Telling Secrets Study Guide

Telling Secrets by Frederick Buechner

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Frederick Buechner, author, professor and ordained Episcopal minister, writes about his personal battle in overcoming the damage done by a lifetime of burying the past in "Telling Secrets." As a young boy in New Jersey, Frederick and his younger brother are faced with the suicide of their father. Buechner's father was an alcoholic and had a hard time holding down a job. Buechner's mother belittled and emasculated her husband as continuous battles waged between the couple. Their mother, apparently angry and feeling betrayed, does not hold either a funeral or a memorial service for her husband. She whisks her two sons, her mother and herself away to Bermudaj presumably to begin a new life and forget the past.

Although she does not vocalize that conversation about their father is taboo, the boys quickly sense that their questions or comments about their dead father are not welcomed. Mrs. Buechner is successful, at least superficially, in that the boys adhere to her silent demand and soon forget what their father even looked or sounded like—ultimately, in fact, it seems as though he never existed. The tragic episode was Buechner's first lesson in keeping secrets and self-deception—the damage from which stays with him for a lifetime.

Buechner's mother is able to maintain her self-delusion for the entirety of her life. She remains silent about the unpleasant. She is known to gold-plate everything—lampshades, statues, the past. In her later years when she had grown deaf, she would close her eyes when her grown sons came to visit her. She could no longer hear emotion that might come from their lips—with closed eyes she did not have to worry about seeing it either. At thirty-two, Buechner wrote a novel that paralleled the story of his father. After reading the book, his mother felt betrayed by her son and refused to ever again read anything he wrote.

As a married man with teenage children, Buechner is made to face the damage caused by his buried secrets as the legacy of denial and the resultant anger had been passed on to his offspring. His daughter's rage manifested itself in the form of anorexia nervosa. Although at one point she almost lost the battle, his daughter finally recovers. It is at this point that Buechner realizes he is also sick—not starving from lack of food; rather, he was starving emotionally from abandoning the truth.

Buechner wages his battle against the destructive past through therapy and a growing need to seek comfort in God. He strongly feels that the only way to recover from a past filled with secrets and deception is to find the "original person" that God had created him to be. Along the way to the freedom he seeks from the lies, Buechner becomes a prolific writer, authoring many novels and non-fiction works, and teacher as well as an ordained Episcopal minister. What proves to be the most helpful in his journey is joining a twelve-step program and working out his problems along with people suffering from similar problems. It is in this environment that he learns to "tell secrets."

In the end, Buechner feels blessed that, through his prayers, he is able to experience glimpses of the truth and that "original person." However, he learns that it is incumbent upon the individual to continually seek the Lord and His truth—to rejoice in silence and listen for his Word.

The Dwarves in the Stable

The Dwarves in the Stable Summary and Analysis

In November, 1936, Frederick Buechner's father commits suicide by running his automobile engine in the family's closed garage. There is no funeral or church rite of passing, only a memorial service for his Princeton class the next spring—the man is unceremoniously cremated a few days after his death. A short while after the tragedy, Frederick, his brother and mother move from the family home in New Jersey to Bermuda and barely ever speak about the man again.

Frederick, emulating his mother's behavior, learns to never speak about his father—either within the family or without. Many questions and feelings remain buried for decades. Finally, Frederick all but forgets that his father ever existed. In later years, when he pens the novel, "Godric," he understands that the main character Godric, who travels the world only to learn that everything leads back to his father's doorstep, represents his own wrought up emotions about his father.

Young Frederick is able to learn through scraps of memories and words here and there that his father was a gentle, good-looking and charming man who drank a little too much and was down on his luck, which was the extent of his father's legacy.

"Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel is supposed to be the unwritten law of families that for one reason or another have gone out of whack, and certainly it was our law." (p. 10) At age thirty-two, many years after the tragic death of his father, Buechner pens the novel "The Return of Ansel Gibbs", which is a thinly veiled account of his father's death. After reading "Ansel Gibbs," his mother never again would read any of Frederick's works—he betrayed the family by telling the story of his own father. The guilt sparked by this incident stays with Buechner for decades.

Frederick's mother was a beauty in her youth—a label that haunted her as age stole the one identity she relied upon. Buechner's account of the last days of his mother's life is poignant, providing a human connection for the readers. Her world has become isolated to one room—her arthritic knees disallow her venturing beyond. She comments that if she did not lose things—her hearing aid, her pills, her favorite pillow—she would have nothing to do. Buechner's mother could not hear well enough at the end to hold real conversations with her sons—she really didn't want "real" talk anyway. And when her sons spoke, she would often close her eyes, the ostrich with her head in the sand unable to hear the emotions but not wanting to see them either. She coped as best she could with life, living until almost ninety-one years old.

