi and Steve were quite right about this. Major changes would necessarily follow from the revelation of the twin secrets, though whether they would be 'good' or 'bad' remains a moot point.

On reflection, I suspect I would have done better to have supported Bibi and Steve's belief that it was best for Jeremy to know nothing of the past until he was adult. A 'not to be opened' letter, giving Jeremy the option of knowing the secrets at some point in the future, or of choosing to remain ignorant of them, might have been the best intervention, restoring to Jeremy the conscious control that Steve (and probably Bibi) had lacked in their own youth.

THE 'NOT TO BE OPENED' LETTER

The 'not to be opened' letter is an intervention in the same spirit as the mythic motifs of Pandora's box or the Tree in the Garden of Eden. It is not to be used lightly and manipulatively, for if it is, then its consequences will most likely be equally shallow and ethically questionable (in saying this, I have just attempted to 'pro-

hibit' the abuse of sacred knowledge!) But if employed with due moral consideration, in seemingly 'impossible' situations, it can radically highlight the choices possible to individuals and families. The basic idea is simple. When an intergenerational secret is in existence, which the therapist considers may have consequences for the future functioning of the younger generation, encouragement is given to the parent(s) to write a letter to the child(ren), presenting the withheld information *in as full a context as possible*. In the case example above, the letter would have contained Steve's adult understandings of why his mother chose to take her own life, as well as how her act impacted upon him as a child, and why he had chosen to say nothing about it to Jeremy before. The information needs to be presented non-judgementally, and non-deterministically (i.e. there should be no suggestion that the child will necessarily follow in the adult's footsteps). The therapist should be involved in the drafting process, assisting and coaching the parent(s) to produce a letter in the above spirit.

The letter is then sealed in an envelope labelled, 'Not to be opened until you are 21', 'Not to be opened unless you think you might be pregnant', 'Not to be opened unless you think you might have AIDS' etc., depending upon the nature of the secret concerned. Preferably, the envelope can be placed inside another, containing a brief prefatory note suggesting that the information in the inner envelope may challenge the reader to think and feel differently about the family, and adding that the choice as to whether the reader is strong enough to cope with this challenge must be made by him or her alone.

Clearly, the letter is an intervention that can only be employed where adult clients are themselves at least prepared to discuss the possibility of the secret's being revealed. It cannot be imposed from outside the family, for it would then become isomorphic with the trauma against which the prohibition has been erected in the first place. However, I can see the possibility of a therapist's addressing such a letter direct to adult clients, when it is likely that some traumatic secret is present, and the therapist wishes to speculate about it, but senses that this should not be done openly. I could have employed such a letter with Bibi, for example. The clients still retain the choice of whether or not to open the letter, and deal with what it contains.

The following features of the 'not to be opened' letter are salient to our concerns in this article:

1. The existence of the letter accurately focuses clients' attention on the dilemma of whether to 'know' or 'not know' some area of hidden knowledge. It metacommunicates about the dilemma, which cannot normally be spoken about. It therefore *restores explicit choice* to a situation in which choice has previously been limited.
2. The letter replaces 'there is a secret, but you can't ask about it' with 'there is a secret, and you can know it if you choose to face the consequences'. Thus, *even if the letter is never opened*, its very

existence draws attention to the secret and hence alters the consciousness of the family.

3. The existence of the explicit message about taboo (as opposed to an implicit or unvoiced message) renders it difficult (though not impossible) for the recipient to resist the urge to open the letter immediately. In this sense, the letter functions in a way we used to call 'paradoxical', yet it would be quite incorrect to see it as a technique designed to 'manoeuvre' clients into violating a family taboo. The letter's hidden contents function in tandem with the message on the outside of the letter, the latter framing the former.
4. The content of the letter will itself be contextualised, rather than 'raw' information. This removes the letter from the category of secrets that are 'dumped' painfully and inappropriately on family members (often when the secretkeeper is dying) without the latter having choice, or being offered full understanding of the secret's original meaning.
5. The letter thus functions differently from interventions which allow clients to 'deal with' painful events from the past in 'privacy' (e.g. the NLP Change History technique) and from those where a secret is talked about interactively in a family session without its actual content ever being acknowledged.

