

One New Book for the Preacher

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TELLING SECRETS by Frederick Buechner. Harper: San Francisco, 1991. 106 pages, hardcover, \$16.95.

Frederick Buechner fulfills his mission as a Presbyterian minister through his writing. His twenty-six wonderfully crafted books are evenly divided between novels and nonfiction. *Telling Secrets*, however, is the third, and in some ways, the most unique of a remarkable trilogy of autobiography. *The Sacred Journey*, delivered as the Smyth Lectures at the 1981 Columbia Forum, was an exercise in “listening to life,” very personal and very moving. *Now and Then* continued through significant experiences of early ministry. Buechner introduces *Telling Secrets* with his usual reticence about something so personal. “This is my third venture into autobiography, and I launch it on the world with the same misgivings as in the case of the earlier two. It is like telling somebody in detail how you are before they have asked the question, How are you?” (p.1). Misgivings or not, thousands of readers will be glad he did, and will find themselves “tracking” along with him in their own “listening to their lives.”

Why, though, deal with secrets at all? The answer is in the premise that, by and large, the human family has powerful secrets. In significant ways, these secrets can “kill,” but telling can strip them of their power and heal their wounds. They even encompass what is perhaps “the central paradox of our condition - that what we hunger for, perhaps more than anything else, is to be known in our full humanness, and yet, that is often just what we also fear more than anything else” (p.2).

Buechner’s “flood of secrets, powerful, distressing, and yet, illuminating,” revolve around three foci: his father’s compulsive alcoholism and suicide, his daughter’s anorexic agony, and in a different way, his own search for healing and grace. Those unresolved problems in his past, still collecting damages from him, were confronted and dealt with through work, reflection, scripture, (e.g., Ps. 91), prayer, people, and, in one surprising instance, Alanon, a fellowship of families of alcoholics.

His father’s suicide when Buechner was ten years old was hidden in a “conspiracy of silence” that was painfully destructive for him. In another way, the experiences of the Buechner’s daughter with *anorexia nervosa* also devastated him. “I was in Hell” he says, and he was. At breakfast, during the Forum Week, he said to us, “My wife wanted me to cancel this engagement and stay home. We have a serious problem with a daughter.” However, in quite different ways, father and daughter both found it possible to move out of darkness into light. Dramatic images are used to describe the “learning” which took place. “Grace *explodes* into our lives” (p.25). The focus, now, for Buechner, was not so destructively on his daughter, but on himself. He came to see that in quite different ways they both knew two forces in their lives. They both desired to be protected and cared for, while at the same time, each wanted to be free and independent (p.46-47).

Near the end of *Telling Secrets* Buechner shares some conclusions from a mosaic of “remembering.” He gives little direction, however, as to the criteria for knowing “when, where, to whom, and how” to tell secrets. He focuses on the need to wait and listen before God. He himself begins to listen in prayer rather than to talk incessantly.

Even “the chatter of thought” gave way to “waiting” and “remembering.” Psalm 131 is a reflection of his praying. Out of the experience in Alanon, and in other times of telling the secrets of his life, he comes to confront the questions of faith. “Have we been right? Is it finally true what we have believed and hungered for? This side of Paradise, who can with absolute certainty?” (p.103). For Buechner, in the silent waiting before God, he has known “the presence of a presence and a promise promised” (p.106). In that knowledge, he concludes, the God “unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid,” who dwells “in the secret places of the most High” still makes known love, grace, and peace. God speaks through the “hieroglyphics” of the things that happen to us, and through “the fathomless quiet in the holy place within us.” We learn “that we do not have to go it alone.” He concludes, “It is even possible to bless the past, even the cursed parts, and be blessed by it.” So be it!