

The Secret

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A person's brain is pretty weird in how it works. I knew that something bad was going on, even though my Mom and Dad were saying nothing at all to me. I still remember that night real good. Well, my Dad told me what happened, about how it was in the middle of the night and stuff, and how I got out of my bed screaming and crying and having a fit. He said it was like a fit anyways. He said I was also running on one spot, and shaking both my hands real hard while I was screaming and crying. They just stood there, my Dad said, "All freaked out" wondering if they should get me to the hospital to get a calming-down needle. After five minutes of being crazy, I woke up. Then I went back to sleep.

I must have known that something was wrong. Mom and Dad would have long quiet, phone talks with people. And we suddenly started going to a church. My Dad told me about how a person was made up of a mind, a body and a spirit. He talked about how school is mostly for making your mind strong and sports does the same for your body. That left the spirit part, and the church was sort of a gym for spirit exercises. I started looking for ghosts there but everybody seemed pretty normal.

One day my Mom told me that we were going to visit her cousin Allan in New Jersey. She said we were flying, not taking the car like we always did. I thought it was funny that it wasn't summer or Thanksgiving or Christmas or any other special reason. Uncle Allan picked us up at the airport, and they talked a lot about second opinions and doctors. But I couldn't really understand them. Maybe I was only four and three quarters, but I already knew when grown-ups were talking secretly. It was like they all had been talking about something when I wasn't around. What that something actually was never came up, so it sounded like I was in a car full of spies.

The second day we were there, Allan took my Mom and Dad into the Apple City, New York, and I stayed with my cousin Susan to play. Later on that day, they came home and I heard the words "doctor this..." and doctor that..." So I knew someone was sick all right. The whole secret thing felt like a mean little worm squiggling around inside me and it made me get very mad at other kids sometimes. If a kid bothered me, I would usually follow the rules and "use my words" to ask them to stop. But when that worm started wiggling and buzzing in my head, I would just explode with a big push. I knocked a few kids on their butts, and teachers' notes went home to my parents.

"John, what kinds of behaviour are not acceptable?" said Dad. "Uh, no hitting? No scratching? No spitting? No pushing?" Usually I got most of the stuff. I always forgot "pinching", because I don't pinch kids.

There were other times that the worm would get me into trouble. It would be like I could hear a mean voice in my head: Go ahead Johnny. Take that racing car home. Day care already has lots of toys. Way more than you.

So I would put it in my pocket and take it home. One problem. I would forget I had the car in my pocket until I saw it around bedtime in my Dad's hand. Right above his hand, I would see his not-very-happy face. I knew I was in trouble again.

"John, do you know what stealing is?"

"Yes?"

"John, I am very disappointed in you. Taking things that belong to other people is wrong."

"Dad, I was just borrowing it!"

"Tomorrow you will have to take the toy back to the day care teacher yourself. And, you will have to apologize for taking it."



“No Dad, I can’t, I can’t. She’ll be really mad at me! I’ll never do it again! Honest!”

I never tried to blame it on the worm when this stuff happened. I kept it secret since that seemed to be the way important things should be done. I always ended up feeling bad. And the only way I could explain why I did bad things was because I was bad.

“No honey! You’re not bad at all. We all make mistakes and we try to learn how to be better.”

“No Dad, I’m just a loser.”

“How can you be a loser? You are a great kid Johnny.”

Other times I would say stuff like “I’m an idiot”, “nobody loves me”, or “I have no friends”. Even lots of hugs and kisses didn’t help very much.

After that scary night, they finally did tell me what was going on to my face. “John, your Mom and I want to talk to you for a minute.” That’s how my Dad started. My Mom didn’t say anything the whole time. She just sat there looking very upset. It looked like she was going to cry any second, and I said to myself, “Oh boy, this is bad!” So there we were, sitting in the living room, the TV off, with Dad looking extremely, extremely serious, and Mom just about to cry. And they brought that secret out into the open air. I could hardly breathe when they started to tell me. The air got very dark and dizzy. They told me that Mom was sick with cancer. They said she was going to doctors and hospitals to try and get better. “We hope that Mommy will get better, John, but it’s going to be a tough time, and we’re going to need to help each other a lot. Mostly we need to hug each other and be helpful, that’s all.

And you know, that was all. I still don’t know why they had been so afraid to tell me that I should be helpful. I couldn’t be helpful if I didn’t know what was going on, could I?

The next week after our big talk, they took me to the hospital and I met Mom’s doctors and nurses. They were nice. I got to go on a

tour of the hospital with my Dad while they checked out Mom. It seemed like a good place to get help. It had a happy name. It was called Sunnybrook.

We had more big talks after that. And at Show and Tell time, I told my teacher and the kids in my class what had been bugging me, now that I knew what it was. We talked about a person’s feelings when someone they love is sick. The teacher asked them how they could help me when I was feeling those things and they had lots of great ideas. Tommy said he would give me a hug if I was sad. Sara said she would understand if I was mad about stuff and pushed her at recess. The same thing happened in day care and at church with the kids there. Everyone was helpful to me while I was being helpful to my Mom.

It was too bad that things didn’t go very good for Mom. That hospital couldn’t make up miracles. I guess that was what we needed because she died even with everyone being very, very helpful. I learned that there’s stuff that we can’t do anything about and other stuff we can. Like keeping secrets. My Dad said that parents keep secrets from their kids for protection. But, he said, that protection idea usually backfires. We are always more afraid of things we don’t understand, he said.

I agree, and if I could talk to every parent, I would tell them this: “Kids aren’t stupid you know. We’re just really young!”



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