

Secret Dangers
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Over the course of the past eight months or so, I've had several people ask me if I am familiar with *The Secret*. The first time, I had to respond honestly "no" – at that point I'd never even heard of it. Then I began hearing more buzz – how Oprah Winfrey had endorsed it on her show, and Larry King was enamored of it – and it began coming up more frequently in conversations with some of you, and with others of my friends. Then in one week a couple months ago it came up twice – first from a respected personal friend who raved about how wonderful it was and how the personal affirmations she had learned from *The Secret* were making a difference in her life; and then from another friend who was worried because his sister had become a devotee overnight and was, in response, making choices that seemed self-destructive.

I knew then that I needed at least to understand what this phenomenon was all about – and why millions of people were flocking to the DVD and the book. I wonder how many of you are at all familiar with *The Secret*... [ask for show of hands].

I will be candid – I was biased from the start because of my inherent skepticism in general, and also because of the title... I learned long ago that secrets are dangerous and toxic. So the title and the feigned mystery was itself a turn-off. Still, I tried mightily to approach it with an open mind. I watched some of the DVD (which came first, before the words were put into book form) and I read the book from cover to cover. And, now, to be quite frank, I am decidedly *not* enamored of *The Secret*'s message, and in fact think it is potentially dangerous if taken too seriously.

For those of you unfamiliar with it, we could have a long conversation about the specifics of *The Secret*'s claims, but here are the basics. On the official website of *The Secret*, the very first statement is, "*The Secret* reveals the most powerful law in the universe" – but with no definition of that law. Under a tab labeled "Top Secret" is a supposed "Summary of Secret Teachings," as follows:

Money is magnetic energy. You are a magnet attracting to you all things, via the signal you are emitting through your thoughts and feelings. Discover how to become a powerful magnet for the creation of personal wealth.

Relationships can be completely transformed, no matter what it's like right now. Learn how to transform every single relationship you have in your life.

Concerned about your health? Explore ways to open yourself up and become a powerful magnet to wellness and health starting from wherever you are now.

Of course, those statements still don't define the actual "secret". But Oprah's web site actually summarizes it well... "The Secret is defined as the law of attraction, which states that like attracts like. The concept says that the energy you put into the world—both good and bad—is exactly what comes

back to you. This means *you* create the circumstances of your life with the choices you make every day.” (Oprah, 1 of 15)

And the “teachers”, such as James Arthur Ray, assert that there is scientific evidence to back up the claims. “Science tells us that everything is energy, and so your thoughts are energy. Your body, your cash, your car—everything you think is solid, . . . it’s just a field of energy and a rate of vibration. And so are we.” (Oprah, 2 of 15) And from this, they say, we can conclude that our thoughts have the power literally to manifest other “material” things.

I am willing to grant some of the basic premises – that our thoughts are powerful (of course they are!), that *we* are powerful (of course we are!), that positive thinking generally is more productive than negative thinking. And if it were that simple, then I probably would not even be interested in talking with you about it. But it goes much further than that.

I have two primary concerns and critiques. The first is its pervasive materialism. Aside from a mere few examples – out of hundreds in the entire book – of what benefits one can expect from applying the Secret, all the examples are about material and/or superficial benefits... money, houses, “ideal” parking spaces, thin bodies, no waiting at the amusement park.

Yes, the amusement park. It didn’t take long for me to lose respect for Rhonda Byrne (the author / “discoverer” of *The Secret*) when I read in the Foreword, “Some of the most magnificent stories we have received have come from children using The Secret to attract what they want, including high grades and friends.” (xi) Not through effort, or action, or building meaningful relationships, but simply by *wanting* those things. Likewise, she later shares a story of a kid who experienced the frustrating reality of a visit to Disney World – long lines. “So that night, just before Colin fell asleep, he thought, ‘Tomorrow I’d love to go on all the big rides and never have to wait in line.’” At Epcot the next morning his family was chosen to be “Epcot’s First Family of the Day,” with an escort and walk-on passes for every ride. “It was everything and more that Colin had wished for... Imagine discovering—at the age of ten—that the power to move worlds lies within you!” (88-89) Yes, just because he got put in the front of the line before everybody else.

Four of the “teachers” appeared on the Larry King Live show last year, and King asked them, “Does [God] want you to be rich?” In turn each of them responded with fervor, “Absolutely.” “Absolutely.” “Absolutely.” “Absolutely.” One of them asserted that if only you start your day by affirming that “This day I will access information about the future, technology and genius,” then money will follow. Yes, it’s that simple, that easy. The mind and experience of this reasonable, rational Unitarian Universalist says, “No, it *ain’t* that easy.” Strike one – the motivation of personal material wealth.

But perhaps even worse than the materialism of it, is the explanation *The Secret* provides for the great ills – evils, really – of the world. Rhonda Byrne’s words:

Often when people first hear [the part of the Secret that says, “Everything that surrounds you right now in your life, including the things you’re complaining about, you’ve attracted.”] they recall events in history where masses of lives were lost [as did I], and they find it incomprehensible that so many people could have attracted themselves to the event. By the law of attraction, they had to be on the same frequency as the event. It doesn’t necessarily mean they thought of that exact event, but

the frequency of their thoughts matched the frequency of the event. If people believe they can be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and they have no control over outside circumstances, those thoughts of fear, separation, and powerlessness, if persistent, can attract them to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. (Byrne, 28)

There is no culpability granted to Adolf Hitler, or the junta in Sudan or Burma, or to the complacent bystanders who watch evil happen. No, it was the frequency of thoughts of the victims.

It disgusts me.

