

Quest for meaning

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There are cracks,
cracks, in everything—
that’s how the light
gets in.

—Leonard Cohen

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT BROKENNESS

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What’s Broken is Brilliant

BY BARBARA WELLS TEN HOVE, CO-MINISTER,
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Do you remember the first time you really understood that the world you lived in was not safe? Sadly, for some, this education comes at far too early an age. Perhaps you were powerfully wounded as a young child by abuse, poverty or hatred.

For those of us lucky enough to feel safe in our families and homes, the discovery of the world’s danger often comes from outside. I remember exactly when it happened for me. April, 1968. I remember I felt terribly alone. Uncertain. Aware that what I believed about the world had shifted in some significant way. Martin Luther King’s assassination changed forever my belief in a world of security and peace. I was eight years old and, for the first time, knew what brokenness felt like.

If each of us were to tell our own story, I expect we would discover similar tales—moments early in our lives when we truly understood that our parents can’t always fix everything that goes wrong, that sometimes things fall apart and can’t be put back together. We realize that brokenness is always going to be around.

Some, when confronted by this challenging reality, decide not to believe it. These folks may develop a web of pretty lies in which to live. Others determine that if *anything* breaks, then *everything* does. They go around breaking things and people in their lives just to prove it to be true.

But most of us try to figure out how to live amid the brokenness.

... sometimes things fall apart
and can’t be put together.

Our world *is* broken—that’s absolutely true. Spend an hour reading any legitimate news source and you will learn about

murder and mayhem, hatred and terror, abused children and war crimes, petty wrongdoing and just general unpleasantness on the part of too many of us. We do not live in anything approaching utopia. Rather, we live in the challenging here and now when so much is broken, so much is in pieces all around us.

As Unitarian Universalists, our first response to brokenness is often to try to fix it. We are people who believe in solutions. We think that if we work hard enough, think creatively enough, band together with enough well meaning people, we can heal this broken world. And that’s not a bad thing at all. As individuals and as congregations we offer our resources to organizations that need our money to better the world. We volunteer for worthy causes, giving of ourselves to others. And I’m often powerfully moved by the ways our people have done extraordinary things to fix that which is broken, through the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, for example, or through efforts of the Standing on the Side of Love campaign on behalf of marriage equality and just, compassionate policies toward immigrants.

Yes, I appreciate all this. But I am also keenly aware, particularly as I age, that not all broken things can be fixed. That much of the good we do can be swept away by one inept leader, by one bad decision on the part of voters, even by quirks of nature—hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes or floods. I know from hard personal experience that humans are fragile, love doesn’t always triumph, and life is hard.

Of course the world—at least one filled with people—has probably always been broken. And we humans, it seems, have always sought ways to fix that brokenness. One response is to tell stories of original, perfect, mythical worlds where all

is good and pure and hopeful. One of the great myths is that of Adam and Eve in Paradise. Here is this beautiful couple, naked and carefree—happy and safe and whole—until the snake arrives. Native American creation stories often portray a perfect world before some animal trickster such as coyote or raven comes along to complicate things.

Because, of course, that's what always happens. Paradise is never reality. It is something to imagine, aspire to, and dream about. We long for "somewhere over the rainbow," but there is no Land of Oz that doesn't include the challenging reality that all people, without exception, are broken, one way or another. Chipped and frayed, seams ripped apart and re-sewn, torn and battered by life. That is part of the human condition. We are horribly imperfect. We have sharp edges brought on by the many ways life has caused us to crack. You may not see them at first, but get up close and the brokenness becomes clear. Sometimes, it shines with a brilliance that is blinding.

I once took part in a mask-making workshop. Prior to the creation of the mask, we were led in a guided meditation. As in so many of such creative inner journeys, the gentle voice of our leader asked us to walk a path, see what we might see, then ultimately find our mask and discover what it had to say to us. I was reluctant to go on such a journey. I was distracted and keenly aware of my physical pain and my inner judgment (companions on almost every journey I take).

When I found my mask and invited it to speak, I expected nothing. Instead, I heard these words. *What's broken is brilliant.* Huh? *What's broken is brilliant.* How can what is broken in me be brilliant? What's broken feels shameful, painful. It is not pretty or nice. It is edgy, cracked; it rubs me and everyone else the wrong way—doesn't it?

