

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Telling Secrets

by

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1. Frederick Buechner asserts, “I have come to believe that by and large the human family all has the same secrets, which are both very telling and very important to tell” (p. 2). What do you think is the general theme and purpose of those secrets? Why is it important to tell them?
2. “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” (p. 10). Has this been true in your own experience or that of someone you know? How can you determine if a family has “gone out of whack”?
3. Buechner remembers the life of his aging mother as a “life that had somehow gotten mislaid in the debris of her nonlife” (p. 12). What do you think he means by a

person's "nonlife," and what is its debris? How do we avoid being mislaid in the same way?

4. Buechner makes the point that his mother's beauty stifled her ability to be kind, since people coddled and adored her. What do you think is the relationship between outer beauty and inner kindness? How do they complement or counteract each other?
5. "It is so easy to sum up other people's lives. . . . The day will come when somebody tries to sum you up the same way . . . and also me" (p. 18). How might someone sum you up? How would you sum up yourself?
6. Referring to his desire and inability to instantly cure his daughter's anorexia, Buechner writes: "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" (p. 26). What does Buechner mean by "the humanity of others," and why would affecting it be a terrible power? Have you ever been in a similar position or wanted to possess that power? What did you learn from it?
7. The illness of Buechner's daughter revealed to him his own demons: "I began to see how much I was in need of healing and getting well myself" (p. 29). In what ways do you think someone else's struggles might shed light on your own weaknesses?
8. Revisiting the past gives us a second chance at righting our mistakes, allowing us to "finally finish with the past in the sense of removing its power to hurt us" (p. 32).

Do you agree? Can you name a time when revisiting the past helped you cope with your mistakes?

9. Buechner asserts that at creation God made humanity and imprinted it with his image, instilling in each of us our “original self” (p. 44). He then explains that the original self often gets lost amid the difficulties of life. Do you know your original self? What, if anything, has caused it to get lost?
10. During a visit Buechner once made to his mother, a friend called and asked for help. His mother discouraged him from going because it would end their visit. “It is on such outwardly trivial decisions as this—should I go or should I stay—that human souls are saved or lost” (p. 49). How might ordinary decisions such as this carry eternal significance? Have you experienced a similar crisis of decision?
11. Buechner describes the Little Ease, a prison chamber so confined that its inhabitant cannot lie straight or stand up, or in any way find relief or physical comfort. It “is a place of torment, but if you live there long enough, it eventually becomes home” (p. 53). What do you make of this statement? What “prisons” have confined you that eventually became home?
12. Regarding our deepest longings, Buechner writes, “I think our best dreams are always trying to move in that direction—homeward” (p. 66). What do you consider to be your best dreams? In what way do they point homeward?

13. In reflecting upon his life, Buechner concedes that he indulges in self-pity but does not apologize for it. “I pity the child who happens to have been me the way I would pity any child under similar circumstances” (p. 74). Can self-pity be appropriate after a difficult childhood? How can it be experienced in a way that heals?
14. Buechner says that we must honor the “sad and hurtful secrets” of our past by admitting what happened and accepting ourselves so that we can move beyond those pains and find healing (p. 76). Do you honor your painful secrets? If not, how might you become better at it?
15. “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” (p. 92). Where do your best prayers take you? Do they enable you to “unclench the fists of your spirit”?
16. “We all of us have not only the right to be happy no matter what but also a kind of sacred commission to be happy—in the sense of being free to breathe and move, in the sense of being able to bless our own lives, even the sad times of our own lives” (p. 102). How do you understand the sacred commission to be happy? Are you realizing it in your life? Are you blessing your own life? Why or why not?