

“Open confession is good for the soul.” *Scottish proverb*
“You’re only as sick as your secrets.” *Alcoholics Anonymous*

Secrets delivered on a postcard

Is a secret weighing on you? Need a safe place to share it?

PostSecret is here for you.

If you haven’t heard, PostSecret is a mail-focused community art project that has grown into a cultural phenomenon over its 14-year existence.

The fundamentals are simple: People who wish to share a secret anonymously write it down on a postcard, illustrate it (or not), and send their confessional to an address in Germantown, MD. The postcards are then read by secret wrangler Frank Warren, who has turned his 2005 blog experiment into a thriving cottage industry including a website, social media accounts, *New York Times*

best-sellers and tour events around the country.

Every week, he posts a select number of received secrets—which run the gamut from happy to sad, tragic to comic, sublime to ridiculous—on PostSecret.com.

“I love how PostSecret marries the digital world of the web to the analog world of postcards,” Warren, 54, said in an email interview. The Postal Museum in Washington, DC, said much the same in a description of “PostSecret: The Power of a Postcard,” an exhibition that ran from Aug. 3, 2015, to Jan. 1, 2018: “The exhibition...demonstrates a unique relationship between mail, digital

technology and social media.”

There are complications, however. “Kids are unaware of how much postage to put on a postcard and some grandparents are flummoxed by the blogs,” Warren said.

When asked why postcards make such a good medium for these confessionals, he mentions Facebook’s recent data-sharing revelations and internet surveillance generally.

“It is difficult to trust the internet. But postcards are beautifully simple and trustworthy. Without a return address, you know your postcard is [untraceable]. You have guaranteed anonymity,” he said, adding, “Some

people take the added precaution of mailing their exposed secrets in envelopes.”

One might wonder why people would participate, and if merely sending a postcard can truly help those who do. There is no shortage of online commentary on the subject. Some argue that any relief would be

temporary, as many of the disclosures are deeply disturbing. Others suggest that it’s impossible to know if a shared secret is a hoax. But one man who since 2010 has been studying the keeping of secrets and how it affects us seems to support the idea that anonymous revelation can be helpful.

Michael Slepian, a Columbia Busi-



More than 1 million postcards have been sent to PostSecret.

ness School assistant professor who maintains KeepingSecrets.org, says that revealing a secret is therapeutic—if it is done in the right way.

“Talking about a secret can help,” Slepian explained to *Quartz* magazine. “But only if a trusted confidant is available; telling the wrong person will only make things worse.

“If you are not sure who you can tell, revealing the secret anonymously... [can] help by bringing a sense of relief or realizing you are not alone in keeping a secret.”

He cites PostSecret as one such place.

The project, which began before the wildfire spread of social media, did once enter the digital arena, offering an app where people could post secrets directly in 2011. Warren shuttered it after three months because a few bad actors were not participating in the supportive spirit of PostSecret.

Unsurprisingly, he is not a fan of several recent digital apps that stepped in to fill that void.

“Typing a secret into a text field is too easy,” he wrote. “To buy a postcard, [imagine] what secret you want to take ownership of, and share on the back—then choosing and fitting the limited amount of words to express your feelings, adding artwork maybe to convey the parts that are too hard to see in words, then addressing it, stamping it, walking to the mailbox and physically letting it go; over a million people from around the world have gone through that ritual. My hope is that they are able to release a postcard, a secret and maybe more.” **PR**