The middle-aged Frederick is married with two children, and ostensibly the family is happy. However, a crisis develops when one of his teen-aged daughters develops anorexia. At first, it just seems to Buechner that a young girl is just trying to be prettier, but when the ravages of the disease produces a gaunt, skeleton, Frederick panics.

However, he feels powerless, comparing himself to the Cowardly Lion who has been tied up by the Flying Monkeys.

Frederick is telling his side of his daughter's story in her battle with anorexia—he would not presume to tell hers. He realizes that his approach of trying to save her at any cost was the wrong one. He learns later that he needed to love and support her but let her find her own way to be victorious over her disease. A young confused person has a need to be free and independent and at the same time to be loved and cared for. Anorexia answers both those needs but of course renders destruction on its victims. Frederick's daughter came close to death and had to be hospitalized and force fed. Realizing she was at the end made her finally join the battle and take the lead in the struggle.

The disease causes Frederick to suffer, willing to give everything up to help his daughter. At the same time she was starving from lack of food, he was starving from his own loss of self. Frederick comments that: "A bleeding heart is of no help to anyone if it bleeds to death" (p. 28). Although he had tried to carry on as his daughter suffered so, he compares this time to an episode in C. S. Lewis's "The Last Battle," where the dwarfs huddle together in what they think is a pitch black stable. In reality, they are in a field of green grass under blue skies—but they just don't see it. He is relieved only when he realizes that the only way his daughter would ever be well again would be at her own choice. It was then that he is able to open his eyes and see the green fields of hope around him. His daughter begins to heal.

Some may wonder, Frederick muses, why his story is worth telling. Is it arrogant to presume that his story is important enough to warrant its own book? Everyone's story is important—a piece of the profound history made by God—the Exodus, the Covenant, the Promised Land. Each man's story is important in that it is part of God's story. While God does not preordain a suicide, such as Frederick's father's, he is the master director in the wings, providing all the clues needed to live a satisfying life. However, if one chooses to ignore those signals, the path chosen will be an unpleasant and treacherous one. God's greatest gift is the gift of memory. This gift does not allow man to change the past but rather learn and remember and not repeat mistakes. God's forgiveness for man's errors intersects with man's ability to forgive one another.

It was not until his mid-fifties that Frederick is able to freely tell the story of his father's death, doing so in his novel, "The Wizard's Tide." The account is simplistic with an almost childlike structure. The style was crucial for Frederick's own recovery, for he was telling the tale to his inner child—the child that was never given answers for the questions he was never allowed to ask. The story ends with the child repeating his father's name and finally feeling free to talk about his dead father.

Although Frederick is close to God, he is a minister; in fact, he feels that men of the cloth are often the most neglectful and disingenuous about their own problems. They want to appear sanguine and confident in their salvation, afraid to rattle their congregations by admitting to failure or doubt or confusion. Many religious leaders feel it

is a sign of weakness to allow their congregations to see them as suffering from many of their same problems. This stance, however, is a disservice to the congregation.

The initial reason Frederick wrote "Telling Secrets" was to share his secrets and that of his family. But in the end, he found a deeper purpose: Sharing the secret of what it means to be human.

The White Tower

The White Tower Summary and Analysis

Frederick feels that the original "stamp" each individual receives from God—the original self—is the essential part of one's identity. Buried deep in each person are all the wisdom, strength and healing abilities one needs. Whether these characteristics are called upon or not depends on the individual. One's best moments originate from those hidden depths. Art—painting, writing, musical composition—resides there. Prayer, the solemn words that express one's true emotions, come from the original self.

Society disrupts and disfigures the original person. People begin to emulate others who they believe to be more desirable than they or live try to live up to an ideal that the world will find more acceptable. Soon the real person is lost and forgotten under the debris of lies and pretense.

In the eleventh century, William the Conqueror built the White Tower—part of the Tower of London. Located within the White Tower is the Chapel of St. John. Buechner compares life to the White Tower. The chapel is a serene and holy place, spacious and quiet. However, located just beneath the Tower is a dungeon called Little Ease. Little Ease is only four feet high and four feet wide, which disallows the prisoner from standing up or lying down. Although aspiring to reside in the Chapel, one often finds himself in Little Ease. It is in such a cramped and debilitating position that Buechner finds himself during his daughter's battle with anorexia. He realizes, through her illness, that his wife, all three children, and most especially himself were all victims of a malaise that dwelt within them all. That his daughter developed anorexia was just the manner in which the disease manifested itself in her. The duality of craving to be independent yet being taken care of had been part of Buechner since his childhood. His daughter was overtly starving, but inside, Buechner was on life-support.