DOES THE DIFFERENCE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

The assumption on which 'secret busting' within family therapy has rested is, as I said earlier, the assumption that when human beings know what it is they do, taste of the apple, however you like to put it, then they are *freer to determine their own destinies*. This indeed is what I have told clients over many years, what I have believed myself, and what I have (unlike some more prudent therapists) actually put into practice in my own life. In many of my clients' cases, the revelation of the secret, whatever it was, and the putting of 'conscious choice' in its place, did *seem* to make a difference. In my own life, discovering my own family's secrets, and understanding more of what made us what we are, did seem to make a difference too. It made me feel wiser, more solid, and yet, paradoxically, it did not actually change me very much. Indeed, if anything, I became less interested in 'change', in refashioning my personality, or my attitude to life, or whatever. In a sense, my new knowledge served as confirmation of my decision to continue to be who I already was. The only real difference was that I knew that this was the case.

I have not materially altered the patterns of personality organisation and relating that I learned in my family of origin. I have, rather, ceased to struggle against them. I have not become a 'new person', but rather, a person who is happier with the old person he remains. In accepting that I have far less choice about who I am

than I once believed, or at any rate, that I choose not to exercise what choice I do have, I have actually changed in only one way. But it is an important way: I can now feel much more accepting of others' wish not to change. I think this is an important development for a therapist, or a teacher. Whether it is good for people in general I am not sure. So has the 'difference made a difference'? Yes, and no. It may well be the same for all those who choose to lay open former secrets within their families.

As therapists working with natural systems, we need to be mindful that *every* family secret, however seemingly petty to an outsider, constitutes a micro-taboo, the breaking of which is terrifying and loathsome for the family to contemplate; that *every* secret, however distasteful to the therapist, potentially partakes of the quality of *holiness*. 'Canst thou command the morning?' God asks Job in the most magnificent piece of rhetoric in the Old Testament (unfortunately, He then spoiled it by perseverating!). The human tendency to think we can 'command the morning' is undiminished in this century of atom-splitting and genetic engineering; yet we need to think carefully about the implications of what we are so boldly doing, and busting family secrets is ultimately in the same category.

Family horror at the breaking of taboos is more powerful and primitive than rational predictions of the likelihood of positive outcomes from the challenging of dysfunction. We cannot necessarily expect human beings to understand this, and we should respect the strength of their deep rooted programming to react with fear and disgust to the very idea of secret knowledge being made open. That does not mean we have to condone secretkeeping that disempowers, tortures or destroys our clients. However, I believe that we must always offer them the choice of whether or not to reveal the hidden knowledge, and contextualise the offer with the possibility that profound change may result. Bateson's biological secrets cannot be revealed for fear that they may paralyse biological process itself. When this sort of hidden knowledge is re-created within human culture, the same awe attaches to it, and we would be foolish to assume that the violation of taboos can ever be carried out with impunity.

A secret is a liminal phenomenon: it straddles the boundary between one sort of family culture and another, between 'the devil you know', and a terrifying, because unexperienced, future in which the family culture will no longer be the same. Families need to know the risks as well as the benefits, and most of all, they need to know that if they choose to reveal secrets, they are losing one kind of power, and embracing another. It may not be the kind of change they presently fear, it may only 'free' them to continue to choose as they choose now, but these are not outcomes that they can know. We cannot confidently tell them that 'busting' a secret in one generation will necessarily prevent the recurrence of the traumatic event in the next, for traumas may 'repeat' in symbolic form as well as literally, and they may 'echo' dimly, as well as loudly (Engel,

1975; Earnshaw, 1995). Nor does it make sense to focus exclusively on the probable repetition of traumas when in fact *everything* will repeat, the good along with the bad, in one way or another (Crago, in press). This set of understandings, rather than a moral framework of right/wrong, good/evil, is, I suggest, the one we need to work within. After all, our struggle for moral certainty in the face of mystery is what makes us human—but it is also a struggle we can never finally win. In Joni Mitchell's innocent words,

I've looked at life from both sides now,
From win and lose, and still somehow
As life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all.