What's broken *is* brilliant. And what's broken is not necessarily what people

dislike or disdain in me or in any of us. What's broken is often where people find connection.

Recently I read a worthy book called *Broken for You*, by Seattle author Stephanie Kallos. It tells the story of a group of broken people who, in the course of living their difficult lives, find powerful connection and, yes,

What's broken is often where people find connection.

even love. Kallos uses the metaphor of the mosaic to help readers discern the process of making something beautiful from what is broken.

Most of us know what a mosaic is—small broken pieces of stone, pottery or glass, placed in a pattern, attached together with a kind of grout. There are ancient mosaics. Perhaps you've seen pictures of some of the gorgeous ones in Italy and Turkey, created hundreds of years ago. But there are plenty of modern mosaics, too. Look closely at a mosaic and it feels disjointed, the pieces small and sometimes ugly, the grout discolored and cracked. But back away some distance and beauty emerges. All the broken pieces, when used in mosaic, reflect a much bigger picture than we can see close up.

Such mosaics remind me that broken pieces are not made whole by trying to glue the pieces back together again, aiming for a perfection we imagine our less-broken selves once displayed.

Rather, when we allow our brokenness to be seen in new ways, when we accept that others are also broken, and love them anyway, and when we cease to view brokenness as ugly and unacceptable, healing becomes possible.



In *Broken for You*, the main character is badly hurt in a car accident. As she heals, she discovers her gift as an artist, for she, with the help of an ever-increasing community of oddballs, begins designing and building mosaics. Each work of art is created from broken shards of delicate china that had been stolen from Jews killed in the Holocaust and intentionally smashed to pieces by the daughter of the thief. If all of this sounds complicated, it is. In the book, as in life, beauty can, and often does, emerge not from perfection, but rather from complicated brokenness. What is broken can be brilliant.

And in the metaphor of the mosaic, I began to see how. Rather than aiming for paradise somewhere over the rainbow, a path we idealists often follow, we are challenged instead to create something *with* the brokenness, not in spite of it. We are called to use our own broken places—our tragic losses, our shameful truths, our unhealed wounds—to create beauty where we can. But how do we do this?

When I was in seminary I remember being taught about Henri Nouwen's concept of the "wounded healer." I never understood quite what this was until I shared my wounds with another in pain and we both began to heal. I expect you have knowledge and experience of this, too. If you were abused, perhaps there was a time when you overcame the shame and told the truth to another, and you both found courage. If your heart was broken, perhaps a time came when you opened it again in spite of the risk. If your life was shattered by violence, perhaps you understood for the first time why it matters to work for peace—and did so.

I cannot know what lives in the deep recesses of each of your hearts. But I do believe that the tender, broken parts in each of us are precious. Does this mean I would wish brokenness on each of us? Of course not. I don't have to wish it. Brokenness comes with living. Nary a one of us is free from it. And

yet, even the harshest tragedies, the most senseless losses, have gifts to give. In Stephanie Kallos's words:

We speak of "senseless tragedies," but really: Is there any other kind? Mothers and wives disappear without a trace. Children are killed. Madmen ravage the world, leaving wounds immeasurably deep, and endlessly mourned.... But we never stop looking, not even after those we love become a part of the unreachable horizon. We can never stop carrying the heavy weight of love on this pilgrimage; we can only transfigure what we carry. We can only shatter it and send it whirling into the world so that it can take shape in some new way.

We can never stop carrying the heavy weight of love on this pilgrimage; we can only transfigure what we carry. That is the task of the religious life. Not to imagine some far away paradise that only the perfect can enter, nor to give up on possibilities and sit passively in misery among the broken shards of our life. Rather we are called to transform the painful and harsh realities of our lives into as much beauty as we can. We are called to create mosaics known as community, as family, as congregations. And we are invited to bring our broken selves into relationship, and find ways to help each other heal.

As a child I learned that my parents couldn't fix everything wrong with the world. I learned that they, and I, and everyone around me were imperfect—wounded and broken by loss, heartbreak and tragedy. But as I grew I also learned that when we broken but brilliant humans band together to create beauty and build community, powerful love breaks through. And I learned that our Unitarian Universalist faith in the unity of all life, broken though it is, and the love that blesses us, imperfect though it may be, can go a long way toward creating the world of our hopes and dreams. ■

Come, Ye Disconsolate

Maybe because I was born 1954, the same year as *Brown v. Board of Education*, I have always known that brokenness is not only individual, but also social and collective. I learned that religious community and theology often hold a people struggling with brokenness, suffering, and injustice. My earliest influences in being held this way are my family church and the movement for African-American civil rights.