Something had been stirring within Buechner since early childhood. He was not consciously aware of its influence; however, looking back he can see clear road markers that led him down the path to God and his ordination as a minister. He would have never imagined that ten years after graduating from Princeton he would be ordained a minister. Looking back he can see that people who he knew only briefly and barely remembered played important parts in his journey. There was a nanny who taught Frederick and his brother to sing "The Old Rugged Cross" before he understood the significance of the cross. A minister many years before embarrassed him when he approached Buechner about "working for Christ."

In another instance, a friend called Frederick asking him to wait with him at the airport—his family had been in a terrible accident and were set to arrive soon. The friend just wanted his support and companionship. Frederick's mother was outraged by this friend's nerve in ruining their Sunday dinner. For an instant, Frederick was torn, and realized that one's salvation can depend on such a quick decision. He learned that to

love one's neighbor not only comforts that person but it also brings peace and love to oneself. When Frederick is in the depths of despair over his daughter's illness, a car passes by with the license plate "TRUST". The word of God? Perhaps. Frederick rates the incident as a turning point. Another "gift" was a new friend—Dudley Knott—who never failed to make Frederick laugh and who always allow him to be himself.

But for the most part during this dark period, Frederick was confined to Little Ease. That he survived told him that God's presence had been there with him. He clumsily prayed for help but failed to look at the place that exists in everyone—that Chapel of Saint John in the White Tower where one's deepest truth resides. Buechner's daughter finally recovers after a long hospital stay and years of psychotherapy. Ironically, it is his daughter's death that makes Frederick realize that he is sick.

Buechner's house in Vermont is small and modest but surrounded by acres of lush greenery. The office where he does his work almost makes him feel guilty because much of what he does seems like play. The house is filled with twenty-five years of things—books, toys, gardening paraphernalia, horse bridles and many other objects. Just as it is true that having children changes one's life forever, it is an even more radical change when they leave to make their own lives. When the children were young, they brought life to his life—the solitary life of a writer whose only experiences are often only those in his head. The kids not only brought homework home every night, they brought themselves and all their adventures and tales. Buechner recalls when his children were teenagers how he'd pace when they were gone too long. It was the most precious sound in the world when he'd hear their cars pull up and their engines stop.

After his children leave, Buechner and his wife start a new life together—almost like when they were first married. As they look back on the years of child rearing, they realize that they talked almost exclusively about their children—what they were doing, where they were going—very little about themselves. To fill the void, Buechner's wife takes up gardening and donates time to environmental issues. Frederick wants more instant gratification than he can garner from watching vegetables grow and seeks out opportunities where he can interact with other people pursuits which he needs to feel alive.

Frederick was offered a teaching position at Harvard Divinity School. His attendance at Union Theological Seminary in New York City years before qualified him for the position. Buechner had enjoyed the environment at Union Theological. Frederick's fellow students had been a diverse group from every part of the country and from every background. The views expressed were diverse as well—much discussion focused on how best to spread the good news of the Gospel on the back drop of the threatening world of the Cold War era. Unfortunately, Frederick did not experience the same type of atmosphere during his days at Harvard.

Although praying before class at Union was normal, Buechner was criticized for beginning his first class with a prayer at Harvard. He soon learned that many of his students were Unitarian Universalists, which he considered a fancy term for atheists. One woman came to him after a class complaining that it was difficult for her to relate to

his teaching since he included "God" in his discussions. She believed in good things like peace and kindness and honesty; however, Buechner could not see himself developing a sermon around such things without God being the main focus.

To Buechner, teaching the gospel was a work rife with emotion and poetry, not a dull recitation of accounts. One reading assignment Buechner assigns his divinity class is Shakespeare's "King Lear," which ponders the existence of God. Buechner's students often did not see the forest for the trees. Some feminist students in his class refuse to read "King Lear" because it contains sexist language—which of course is normal rhetoric for a piece written in the early seventeenth century. Likewise, a male student will not read Graham Greene's "The Power and the Glory" because of its racist slant. These students keep their principals intact but fail to explore the wisdom of these classics.

Harvard is proud of the pluralism of the students of his divinity classes. As much as Buechner pours his heart out over his feelings about God and life, he receives little response from his students. When confronting the class about their lack of participation, one student speaks up, indicating he is reluctant to express himself for fear of being ridiculed. Buechner's teaching experience at Harvard clearly shows that within this lauded pluralism, factionalization is alive and well.

Buechner starts several novels about his time in Bermuda, where he and his mother and brother moved to abruptly after his father's death. He could write only about thirty pages before he would blank out. That enchanted time in his childhood had followed the darkest of times. Bermuda in pre-World War II was quaint and filled with natural beauty. There were no motor cars, only buggies and bicycles. Bermuda provided an easy way of life in a lovely setting. Although he had good times before Bermuda, many of his memories were of his father changing jobs and drinking and his mother scolding and deriding him.

