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## Are Secrets Spoiling Your Spiritual Life?

by John Howard Prin, LADC

As an addictions counselor, I often see people who want to grow spiritually but who are using addictions as shortcuts to their goals. Over the years I've identified two major conditions that persons trapped in addiction claim for staying addicted: boredom and misery. These misguided folks persist in heavy drinking, compulsive shopping, internet pornography, shoplifting, eating disorders, and more in order to achieve the mood change from negative emotions that they seek — in order to escape from their boredom or pain and achieve what feels like a spiritual high. Unfortunately once the high disappears, what is left is shame, guilt, remorse, and disapproval from the important people in their lives. This tends to lead to secrecy. Avoiding the shame, guilt, and remorse is a whopping challenge in itself and failure, or refusal to even try, is rife. About one-third of the clients whom I see actively steal hours away from their public lives, including home and work lives, to indulge in their hidden addictive habits — secretly attempting to reach transcendence from reality.

Are you someone who lives out a secret life as a way to cover up and avoid the disapproval of others, especially loved ones? Do you, or somebody you know, carefully calculate when to indulge in your favorite rituals whenever nobody is looking? People who do so may be seeking to fill an undefined but persistent core need, a spiritual connection. Their quest is doomed however by cover-ups, alibis, excuses, and lies (hardly authentic spirituality). These are the people I hope to help with my book *Secret Keeping: Overcoming Hidden Habits and Addictions*.

Secret Keepers, I've learned, are troubled people who seek significance and meaning in a "parallel universe" of their own secret design where they intentionally conceal shameful and discreditable behaviors. The problem is, the moment their artificial mood-elevation ends (the high ends), they once again face the same boredom or misery. No change, other than the added suffering from self-inflicted hangovers, headaches, sexually transmitted diseases, financial debts, lack of nutrition, impaired sleep, liver and lung damage...or some other shock to their system!

Hidden addictive behavior, regardless of how cleverly concealed, will never resolve the core predicaments of boredom and misery. Bored people lack direction, purpose, and meaning in their lives. Drinking or drugging in isolation or stealing hours to pursue risky solo thrills may divert someone temporarily from boredom, but these will never supply permanently the meaning and significance that comes from a lifestyle of seeking authentic spirituality.

Miserable people feel the hurts of their past, feel powerless in the present, and fear for their future. Perhaps they have tried to find spiritual solace and peace but it has eluded them. Feeling resentful of their early suffering and justified in their victim mindset, such an individual

escapes the here-and-now in any way he or she can. Again, no permanent meaning and significance (which build self-esteem and well being) results.

As a counselor, I verbally acknowledge these two kinds of Secret Keepers' genuine need to live a sincere spiritual life. Every human being has this need built deep into their genes, I believe. But I point out the downward spiral of the destructive risks and consequences of their choices. I aim to help them see the futility of reaching their spiritual goals by using addictive substitutes and shortcuts. Instead, I coach them on discovering the rewards of shedding their secret-keeping habits and revising their beliefs and attitudes in order to live the H.O.T. (Honest, Open, Transparent) life, a way of living that releases them to be the person they were born to be.

We arrive on earth as spiritual beings in tangible bodies. As we grow from being babies to children, especially in Western societies, we come to believe that spirituality resides outside us — beyond, separate, apart. Sadly, the divine spark within flickers and fades, and in time disconnection occurs. As some children grow up, their tender emotions experience damage from developmental deficits — hurtful feelings that destabilize children due to real suffering or unfairness in their upbringing. For these kids, damaged emotions and disconnected spirits generate distorted thoughts or self-talk that limit their options. This combination of disconnection and damage sets the stage for addictions in adolescents and can readily lead to destructive mood-altering behavior as a shortcut to escaping negative emotions. Over time the body will experience disease or medical disorders, and disaster or even death may follow.... unless the individual makes a decision to abstain from their addiction(s) and accompanying secret-keeping by committing to recovery.

Resolution for bored people starts as they learn to deconstruct their distorted thinking ("Life sucks, then you die") by revising their beliefs and self-talk ("Life offers endless possibilities and I'm alive to try them."). For miserable people, resolution starts as they learn to identify the distorted thoughts that were linked to hurtful feelings from childhood suffering or injustice, and it continues when they learn to practice acceptance and forgiveness. For both bored and miserable people, the payoff gets even better whenever they learn to re-connect spiritually with the divine spark of a Higher Power.

Then the benefits of a genuine H.O.T life grow as one lives in recovery and old ways of secretly hiding addictive habits give way to authentic spirituality.

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**John Howard Prin**, a former addict, is now a licensed alcohol and drug counselor, speaker, and the author of *Secret Keeping: Overcoming Hidden Habits and Addictions*. His articles and books address the ways people get trapped in unhealthy secret habits and offer effective methods to escape the harm of leading double lives. John's career began with his own recovery from chemical addictions in 1996. He heads TrueYouRecovery.com Services in Minneapolis, MN.

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