

Finding Healing in the Broken Places

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We live in a world of broken things, where junk yards and landfills and oceans and city streets are overflowing with the discarded refuse of used and abused objects that have lost their essential purpose and meaning...missing parts, not fast enough, no longer in pristine condition, damaged, worn out and frayed around the edges. Among that which has been thrown away and forgotten, you can find broken furniture, outdated computers, chipped dishes, rusted tools, damaged toys...the list of cast-offs grows with each successive generation.

Not unlike these objects, we, humans beings, also have our own fair share of broken things within ourselves with which to contend. All you need to do is go into a hospital to see what human brokenness looks like: a broken leg from a car accident, a broken immune system battling infection, broken minds that see the world in painful and disorienting ways, broken hips, broken hearts, broken systems and broken lives. Yet, unlike all the inanimate objects in the land of broken things, somewhere within us resides the ability to be transformed by our wounds—not always regenerated, but definitely transformed.

Yes, there are a lot of broken things that you can find in a hospital, and you can also find them in school yards, discarded in homeless shelters and nursing homes, in vast oceans of humanity living in poverty or wealth. Yes, you can find human brokenness in the back alleys of city streets, in the halls of Congress and even in downtown Amherst. Life's painful wounds and bruises do not discriminate against age or status, for sudden loss and unfathomable grief affects everyone on this human journey. With all of that brokenness comes the intersecting waves of physical, emotional and mental pain all of which can crush a person's spirit—all of which, in one fell swoop, can destroy a person's sense of meaning and purpose.

In his famous novel, A Farewell to Arms, Ernest Hemingway wrote “the world breaks everyone and afterward, some are strong in the broken places.” This quote gets at the reality that none of us are exempt from brokenness in our lives. Yet, Hemingway also recognized that not all people who experience brokenness necessarily become strong in those fractured places. Sometimes the pain is so extreme that they can never really become strong in that place again. But for many others these breaks in life are opportunities to gain strength and peace. The words of Hemingway, who was wounded in WWI, underscore the power of the human spirit to triumph over brokenness and tragedy and to grow in unimaginable ways because of it.

But how do we heal in the broken places? Viktor Frankel, one of my inspirational mentors, said that *everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way*. He goes on to say that *when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves*.

American author Frederick Buechner once wrote about what he called the stewardship of pain. He argued that since all of us will experience pain in our lives the question comes down to: What are we going to do with that pain? How will we be stewards of that pain? Some people deny it or hide from it. Others retreat from life and relationships hoping to not be hurt again. And some, oblivious to their pain, go around hurting others because of their unresolved aches and issues.

Being a good steward of pain takes effort. We can all vow for that! **It requires looking at our pain head on and choosing to define it instead of letting it define us.** The reality is that pain by itself does not teach. Just as it takes a skilled professional to set a broken bone so it properly heals, it takes effort and work for us to heal the broken places in our lives.

One of my favorite authors, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, once wrote: “I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness and the willingness to remain vulnerable.”

Lindbergh mentions mourning as a key ingredient to taking care of our pain. North American culture does not do well with mourning. We want to move on from pain and loss as quickly as possible. But the truth is that mourning takes pain seriously. Mourning honours what has been lost and can help heal the heart for the next phase of life. Healing the broken place takes work.

Lindbergh also mentions the need to apply understanding, patience, love and openness to our pain. All of these work to help us understand who we are and who we are becoming because of the pain that has come into our life. These tools invite us to ask deep questions of life and help us move toward wholeness and peace. It takes work to become strong in a broken place. It takes work to learn from our pain and be transformed by it.

Here is where we go to what I think is the really interesting part of this reflection. I have always been fascinated by the transformation process...taking something that has been broken and creating something new with it. I once visited a family who had renovated the bathroom in an old house they had bought. Instead of bringing the old toilet, sink and tub to the dump, they artfully arranged them in their yard and planted flowers in them. It was the coolest garden I had ever seen! It inspired me to find objects that were either broken or no longer useful and repurpose them into something of meaning again.

I then discovered the Japanese practice of Kintsugi: the art of precious scars. By repairing broken ceramics it is possible to give a new lease of life to pottery that becomes even more refined thanks to its

“scars”. The Japanese art of kintsugi teaches that broken objects are not something to hide but to display with pride.

When a bowl, teapot or precious vase falls and breaks into pieces, we throw them away angrily and regretfully. Yet, there is an alternative, a Japanese practice that highlights and enhances the breaks thus adding value to the broken object. It’s called kintsugi or golden repair.

This traditional Japanese art uses a precious metal – liquid gold, liquid silver or lacquer dusted with powdered gold – to bring together the pieces of a broken pottery item and at the same time enhance the breaks. Every repaired piece is unique, because of the randomness with which ceramics shatter and the irregular patterns formed that are enhanced with the use of metals. Hence the scars that make the pottery whole again add both strength and beauty to the imperfect yet transformed piece.

We, on the other hand, have a tendency to hide our scars, as if they are something shameful, too ugly to display or a sign of our imperfections. It is, however, our scars that help to shape who we are. **They are the reminders of our struggles and our resiliency.** We are constantly being transformed because of them. Finding healing in the broken places of our lives is not about perfection. It is about recognizing that we do not need to be perfect to be perfectly loved, and others do not need to be perfect for us to perfectly love them.

As Viktor Frankel pointed out: *when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.* That is how we find healing in the broken places. That is the biggest difference between broken objects and broken people; however, both require gentleness and patience and attentiveness is healing is to occur, at all.

Amen and Blessed Be