Buechner's father, in his note, indicated that his family would be better without him. That, he felt, was the last best gift he could give and was actually all he had left when he died. Buechner's favorite memory about living in Bermuda was that his maternal grandmother lived there with them. She was the only adult who provided a sense of fun in his life and who loved Frederick without condition. Buechner later realizes that he could not finish the novels he began about enchanted Bermuda because he really trying to find that enchanted part of himself that he had misplaced.

The Basement Room

The Basement Room Summary and Analysis

Through his struggle for emotional freedom, Buechner recognizes that his various "selfs" that emerged throughout the years were failed attempts at rediscovering his original self. He did not resent these different representations of himself; rather, they were pitiable individuals who deserved his sympathy. Sex is a natural topic that is swept under the weight of secrecy. While it is as natural for humans to want to touch and be touched by love ones, the human need for sex had evolved into a shameful pursuit. When Buechner married and then had children, patterns of unhealthy deception could be found in the families of both Buechner and his wife.

This pervasive sickness manifests itself in his daughter in her battle with anorexia—a physiological result of self-deception. Buechner did not realize that he had expected his children to somehow save him—something they were not empowered to do and which would have destroyed them had they tried. The fear Buechner felt about harm coming to his children in reality, he learns, was more a fear about what effect their death would cause him. What would he be if he were no longer able to play the role of "father?"

After being recognized for what they are, guilty secrets like the ones Buechner unwittingly burdened his children with can be dealt with and amended. Hurtful secrets, like those that plagued Buechner from childhood on, can be diminished by finally being allowed to feel the hurt and pain that had been festering for so many years. While it is laudable to love they neighbor as thyself, it is crucial that one first loves himself.

After living on the east coast his entire life, Buechner temporarily moves west in 1985. Buechner anticipates a life with less stress and one supported by simple mid-western values. He accepts a position at Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL. At first Buechner senses a rather ultra-conservative, suffocating atmosphere at the college. All professors must sign a declaration that they will not smoke, drink or even dance while teaching at the college. He is bothered that God's words to "love thy neighbor" are ignored when it comes to homosexual individuals.

Buechner is heartened by the fact that even though students disagree among themselves and with him as their professor, there seems to be no resultant anger or animosity. He is impressed by the ease with which students and faculty talk about what God is doing in their lives—a subject verboten at most universities in the east. There is a stark difference in the mid-western open approach to religion versus the embarrassment that is engendered by religious discussions taking place on the east coast—the latter a scenario that is sure to feed shame and secrecy.

Buechner begins attending Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, where he finds a spiritual home. He loves the chanting of the psalms and verses practiced at Saint Barnabas. While he has grown tired of words through his role as teacher, preacher and author,

God's words are given new life when they are sung. Robert MacFarlane, the rector of Saint Barnabas, stands out among other evangelical preachers who utter God's words but do not seem to connect with them on a personal level. MacFarlane sermonizes in a slow, quiet and thoughtful way, without bluster or an all-knowing attitude. To Buechner, MacFarlane brings humanness and genuineness to his sermons with the subtle recognition that he too has suffered in life and does not always know the answers. MacFarlane believes that Peter was correct when he denied that he knew Christ—very few people do. It is incumbent upon anyone seeking the graces of the Lord to find him, seek him out and follow him, without false claims of knowing him.

When Buechner finishes his work at Wheaton, he returns home. It is sad for Buechner to leave Saint Barnabas, fearing he will never again find that comforting environment. He is mainly correct in his fear; however, there are times when he runs across a memorable sermon. At a Greek Orthodox church, he is unimpressed with the rituals and ceremony that leave the congregation to be only on-lookers but is moved when the priest speaks about the many people who are unaware of how profoundly they suffer from spiritual discomfort.

Buechner does not find another Saint Barnabas, but he develops a fictional character, Brendan the Navigator, who recognizes that all men are cripples in some ways. "Brendan" was published in 1987 and is so successful that the publisher decides to reprint all of Buechner's prior works. To Buechner's delight, they all find new readership.

Buechner joins a co-dependency group comprised of people of all description. One commonality is their need for each other and the need to tell their secrets. The members seek the peace and comfort of a Higher Power—or God. They begin their meetings with a prayer written by Reinhold Niebur, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." (91) They end their meetings with the Lord's prayer, even though they may not acknowledge it, they all need God.