At Saint Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Washington DC, where I grew up, the hymn "Come, Ye Disconsolate" called worshipers to the altar for personal prayer:

Come, ye disconsolate, where're ye languish

*Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel
Here bring your wounded heart, here tell your anguish*

Earth hath no sorrow that heaven cannot heal

My earliest image of how faith holds a people in brokenness and suffering is Saint Paul members walking down the sunlit aisles in the former synagogue to bring their wounded hearts, anguish, sorrow, and loss to the wide wooden altar, as the choir sang "Come, Ye Disconsolate." Those prayerful moments in the church demonstrated the equality of all in the eyes of the Creator: school teachers and nurses, government workers and college professors, beauticians and truck drivers, domestics and day laborers—all came to kneel humbly in private conversation with their God. When they rose to return to the pews, their eyes sometimes held tears, but always held hope, and their bodies were outlined by the glow from stained glass windows, still decorated with stars of David.

In the 1960s, social status in Washington was communicated not only by race and ethnicity but also through

education, profession, material assets, and physical appearance. As early as age four, I saw that children with fair skin and silky hair were viewed as more attractive, intelligent, and well-behaved by black and white society. I recognized that the black proprietor of my nursery school had great respect for the children whose parents worked for the government and owned their houses and that she treated me indifferently because my mother worked at a laundry, my father worked for a trash company, and we rented the upstairs apartment in another family's home.

I went to an all-black elementary school, where the white principal did not allow teachers to give A's to students because she was convinced of the inferiority of black people. Aunts, uncles, and neighbors, when moved by television images of attack dogs and fire hoses turned on students and marchers, told personal stories about unfair treatment at work, in stores, by police, or while traveling through white neighborhoods.

The church, while not immune from race, color, and class discrimination, provided fortification for struggling against racial and economic injustice. Ministers in the 1960s and 1970s would never use a word like *empowerment*, but it was the subtext of sermons and the Bible stories they most frequently referenced. They spoke of evil as evident in oppression and inequality. The sermons about oppression came clothed in stories of persecuted prophets and other Biblical protagonists with whom the congregation could identify, those ancient stories often paired with accounts of contemporary civil rights struggles.

The church asserted that neither material assets nor profession nor social standing determined intrinsic worth. God conferred worth and dignity. No matter the struggles and injustice in the world, the faithful would find support in times of trouble. The righteous will not be forsaken. The meek shall inherit

the earth. We shall overcome. Earth hath no sorrow that heaven cannot heal. These messages gave me a strong sense of my own possibilities despite the larger society's messages.

But the most influential minister of my childhood and early youth was a Baptist minister from Georgia. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to the brokenness and suffering caused by injustice in society. His words, echoing the messages I heard from the pulpit, named injustice and oppression as evils that had to be transformed—but King went further. He called the oppressor as well as the oppressed to a vision of beloved community, a society of love and justice that all people were responsible for creating.

As I witnessed King's work at the intersection of his religious identity and social justice, I unconsciously absorbed the wisdom that living as a person of faith means practicing social justice. And I learned that one role of the church is to support its members in acting justly beyond its walls. However, a time came when the support that Saint Paul offered was inadequate to hold the identity struggles I experienced as a working-class, first-generation college student. Although the congregation continued to affirm me, the theology did not address the complexity that I witnessed in worlds beyond the church community. However, the college environment lacked the values that I cherished at Saint Paul, as well as its emphasis on integrity and character.

My search for something to anchor me led me to other theologies. At the Howard University School of Religion library I immersed myself in the philosophies of Howard Thurman, Zen Buddhists, existentialists, and Christian mystics, as well as traditions of the Far East, to help me cope with my personal anguish. Though the philosophies provided useful insights, they did not provide comfort. I found myself listening a lot to "Come, Ye Disconsolate," as

recorded by Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack.