And, yes, it's personal. You know now the loss that our family experienced this week. It was a personal, significant, emotional, spiritual loss. One from which we will, of course, heal. But it has been painful. And it angers me to know – to *know* – that these so-called “teachers” would tell me that the frequency of mine and Graham's thoughts (or maybe of the embryo's own thoughts) caused our expected child to die. And not only that, but that if I would just stop allowing myself to feel the pain, then I wouldn't keep attracting more pain to me!

It would be irresponsible for me to suggest that there's absolutely nothing meaningful in *The Secret*... or to deny that there even are some of its premises that resonate well with Unitarian Universalism. We, too, affirm that each human being is powerful – that we have the divine spark within us, and the ability to make things happen in the world. We have for centuries promoted the concept of the priesthood of all believers – that is, that every individual has the ability directly to experience something divine, to interpret truth, to bless the world with his or her unique gifts. We certainly affirm that what you *know* to be true in your heart is a legitimate expression of truth. And that your own personal feelings matter.

And there is no reason for a rational-minded person of faith to deny that our attitudes make a difference in the world – that a hopeful outlook is more likely to bring about positive change than is a despondent or defeatist outlook. And it may not be an explicit Unitarian Universalist tenet, but it wouldn't be contrary to our faith tradition to assert that you must believe in something if you are to make it come true.

But we also are reasonable, rational, realistic people. We say that an individual's interpretation of reality is valuable and legitimate, but also that it doesn't stand alone – it must withstand the tests of tradition and history and reason. We recognize that life is complex and multi-dimensional – that the only way to recognize and truly appreciate the good in life is to honor the reality of pain, loss, grief.

So in the end, I do believe *The Secret* is misguided, superficial, and – yes – dangerous. It is a potentially good idea that has been taken too far. Frankly, I think it is a manipulative, materialistically motivated approach to the human condition that preys on fear and self-centered desires, while relinquishing the individual from carrying responsibility as a member of a social system, a human family; for addressing the needs of the world beyond one's own self-centered desires. Yes, granted – according to the law of attraction, there is a necessary and natural result of the good that will be manifested based on the individual's focusing on whatever she *wants*, because the individual will in turn emit more good into the

world. But the motivation itself is, in my opinion, morally corrupt, based on the assumption that what we “want” is inherently wise. Look back to the opening of *The Secret*, page 1...

The Secret gives you anything you want: happiness, health, and wealth. (Bob Proctor)

You can have, do, or be anything you want. (Dr. Joe Vitale)

We can have whatever it is that we choose. I don't care how big it is. (John Assaraf)

It's all about wanting stuff – material wealth, superficial beauty – not meaningful relationships, not healing for the world (only for oneself), not spiritual or psychological peace and fulfillment. Just stuff... and if you don't get the stuff you want, then there is one reason alone – you didn't want it *enough*; your thoughts were on the wrong frequency.

In its very packaging – the Hollywoodified shroud of mystery the claims that *The Secret* has been known for thousands of years, but kept hidden from the average person – *The Secret* implies that it is the one and only answer that anyone needs to address the complexities of the human condition. The names and words of famous and respected figures are invoked – Jesus of Nazareth, the Buddha, our own Ralph Waldo Emerson, Martin Luther King, Jr. But those of us who have read the original works in which their words appear know that all of their words are taken out of the context in which they were said, all interpreted to mean that you deserve to have whatever you want, and that within you, you have the sole power to manifest it. And *The Secret's* actual “teachers” – the living, breathing ones who made the choice to be part of the production – are promoted as some of the greatest teachers in the United States (Byrne, x). As a group they share a single credential... each of them has amassed material wealth.

Jack Canfield, famous for the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series of books, says,

Since I learned The Secret and started applying it to my life, my life has truly become magical. I think the kind of life that everybody dreams of is one I live on a day-to-day basis. I live in a four-and-a-half-million-dollar mansion. I have a wife to die for. I get to vacation in all the fabulous spots of the world. I've climbed mountains. I've explored. I've been on safaris. And all of this happened, and continues to happen, because of knowing how to apply The Secret. (Byrne, 40)

In implicit and explicit ways, we Unitarian Universalists teach our children and ourselves that material wealth is not inherently evil, but also that it is a *means* to leading a meaningful life, but not an end in itself. We celebrate instead the spiritual wealth that comes from genuine relationships with others and with the world; the wealth of meaning derived from exploring that world with one's mind and heart – with humility, gratitude and awe – with eyes turned outward and opened fully to see not only the material (and ultimately superficial) stuff we might acquire, but the evolving, multi-dimensional truth and love and meaning of life. Secret teacher Lisa Nichols asserts that “It's not your job to change the world.” (Byrne, 146) On the contrary, we affirm and promote the truth that the care of the world – not just ourselves, but the whole world – is our shared responsibility.

We warn against idolatry, urging suspicion of anyone or anything that says it alone contains the single right answer to your ills, your worries, your fears, your unhappiness (e.g., “the most powerful law in the Universe”). Perhaps the most insidious aspect is its being called a “secret” at all. There is a reason why

we parents are warned not to have secrets with our children – knowing that they can be dangerous and toxic.

I have said many times from this pulpit that wisdom comes in many forms, from many sources. For some of you, *The Secret* has been one of those sources. And I will continue to encourage you to gather wisdom and insight from sources that are meaningful to you. But I warn you, too, to apply some of our most basic Unitarian Universalist values to your interpretation of any such sources – asking yourself whether they stand up to our commitment to a free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning; to the reality of our interdependence with all life; and to the call to bring justice, compassion, peace, equity, freedom and responsibility to the world.

Please, as persons of faith, think on *these* things. Amen.

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