The group teaches that people are powerless in controlling their lives and the lives of others. These loosely formed organizations, often meeting in church basements, stem from the twelve-step Alcoholics Anonymous programs. Buechner feels that many churches could learn from these groups, in that there is no authoritarian figure who "knows all the answers". In churches there is the tendency to "not rock the boat", not speak up about things that are unpleasant or controversial. The behavior of churches closely mirrors that of society. Members of Buechner's group feel free to speak their minds, speak the truth and provide unconditional love and support to fellow members. In many ways, they are more like families that many real families are.

In recent years, Buechner and his wife spend some winters in Florida, which he used to deem as gouche. However, he now feels that it is important to have fun in life—perhaps that's what it's about anyway. Buechner continued in therapy and came to forgive and understand both his parents. In a dream, his mother was fussing with her appearance, as she usually did, and getting ready to go meet someone. The significance of the dream was that she was leaving, and by doing so was signaling that Buechner was free

to live his life. While she was alive, Buechner and his brother were crisply aware that she felt that as long as she was unhappy, her sons could not be happy. Buechner now felt that stigma was gone. He realized that he had passed the legacy on to his family in that he felt he could not be happy if his children were not.

Buechner, in his later days, comes to realize that the most important secret kept from him was that, "It is all good. There is nothing to worry about" (p. 103). In the end, Buechner muses as to the certainty of God. From the novel "Thomas Wingfold," by George MacDonald, Buechner takes comfort in the title character, who will be satisfied to believe in and follow Jesus even if in the end there is no hereafter.

Buechner continues to pray in his own words but has also learned to pray in silence, watching and waiting to hear God speak to him. God speaks in many ways—in a beautiful piece of artwork, the sound of water over stones, or in one's fatigue at the end of a long day. The main barrier to hearing God is the incessant dialog that occurs within everyone. In a few instances, Buechner has felt the grace of His presence. At those, times Buechner knew that he was in the presence of prolong search for his truth and of his long-missing original self.

Characters

Frederick Buechner

Frederick Buechner is the author and narrator of "Telling Secrets." His father committed suicide when Frederick was young. He and his brother and mother moved to a faraway location after his tragic death and never were allowed—by nuanced signals from his controlling mother—to talk about their departed father. It was not until Buechner is in his mid-fifties that he finally confronts the demons created by those long-held secrets.

After living through his daughter's near-death battle with anorexia nervosa, Frederick ironically finds through her healing process that he is sick. He had learned to repress so many of his emotions, but while his daughter was physically starving herself, he gained the realization that he had been emotionally starved for decades. His daughter's illness was one that caused its victim to simultaneously crave freedom, yet plead to be cosseted. Frederick recognizes these same traits in himself and realizes that he must confront them.

Frederick is able to deal with the travails of his life: the tragic death of his father; the prideful and secretive mother; and, the pain of being powerless in watching his daughter succumb to the same miseries that were part of him. Buechner firmly believes that each individual is at his best when the original person that God made him to be is allowed to emerge. Through the ups and down of life, one can often lose sight of that original person—the only truth that really exists. Buechner acknowledges that he could not have survived had it not been for God. Through his initially clumsy prayers to his strengthening relationship with God as a minister, Buechner is able to return, at least at special times of grace, to that original person God meant him to be.

Frederick Buechner's Mother

Frederick Buechner's mother, whose given name is not provided, reacts to her husband's suicide with humiliation and bitterness—he has abandoned her and their two sons. Mrs. Buechner is not a religious woman and therefore holds no formal ceremony or memorial service for her husband. The boys learn through her behavior and subtle signals to neither speak of their father nor ask questions about him. Almost immediately after her husband's tragic end, she moves with her mother and her two sons to Bermuda—to start over and to forget the unpleasant past. She is successful in one sense. The father her young sons knew so briefly eventually becomes a blurry memory, and ultimately a person who almost never existed.

Many years after his father's death, Frederick writes a novel that somewhat parallels the story of his father. His mother is so disturbed by what she considers a betrayal—telling secrets—that from that point on she refuses to read anything he writes. In her last years, Mrs. Buechner is confined to her room due to her crippling arthritis. Frederick

visits her and they exchange only light conversation as it is impossible to discuss anything approaching the profound when one has to shout over deafness. In these years, Mrs. Buechner gets into the habit of closing her eyes when talking with her sons. Her deafness alleviates her from hearing the emotion that may be present in their words. By closing her eyes, she does not risk seeing the emotions that might cross their faces.

Mrs. Buechner was a beauty as a young woman. Being so closely associated with that identity, aging was particularly difficult for her. In her later years, she still paints her face and plucks her eyebrows. She had survived in the only way she knew. Her life became confined to her room and then as the ravages of her disease worsened, her bed. She was thankful that she lost things—her pills, her comb, her favorite pillow—it was the only excitement she had in life. Mrs. Buechner liked to paste gold stars on her children's papers and to gold plate objects—lampshades, statutes. In her struggle to get through life, she learned to gold-plate her past and to keep secrets.