When I discovered Unitarian Universalism a decade later, as a young adult at All Souls Church, Unitarian, in Washington DC, I found a faith with justice at its core. I did not leave Saint Paul because I rejected anything; I joined All Souls because Unitarian Universalism was theologically expansive, included more social identities, emphasized human agency, and brought together faith and justice.

For many years, All Souls was the religious home that fortified me through all the disappointing presidential elections, irrational wars, and halting progress of social justice movements. Unitarian Universalism challenged me to continue to expand my consciousness of the ways that injustice manifests in human relationships—not only with regard to race, gender, and class but also sexual orientation, disability, age, nationality, and religion.

Unitarian Universalism is my religious home. It is not a perfect faith community for a woman of color from a working-class family. Our congregations' struggle to be fully racially and culturally inclusive is a continuing source of disappointment, and it is painful to admit that not all social identities find full welcome in our faith. Despite the tensions and contradictions between Unitarian Universalists' principles and practices, in matters of faith and social justice I find in it a more expansive altar where I can bring my wounded heart and tell my anguish.



Excerpted from
"Come, Ye Disconsolate" by **Taquiena Boston**, director of multicultural growth and witness for the Unitarian Universalist Association. Published in 2009 by Skinner House in *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, edited by John Gibb Millspaugh. ■

How Does Our Faith Hold Brokenness?

In Duluth, Minnesota, in the center of the city, there is a statue of three young men, college-aged, strong and hopeful, looking out of the stone toward the world. On a summer night in 1920, not so very long ago, these three—Isaac McGhie, Elias Clayton, and Elmer Jackson—were lynched there by a mob that may have numbered as many as ten thousand people. The three were road workers for a traveling circus, arrested days before on charges of raping a white woman. The crowd broke into the jail and dragged them to a lamppost. It did not take very long for these thousands of citizens to gather themselves around a murderous idea. Not even the circus would have brought out ten thousand people without notice.

Evil was easily organized, as it so often is, from the fragments of possibility that lie around, ever ready, the tiny sharp shards of potential, the fertile seeds that exist inside each one of us. Of the ten thousand, a few were masterminds and most were "merely" spectators, carrying no weapons, no coils of premeditated rope. But how to draw lines? So often evil shows itself not as a monolith, but as a patchwork composed of a great many very small pieces.

Eighty-three years later a different crowd gathered in that same street, some of them descendents of those present the first time. This patchwork of humanity was smaller, and no doubt more difficult to organize, than the first, but this one was lovely and intentional, healing and brave. The people of Duluth—African Americans and white Americans and others—came together to tell this story out loud, publicly, to claim shared ownership of this history which for

decades had been hidden like a festering family secret. Onto the monument they dedicated are carved the words of Edmund Burke: *An event has happened upon which it is difficult to speak and impossible to remain silent.*

Unitarian Universalism is often accused of remaining silent, of being “soft on crime,” unwilling to look evil in the eye and admit that some human beings, by their choices, have stepped across an invisible but absolute line, forfeiting forgiveness. The early Universalists did believe that every person

An event has happened upon which it is difficult to speak and impossible to remain silent.

is redeemable, salvageable, possessed of worth and even dignity, *no matter what*—but this was less a statement about human nature than about the nature of God, who was Love and nothing else for them, understanding and nothing less for them, forgiveness absolutely, if one would be forgiven.

The real concern of the Universalists, and an abiding concern for their descendants, was judgment, and who gets to do it, and on what grounds. Who is fit to say whose soul might be beyond repair? They disbelieved, vehemently, in the eternal punishment of hell, but not in hell entirely. They held that we are punished not for our sins but *by* them, every day. Our wholeness, our holiness, is torn; our spirit becomes sick. They disbelieved in the doctrine of original sin, at least as it was roared from raging pulpits; but more, they disbelieved in the myth of original goodness, that there ever was a golden age, an innocent time when happy human beings tended the garden of the earth and then made some kind of awful first mistake.

There was no mistake, they said, no apple and no snake. Free will was inherent in us all along. We make hell

for one another while we live, they said, by cruel action and selfish inaction; sometimes we make hell for ourselves, and live there ‘til we die.

