

The Quality Life by Stephen Covey

The secret life is the key to a quality life and that in turn is the key to a quality culture, products, and services. Once in New York City, I attended the Broadway play, *The Secret Garden*. The play was particularly poignant for me that evening because my mother had just died.

The Tony Award winning musical is the story of a young girl whose mother and father die of cholera in India as the play begins. She is sent to live with her uncle in a large British manor. The old house is filled with romantic spirits. As the restless girl explores the grounds of the estate, she discovers the entrance to the magical secret garden, a place where anything is possible. When she first enters the garden, she finds that it appears to be dead, much like her cousin, a bedridden boy, and her uncle, still haunted by memories of his lovely wife who died giving birth to the boy. In harmony with natural laws and principles, the girl faithfully plants seeds and brings new life to the garden. As the roots are warmed and the garden cultivated, she brings about a dramatic transformation of her entire culture within one season.

In my many years of teaching and training, I have seen several such transformations brought about by proactive people who exercise principle-centered leadership and the Seven Habits in their secret, private, and public lives. When I returned home to Salt Lake City the next day to speak at my mother's funeral, I referred to the *Secret Garden*, because for me and many others, my mother's home was a secret garden where we could escape and be nurtured by positive affirmation. In her eyes, all about us was good, and all that was good was possible.

Our Three Lives

We all live three lives: public, private, and secret. In our public lives, we are seen and heard by colleagues, associates, and others within our circle of influence. In our private lives, we interact more intimately with spouses, family members, and close friends. The secret life is where your heart is, where your real motives are the ultimate desires of your life.

Many executives never visit the secret life. Their public and private lives are essentially scripted by who and what precedes and surrounds them or by the pressures of the environment. And so they never exercise that unique endowment of self-awareness the key to the secret life where you can stand apart from yourself and observe your own involvement.

Courage is required to explore our secret life because we must first withdraw from the social mirror, where we are fed positive and negative feedback continuously. As we get used to this social feedback, it becomes a comfort zone. And we may opt to avoid self-examination and idle away our time in a vacuum of reverie and rationalization. In that frame of mind, we have little sense of identity, safety, or security.

Examine Your Motives

The most critical junctures in my life take place when I visit my secret life and ask, "What do I think? What do I believe is right? What should my motives be?" These are times when I choose my motives. One such time occurred when I first heard Dag Hammarskjöld say, "It is more noble to give yourself completely to one individual, than to labor diligently for the salvation of the masses." That statement had such a profound effect on me that I started to say to myself in regard to my relationships with other people, "Wait a minute it's my life. I can choose whether I want to make reconciliation with this person or not. I can choose my own motives."

One of the exciting fruits of the *Secret Garden* is an ability to consciously choose your own motives. Until you choose your own motives, you really can't choose to live your own life. Everything flows out of motive and motivation that is the root of our deepest desires.

Now, when I get into a frustrating or perplexing situation, I enter into my secret life. That's where I find not only motives but also correct principles; that's where the inner wisdom is. As I learn to be proactive in exploring the secret life, I tap into self-awareness, imagination, conscience, and into the exercise of free will to choose another motive.

People who regularly explore their secret life and examine their motives are better able to see into the hearts of others, practice real empathy, bestow real empowerment and affirm worth and identity.