Frederick Buechner's Father

When Frederick is a young boy, his father commits suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning. His father had a history of alcoholism and employment problems. His father's name is not mentioned.

Frederick's Buechner's Wife

Frederick's wife suffered under the strain of Frederick's struggle with his past. After their children were grown, she spent many solitary hours doing her gardening and volunteering for environmental causes. Her name is never mentioned.

Frederick Buechner's Daughter

Frederick's daughter had a serious struggle with anorexia nervosa but was ultimately victorious over the disease. Frederick suffered greatly over his daughter's condition. Her name is never mentioned.

Dudley Knott

Dudley Knott was a good friend that Frederick made in his later years. Dudley always made Frederick laugh and allowed him to be himself.

The Cowardly Lion

In his office, Frederick had a stained glass window with the image of the Cowardly Lion from the Wizard of Oz. In the image, The Cowardly Lion is tied up by the Flying Monkeys. Frederick often felt like the lion—powerless to overcome the pain in his life.

Godric

Frederick Buechner wrote the novel, "Godric." The title character, Godric, left home and wandered the world only to learn that in the end all paths led back to his father's doorstep. In this character, Buechner was recognizing the importance of his father in his life.

Harvard Divinity School Students

Buechner encountered progressive, liberal-minded students in the class he taught at Harvard. Although the class was about God, some students, who were atheists, requested that God be called a Higher Power. Another student refused to read "King Lear" because it contained what she considered sexist narrative.

Robert MacFarlane

Robert MacFarlane was the rector of Saint Barnabas where Buechner attended services while teaching at Wheaton. Buechner like MacFarlane's thoughtful sermons, which were delivered without bluster or condescension.

Objects/Places

New Jersey

Frederick Buechner's childhood home was in New Jersey. It was the location of his father's suicide.

Bermuda

Immediately after his father's suicide, Frederick's mother moved him and his brother to Bermuda to start a new life and bury the past.

Vermont

After Frederick Buechner married, he and his wife lived on a farm in Vermont where they raised their three children.

Harvard Divinity School

Frederick Buechner accepted a teaching assignment at Harvard's Divinity School. He was somewhat surprised that some of the divinity students he encountered were atheists.

The Dwarves' Stable

Buechner often compared himself to the dwarves in C. S. Lewis' story, "The Last Battle." The dwarves thought they were huddled together in a pitch black stable but they were actually in a vast green field under a bright blue sky.

Union Theological Seminary

Frederick Buechner studied at Union Theological Seminary after which he was ordained as an Episcopal minister.

The White Tower

The White Tower is located in the Tower of London. The Chapel of St. John is located on its second floor. Buechner likened one's healthy place in life to the Chapel of St. John.

Little Ease

Little Ease is a dungeon located under the Chapel of St. John in the White Tower of the Tower of London. Little Ease is a four foot by four foot space, which disallows its prisoners to either stand or lie down. Buechner compared the constraints of Little Ease with his inability to break from his past.

Wheaton College

Buechner accepted a teaching assignment at Wheaton College's Divinity School. He found the students at the mid-western school much more open about their emotions and feelings for God than students on the east coast.

Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church

Buechner found his favorite church while teaching in Wheaton. He respected the openness of the minister at St. Barnabas, Robert MacFarlane, who was not condescending and not afraid to express his own doubts and fears.

The Basement Room

Buechner's most important work in finding his original self and dealing with his past was accomplished in the basement room of a church. He joined a twelve-step program, similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, whose members were striving along with Buechner to tell their secrets.

Themes

Keeping Secrets

The story of life-long denial is told by author Frederick Buechner in his autobiographical account, "Telling Secrets". The "telling of secrets" successfully caps a life-time of self-deception and "keeping secrets." When the young Frederick is faced with the suicide death of his father, he learns from his mother to attach shame and humiliation to the incident. Frederick's mother whisks him and his brother away from the scene of the tragedy in New Jersey to Bermuda to begin a new life and bury the unpleasantness of the past.

The children learn quickly through their mother's tone and behavior to not engage in conversation about their father. They soon can hardly remember what he looked like; ultimately, it was as though he never existed. In later years, Buechner is forced to deal with the past and its secrets. Buechner epitomizes this sentiment in the title character of his novel "Godric" who learned that as far and as wide as one travels the world, the path returns to the father's doorstep.