Evil is the capacity within and among us to break sacred connection with ourselves, with each other, with the Holy, and further, to deny this breakage or to call it virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear and delusion—mostly self-delusion. Sunlight beats it back. Humility stunts its growth. Truth telling, truth seeking, truth speaking, secret-breaking, brave naming, bearing witness—all weaken its resolve and threaten its potential. Saying and singing and teaching to children, and carving into stone from time to time the words, *Here happened an event upon which it is difficult to speak and impossible to remain silent*—this is good practice. This is how connection begins, sacred connection, and how it is restored. This is part of what the church is for.

The church exists, in part, *to remember*—to rescue from vast silence stories that might not otherwise be heard, to ask questions that might not otherwise be asked, and to celebrate victories and mourn losses that might otherwise be forgotten. To bless what might go unblessed. The church is part of society—and this is never more clear than when it is complicit in society’s ignorance, arrogance or evil. But it stands apart as well, charged to see the world both as it is and as it could be. This remembering, this naming of truth, the telling of stories forgotten, forbidden and hidden, both terrible and beautiful, is one way that we hold brokenness, injustice and suffering. For us, it could be called a sacrament, *the sacrament of the living word.*

I have come to believe about human beings that we require food, water, shelter, air, and *stories*. Something in us needs to speak and to be heard, to forgive and be forgiven, to sing and hear music, to speak our truth and lis-

ten for the truths of others. Part of our vocation as human beings, and as religious human beings, is to aid and abet the transmission of beauty and truth.

My husband will say on those occasions when the weight of the world is closing in and the evidence against hope mounts as I read the news, when I start confusing cynicism with pragmatism, and I sigh, “I’m so tired, I’m so discouraged”—he’ll say, in the kindest way: “What kind of entitled grandiosity of privilege is this, to think that you or I or anyone has the right to sever the bright thread of hope, the tradition of dedication to the common good and faith in the people’s power to imagine great change and great risks and then take them; the beautiful, proud history of work for human rights and freedom? We’re only here to pass it on,” he’ll say. “All you have to do is keep the fire burning for a little while, and pass it on. You have no right to put it out.” Not in so many words, but that’s about what Ross will say.

It’s what we say every Sunday. The sacrament of celebration involves memory, as much as it involves forward-looking hope. The church can hold evil and injustice only if it holds the story of resistance, too. It’s not the mourning, but the dancing, that will move our people out of the sanctuary and into the street, into the statehouse, where the life of prayer is embodied.

by **Victoria Safford**, senior minister of the White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church in Mahtomedi, Minnesota.



Excerpted from “How does our faith hold brokenness, injustice and suffering?” published in A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists. This book is available through the UUA Bookstore (www.uua.org/bookstore or 800-215-9076) or the CLF library (617-948-6150). ■

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From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
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As I follow the news of upheaval that appears to be escalating daily—collapsing political and economic systems, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados and floods—and as I interact with many people whose lives are affected by those bigger systems, here's what I've been wondering.

How do I stay present when things are breaking or broken? How do I allow things to break when they need to break, and still stay on the side of Life? How do I manage to not numb out or move into denial, without going mad and breaking apart myself, when systems far beyond my control or even my comprehension, are wreaking havoc? And for what do I go down fighting?

I'll tell you three things I've figured out, but your wisdom is greatly appreciated here, as I am still struggling to sort it out. Well, actually, that's the first thing I've figured out: I'm not going to be able to make meaning of this alone. Rather, I think this is a time when we need each other in order to create a multi-dimensional, holistic picture of what is going on and how we might live together in this portion of history.

One of my favorite aspects of the Occupy movement is that unlikely people are finding their way to each other to hash things out. In the cold winter of Minnesota, where I live, Occupiers have moved from a downtown plaza into empty, foreclosed houses. In those houses there is conversation, questioning, wondering, and sharing stories going on. Students, veterans, homeless people, peace activists, and union members are talking honestly for extended periods of time. This can only be good.

But you don't have to move into an abandoned house to connect with a startling variety of people. The Internet is probably my favorite gathering place. There it is, right in my own home. How amazing that I am in daily contact with hundreds of smart, faithful people who can share wisdom with me from their part of the world, telling me things I wouldn't otherwise know about life from their point of view.

The second thing I've figured out is that I need to learn to be more comfortable with not knowing exactly what is going on or what to do. I need to find some peace with "I don't know."

How do I stay present when things are breaking or broken?