References

- Bateson, G. and Bateson, M. K., 1987. *Angels Fear: An Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred*, London, Rider, 1988.
- Bleibtreu, J., 1968. *The Parable of the Beast*, London, Gollancz.
- Boszormenyi-Nagy, I. and Spark, G., 1973. *Invisible Loyalties*, New York, Brunner-Mazel, [repr. 1984].
- Bradshaw, J., 1995. *Family Secrets: What You Don't Know Can Hurt You*, New York, Bantam Books.
- Cooklin, A. and Barnes, G., 1993. Taboos and Social Order: New Encounters for Family and Therapist. In Imber-Black, E. (Ed.), *Secrets in Families and Family Therapy* (see below).
- Crago, H., in press. *A Family in Time*.
- Darlington, C., 1969. *The Evolution of Man and Society*, New York, Simon and Schuster.
- Earnshaw, A., 1995. *Time Will Tell: A Book About Family Time*, Sydney, A. and K. Enterprises.
- Engel, G., 1975. Death of a Twin: Mourning and Anniversary Reactions, Fragments of 10 Years of Self-Analysis, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 56, 1: 23–40.
- Golding, W., 1955. *The Inheritors*, London, Faber and Faber.
- Hendrix, H., 1988. *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, Melbourne, Schwartz and Schwartz.
- Imber-Black, E. (ed.), 1993. *Secrets in Families and Family Therapy*, New York, Norton.
- Kerr, M. and Bowen, M., 1988. *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*, New York, Norton.
- Langs, R., 1996. *The Evolution of the Emotion-Processing Mind, With an Introduction to Mental Darwinism*, London, Karnac Books.
- Leach, E., 1963. Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse. In Maranda, P. (Ed.), *Mythology: Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972: 39–68.
- Levinson, D., Darrow, C., Klein, E., Levinson, M. and McKee, B., 1978. *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, New York, Ballantine.
- MacLean, P., 1978. A Mind of Three Minds: Educating the Triune Brain. In *Education and the Brain*, National Society for the Study of Education, Chicago, quoted in Kerr and Bowen (above).
- Palazzoli, M., Cirillo, S., Selvini, M. and Sorrentino, A., 1989. *Family Games: General Models of Psychotic Processes in the Family*, London, Karnac Books [first published in Italian, 1988].
- Pincus, L. and Dare, C., 1978. *Secrets in the Family*, New York, Pantheon.
- Roth, S., 1993. Speaking the Unspoken: A Work-Group Consultation to Re-Open Dialogue. In Imber-Black (Ed.), *Secrets in Families and Family Therapy*, New York, Norton.
- Shattuck, R., 1996. *Hidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*, New York, St Martin's Press.
- Wilber, K., 1986. *Up from Eden: A Transpersonal History of Consciousness*. Boston, Shambhala.
2. Cooklin and Barnes (in Imber-Black, 1993: 297) refer to later work by Leach, but fail to acknowledge this most useful insight as relevant to family 'taboos'.
3. After this article had been completed and submitted for publication, I discovered Roger Shattuck's 1996 volume *Forbidden Knowledge*. Despite not dealing with family secrets, the book is very relevant, providing a much wider coverage of mythological and literary treatments of violated prohibitions than I have space to do here. I particularly draw readers' attention to his appendix, 'six categories of forbidden knowledge' as a supplement to what is presented in this article.
4. Jeremy was seven at the time of the accident, the age Steve had been when his mother took her own life. The fact that Steve's own age at the time of the accident paralleled his mother's age at her death seems a possible exception to Earnshaw's principle, unless his father was the same age as his mother, a fact I did not then seek to establish.

Notes

1. Bateson is of course referring to biological reproduction, but my sense is that humans reproduce

themselves in a huge range of cultural ways as well, and that this secondary form of 'reproduction' is governed by exactly the same principle as the biological. To offer just one example, authors create a novel before they 'know' what parts of themselves they are symbolising or recreating in it, often only realising it years later.

2. Cooklin and Barnes (in Imber-Black, 1993: 297) refer to later work by Leach, but fail to acknowledge this most useful insight as relevant to family 'taboos'.
3. After this article had been completed and submitted for publication, I discovered Roger Shattuck's 1996 volume *Forbidden Knowledge*. Despite not dealing with family secrets, the book is very relevant, providing a much wider coverage of mythological and literary treatments of violated prohibitions than I have space to do here. I particularly draw readers' attention to his appendix, 'six categories of forbidden knowledge' as a supplement to what is presented in this article.
4. Jeremy was seven at the time of the accident, the age Steve had been when his mother took her own life. The fact that Steve's own age at the time of the accident paralleled his mother's age at her death seems a possible exception to Earnshaw's principle, unless his father was the same age as his mother, a fact I did not then seek to establish.

Wait for 18, 3: Working with Men

Articles include:

Stages in Therapy with Men whose Partners do not Enjoy Sex, by Penny Roughan

An Evaluation of Group Intervention Programs for Violent and Abusive Men, by Robert Russell and Maxwell Jory

Political Correctness and Practice Effectiveness: Working with Perpetrators in Violent Relationships, by Jean-Pierre Menagé

Cutting Grass: In Search of the Australian Male, by Keith Sedgman and poems by Peter K. Jordan