

CAN I TELL YOU SOMETHING?

Secrets in a small town

Hollie Bakerboljkovac opens up

"It was travelling mother," said the child eagerly, and wilfully. "It was leaving the farm, and putting up lunch in a basket, and a little riding ... and we carried our night gowns."

"Don't tell the whole village about it if we did," said the mother, interrupting the reminiscences of this experienced voyager. "Haven't I told you before," she whispered in her last attempt at discipline, "that you shouldn't talk about night gowns and stockings and, things like that in a loud tone of voice. And especially when there's men folks round."

"I know mother, and I won't. All I want to say is..."
Rebecca and her mother, of Sunnybrook Farm

This passage from Kate Douglas Wiggin's opening pages is 1903s version of the Things We Don't Talk About. Rebecca is from a time of impeccable manners, acceptable behaviour and Sunday morning town gossip. It's an era of keeping up appearances. Living in a small village means everyone knows your business, so ensuring that they don't know about what you wear to bed was important. Some things have to be kept secret.

One hundred and fifteen years after Rebecca, we are more liberated to say what we think, to express our opinions and wow — some people even go to the corner store in their nightgowns!

Here we are, in modern Braidwood, riding in cars rather than horses, communicating via Facebook rather than Sunday morning gossip, and visiting loved ones with the tap of a touch screen. We share our personal lives publicly, tell people when we're annoyed at the driver who cut us off on the Highway, share restaurant recommendations and post photos of far off destinations.

We share a lot of information about our lives. Living in a small village means everyone has already seen what you did on the weekend (via social media) before you meet them in the street on Monday.

Sharing publicly gives us things to talk about in real life.
What you share shapes who you are seen to be.

And, just like Rebecca's mother, we all know the rules about what not to talk about. Some things are still kept secret.

As a therapist, I'm not as much interested in the actual Things We Don't Talk About as I am interested in the reasons for why we are not talking about them. For ex-

ample, generally people don't like to talk publicly about marriage problems, money issues, emotional trauma, sexual dysfunction and even some types of physical health concerns. The more interesting question is: Why not?

We've all been taught what not to talk about. For Rebecca, mother's implication is clear : it's shameful to discuss nightgowns in public. What 'Things You Shouldn't Talk About' have you learned to associate with shame?

"I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection."

~ Brene Brown

The things we don't talk about put spotlights on our perceived failures. When you perceive your personal value to be intrinsically linked to your ability to manage certain events (like debt, or weight gain, or lack of intimacy with your partner) in a particular way, anything outside of that restricted situation is failure, and shame is given a space to seep in.

Not being able to cope with a particular event, or making a mistake, or not knowing how to move forward in a productive way, doesn't mean YOU are a failure. It just means at this time, you haven't quite got the resources and information you need to successfully complete your target. And if you frame it like that, it becomes much easier to talk about.

We must get honest about our suffering. You're not the only person who had a surgery that's difficult to bounce back from. You're not the only parent who feels guilty about being at work during your kid's assembly. You're not the only woman who's found herself in an abusive relationship. You're not the only man who can't physically do the work he did when he was twenty years old. You're not the only family who missed a mortgage payment. You're not the only one who's suffering.

You could be the one to speak out. In order to be free of the shame, we have to talk about it. We have to find people who will accept us for who we are, where we stand, mistakes and all. And we have to be those people for others.



SURE, GO AHEAD

Be willing to listen to your loved ones without judgment. Be willing to ask the question, "how does that experience feel for you," and then listen to the answer. Shame doesn't need a solution. Giving a solution just reiterates, "whatever you have done was not enough," and the person who is living with shame will respond by hearing you say, "you are not enough."

Also, be willing to ask, "why not?" Why not talk about 'The Things'? Why not share the realness of our lives? Why not say NO to superficial social media posts by ignoring them, refusing to hit the Like button, or unfollowing?

Why not reach out to someone you care about in real time?
Why not be all of yourself?
Why not be willing to look into another person's heart?
Why not open our own?

Rebecca's talk about nightgowns threatened to disrupt the social fabric of Riverboro, but the 'Things We Don't Talk About' in the modern day are much more dangerous to Braidwood's culture and prosperity. Shame is the destroyer that takes us to dark and wounded places, and the best cure

for shame is to bring it into the light. Our mental, emotional and physical health rely on facing shame.

Start Talking About The Things that are secret, and claim yourself as more than the sum of the things you haven't been able to handle. We've all been stuck somewhere. Your value is not defined by your stuckness. You have unlimited potential. And none of it has anything to do with what your neighbour is doing on Facebook.

Choose who you open your heart to wisely at first. Go to someone you trust. And if you don't have one of those, go to a professional; because that's what we're trained for. Regardless, the starting point to facing

the Things We Don't Talk About is to grow your heart, by allowing someone else to look in.

And if you're still unsure, take inspiration from Rebecca :

"[Rebecca's heart] stretched a little and grew; grew in sweetness and intuition and depth of feeling. It had looked into another heart, felt it beat, and heard it sigh; and that is how all hearts grow."

~ Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm
by Kate Douglas Wiggin, 1903

Hollie Bakerboljkovac is an Integrative Therapist and Coach at Braidwood Holistic Therapies. She works in various therapeutic modalities to help people engage with authentic wholebody wellness, including mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health. Connect with Hollie at braidwoodholistic.com.au and instituteformselfcrafting.com



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