Buechner's mother was able to survive her entire life by avoiding the truth. She was in the habit of gold-plating everything—from her statuary and lampshades to her past. She placed gold stars on her children's homework whether deserved or not. As a young author, Buechner wrote a novel closely resembling aspects of his father's life. Mrs. Buechner added to the young man's already robust stash of guilt by accusing him of betraying her. Never again would she read anything he wrote. That episode taught him that telling the truth can cause anguish and pain. However, through his struggles in revisiting the past and learning the truth, Buechner was provided a more pointed lesson: damages from "keeping secrets" were by far the most devastating.

The Original Person

Frederick Buechner, author and narrator of his personal story, "Telling Secrets" is a writer and minister who, through personal tragedy, becomes convinced that there is no happiness in a life stripped of the "original person" that God created him to be. Buechner feels that God's gifts, including art—be it writing, painting, dancing—all reside within that original person. Buechner learns that genuine prayer, prayer that expresses one's true emotions and needs, originates from that same place. As people mature, they often emulate others who they deem to be more appealing or strive to live up to an ideal that, though against their own nature, appears to be more attractive and acceptable to the world. In this scenario that often becomes a life-long plague, the original person is lost in a debris of lies and secrets. Not only can one not live up to his or her God-given potential by adapting a new persona, it is impossible for that person to have a close relationship with God, who bestowed him with those original gifts.

Frederick Buechner's life-long journey to find that true self began as a young boy when his father committed suicide. His mother, through her prideful behavior, disallowed Frederick from expressing his feelings about his father or even asking questions about him. Thus began a life-long struggle that denied the truth that the "original person" needed in order to flourish.

After his daughter's serious battle with disease from which she finally recovered, Frederick realized that he was not well—that a life of denials and lies had ravaged and stolen his original purpose. In his mid-fifties, Buechner is finally able to confront the demons that had damaged his life and emerge victorious by his confrontation of them. In essence, he becomes the original person he sought.

The Legacy of Deception

Frederick Buechner's mother began a legacy of deception in her nuclear family that far outlived her. When Frederick speaks of being a newly wed, he comments that both his and his wife's families suffered from the inability to face uncomfortable realities. As Frederick matured and gained more experience, he began to realize that he himself was passing the damaging behavior on to his three children.

Most alarmingly, the anger resulting from glossing over the sometimes ugly truth manifested itself in a serious physical condition in one of his teen-aged daughters. As a young teen, the girl began to limit her eating, which at first Frederick attributed to a young girl wanting to look more attractive. However, when her appearance took on a deadly, skeletal look, the red flags quickly went up.

The young girl had years of struggle with the anorexia nervosa—she almost died at one point. Through therapy and a fragment of the will to live, Frederick's daughter eventually recovered. It was then that Frederick recognized that he was sick as well. While his daughter starved from lack of food, Frederick was starving from lack of emotions—emotions which had been abandoned and smothered for decades.

Perhaps Buechner's mother was taught to bury secrets by her parents; if so, she learned well. The self-deception in her family was passed on to Buechner and his younger brother, his wife and his three children. A recovering secret-keeper, Buechner wears the scars of a life-long battle to change the legacy of lies and self-deception.

Style

Perspective

The book "Telling Secrets" is written by author Frederick Buechner. He is the first-person narrator of the account which is about his personal struggle in finding what he terms the "original person"—the person God intended him to be. Of course, since the story is about his life and family, there could be no better authority to pen this account. From his perspective as an ordained minister, Buechner has credibility in addressing the issues of God and faith.

The book's title, "Telling Secrets", comes from a familiar tradition in many families, which is to not speak about feelings and emotions. As a youngster, after his father committed suicide, Buechner learns to bury the past along with all the questions and feelings about the tragedy that would be normal for him to have. His personal narration of dealing with a life-long struggle to free himself from his past is poignant and of course believable, since it originates from his experiences and memories.

By telling his own story in the first person, he is able to convey the pain and agony of his long journey in finding his original self. When he speaks of his daughter's struggle with anorexia nervosa—to which she almost succumbs—he is careful to relate only his feelings and pain and underscores the fact that he does not pretend to tell the story from his daughter's perspective.

Tone

Frederick Buechner writes his autobiographical work, "Telling Secrets" in a reflective and bittersweet tone. While he certainly was damaged by his mother's unstated though militant legacy to keep secrets about what she deemed taboo, his struggle to free himself from those binds have healed the wounds. He seems to hold no animosity toward his mother—rather, he appears to hold sympathy and understanding.

There is great poignancy in Buechner's words as he writes of the once forbidden topics of the past. Buechner does not lecture nor pontificate about the thin legacy left to him by his parents. Rather, he dismantles the sadness by describing how his struggle in surmounting his guilt and hidden emotions led to his finding the person—the "original person"—that God meant him to be.

