I considered the potential loss, as well as the implications of keeping her surgery secret, in this light.

Secrets are a difficult, but very real part of human lives. Emotionally, secrets can hold a huge part of our collective lives as a kind of internal bookmark, something we hide from others, continuing on as though they don't exist. As we keep on with our daily "normals," secrets can become a weight—something we dread but also feel we must hold inside of ourselves. A secret is at once a trust and an abattoir. We all keep secrets. As I've explored the boundaries of student and teacher interaction in formal and informal classrooms, I am struck by how much we (as the human animal) seem to feel we must internalize, and hold far away from any critical or sympathetic eye, those parts of us that are so real, so important to who we are in day-to-day existence. It is striking that the parts of us that seem to matter most are the same parts that we work tirelessly to hide from others, to not share, to never divulge. Why do we suffer the weight of secrets rather than open up to confidants?

Larger questions in the context of anthropology might be: Is an 'ethnography of secrets' possible? How do different people understand the concept of the "secret"? What, if anything, might secrets tell us? Knowing that all engagements with others are partial, can we really presume to understand of the depth of the ones we study? If we cannot break the shell of our own hidden, secret selves, can we do so for others?

The notion and context of the "secret" is varied indeed. There is private information that we do not wish to turn into gossip. There are more colloquially known versions of the "secret," painful in their own right and more intractable than others. "Unconscionable secrets" are particularly powerful. This phrase appeared in a recent newspaper article about the demise of a marriage, where the immediacy of the term was unmistakable: "unconscionable" was a codeword for "Oh my god the husband/wife must be gay/lesbian." Not "telling all" in this case was a clear violation of what "marriage" was supposed to be all about. On the other hand, some secrets must be held (as I learned) in order to respect others' wishes. Secrets come in many different flavors.

Secrets can do something else that is hard for all of us: they can become a way to keep the truth out. This may be as fundamental as respect, or as powerful as self-preservation. It may be as complex as maintaining familial relations and recognizing that some sort of peculiar diplomacy must take precedence over personal pain. Whatever it may be, our ability to explore secrets—whether in content, use or conceptualization—poses serious dilemmas. Absent their disclosure, how can we be certain that what we hear is not filtered by some critical or sympathetic eye, those parts of us that resonate and bearing fruit in other areas of your life... no matter where you go or who you become.

Join us. SOLGA wants you! Visit www.solga.org for news, mentors, our listserv and more. Please send any comments, suggestions and ideas for new columns, or just say "hi" to David Houston, at dlhnv-eng@uvm.edu.