Buechner's closeness and reverence for God becomes apparent when, as an adult, he begins to find himself and becomes a minister. His relationship with God, however, was not fulfilled until he was able to recover his true self. On his journey to reach back into his dark past, he makes allusions of himself as "The Cowardly Lion" and his own character "Godric" from the novel by the same name.

Buechner is a very tempered man, although in many ways, he "crawled through the fire" to find his peace with himself and God. This restrained and moderate tone of expression comes across in Buechner's words—which are touching and memorable.

Structure

"Telling Secrets" is the autobiographical story of author Frederick Buechner. The account is separated into three chapters. The title of the first chapter, "The Dwarves in the Stable," is based on an episode in the C. S. Lewis story, "The Last Battle." The dwarves think they are huddled together in a stable in what they think is pitch black. In reality, they are sitting on an endless green expanse capped with a bright blue sky. This metaphorically sets the backdrop of "Telling Secret's" account of self-delusion.

The second chapter, entitled, "The White Tower," references a historic source. Within the Tower of London, there is an old wing known as the White Tower, built by William the Conqueror in the eleventh century. On the second floor of the White Tower, there is a small Norman chapel called the Chapel of St. John which is a serene and peaceful sanctuary. However, beneath the chapel is a dungeon called Little Ease—named because its four foot by four foot dimensions disallows an adult from either lying down or standing up, thus providing "little ease" to the prisoner. Buechner attaches metaphorical meaning to the two sections of the White Tower—the chapel is where the individual's peace and truth reside and Little Ease is the location to which people exile themselves through their lies and self-deception.

The third chapter is entitled, "The Basement Room", which at first blush presents rather ominous potentials. However, the basement room of a church is where Buechner meets with others who have faced similar problems with their pasts in a twelve-step program. It is in this unremarkable setting that Buechner is able to break from a past of "keeping secrets" into a future where "telling secrets" is the key to personal freedom and peace.

Quotes

"If I didn't have something to look for, I would be lost. . .it was one of her most shimmering utterances." Chap. 1, p. 12

"Her laughter came from deep down in herself and deep down in the past, which in one way was lost and gone and in other ways was still as much within her reach as the can of root beer with a straw sticking in it which . . . was the only thing that helped her dry throat." (Chap. 1, p. 13

"The sadness was I'd lost a father I had never fully found. . .Your whole life through you search to catch the strain, and seek the face you've lost in strangers' faces." Chap. 1, p. 21

"The fearsome blessing of that hard time continues to work itself out in my life in the same way we're told the universe is still hurtling through outer space under the impact of the great cosmic explosion that brought it into being in the first place. I think grace sometimes explodes into our lives like that—sending our pain, terror, astonishment hurtling through inner space until by grace they become Orion, Cassiopeia, Polaris to give us our bearings." Chap. 1, p. 25

"None of us has the power to change other human beings like that, and it would be a terrible power if we did, the power to violate the humanity of others even for their own good." Chap. 1, p. 26

"A bleeding heart is of no help to anybody if it bleeds to death." Chap. 1, p. 28

"As individuals, as a species, as a world, our origins are lost in mystery." Chap. 1, p. 44

"I can only assume he believed that we would be better off without him, and in a tragic way he was right. In that way his death was, as I suspect he intended it to be, his last, best gift to us." Chap. 2, p. 69

"Fifty years later Bermuda was where most of those unfinished novels were set, and as I think aback on them now, it seems clear that in the process of trying to remember and dream my way into them, what I was looking for was less a book about the enchanted place to write than a place like that enchanted place inside myself to find and be." Chap. 2, p. 70

"Our secrets are not hid from God, says the ancient collect, but they are hid from each other, and some of them we so successfully hide even from ourselves that after a while we all but forget they exist." Chap. 3, p. 73

"Go where your best prayers take you. Unclench the fists of your spirit and take it easy. Breathe deep of the glad air and live one day at a time." Chap. 3, p. 92

"'Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication make your requests known to God. And the peace that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus.' (Philippians 3:6-7)" Chap. 3, p. 93

Topics for Discussion

Why did Frederick Buechner's elderly mother close her eyes when her sons spoke to her?

In Frederick Buechner's view, what do those suffering from anorexia nervosa crave?

What does Frederick Buechner learn about himself during his daughter's battle with anorexia reveal?

What allusion does Frederick Buechner make to "The Cowardly Lion" of the "Wizard of Oz" and the title character in his book "Godric?"

What significance does Buechner attach to the The Tower of London's White Tower and Little Ease?

What does Frederick Buechner refer to as the "original person?" What caused the struggle in his life to find himself?

Why was it difficult for Frederick Buechner to write about his time as a child in Bermuda?

What type of organization did Frederick Buechner join that gave him the strength to find himself? What prayers did they begin and end their meetings with?