That's not an easy one for me. I am more comfortable in the role of crusader on the side of what is right. I cherish our Unitarian Universalist history of activism, of standing on the side of love. I like to think I know which end is up! As I read the signs of the times, a great many things are breaking apart that might be good to have break apart. But right now, there is a great deal I simply can't know.

Oh sure, I know that money and politics are never a good mix, and I applaud every effort to separate the two. I know that providing basic needs for everyone is a good thing for all. It's not that I don't know *anything*. I'm just clearer every day that I don't know even close to *everything*.

It's hard for me to grieve when big box stores go bankrupt, though the loss of jobs that follows is upsetting. Those stores never seemed sustainable to me anyway. I'm not upset when consumers quit buying things, even if that cessation is fueled by fear and impacts people's livelihoods and well-being. These are complicated systems! So, I am working on how to be more comfortable saying "I don't know."

The third thing I know is that I need to stay very clear about how I deploy my time, money and commitment to make sure that I am aligned with my own deepest values. Feminist theologian Mary Daly used to say "Take your life and throw it as far as it will go." These days, that message seems important.

I need to find places where my life energy gathers strength, and then build from those places, working with others who are living with that same passionate commitment. For me, life energy always gathers around plants. I think that the burgeoning movement towards organic gardening and eating local foods is one way that what is broken might yield something better. So I spend some time exchanging seeds and knowledge and excitement. I am working to create a new community garden in my neighborhood.

Raising a teenager, as I do, means involvement with school systems and other parents and thinking about what "a good education" means today.

I don't have to go searching for where my life energy is in matters so close to my heart. I simply need to steward it well, and believe that the small actions I take can have some beneficial impact.

Of course, a great deal of my energy is invested in building CLF as a community of resistance and hope, so that in these troubled times we can find and support each other. My ministry with CLF provides fresh evidence for me, every single day, that there is creative, new, bold energy alive and humming.

The allies who have shown up to help out with this are truly amazing, and make me believe that anything is possible if we do it together. The depth of sharing that people are ready for in small groups and in worship, with people they have never met in person, boggles my mind. I continue to feel like the luckiest person on the planet to have this place to find myself, and I hope you can find yourself here as well, as we join together in all of our blessed and broken splendor. ■

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REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Unitarian Universalists tend to be pretty upbeat about human nature. We remind ourselves of each person's "inherent worth and dignity," and rather than baptizing babies (to cleanse them of original sin), we welcome young ones with rituals that affirm that we're delighted to have them exactly as they are. In the 1800s Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke declared five defining points of Unitarianism that famously included "the progress of mankind onward and upward forever." To hear the UU version of humanity, you might think that all of us, like Mary Poppins, are "practically perfect in every way."

There's much to be said for this optimism about human beings, but it does have a downside. What if you don't feel practically perfect? What if you don't feel anywhere in the same zip code as perfect? What if you look in the mirror and see flaws and failings, disabilities and damages? Some versions of religion say that we are forgiven and made perfect by God or Jesus, but UUs tend to expect people to go ahead and perfect themselves.

So what happens when you just don't think you can even get on the road toward perfect? What if you've come to the conclusion that some things about yourself are not only broken, they're almost certainly going to stay broken? Does Unitarian Universalism have nothing to offer those of us whose hearts or bodies or spirits feel broken beyond mending?

Well, maybe what we can offer is another way of looking at brokenness. Perhaps you've heard this story, in one of its many versions:

An elderly woman had to haul water to her home from the stream down the hill. Every day she would take up two large pots, each hung on the ends



of a pole, which she carried across her neck. But one of the pots had a crack in it, while the other

pot was perfectly whole. So each time the woman trudged up the hill from the stream to her house the perfect pot delivered a full portion of water, but the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and felt miserable that it could only do half of what it had been created to do. Finally, after what it perceived to be bitter failure, the dripping pot spoke to the woman one day by the stream.

What if you've come to the conclusion that some things about yourself are not only broken, they're almost certainly going to stay broken?

"I am so sorry that I have failed you all this time, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house." The old woman smiled, "Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? Every day as we walk up the hill the water that dribbles through your crack nourishes the wildflowers along the way. Perhaps you are flawed as a water jug, but you are a perfect watering can, and because of you I am able to enjoy all these beautiful flowers on my daily walk to and from the stream."

In other words, perhaps what we all need to be is not flawless, but rather carried by a love that recognizes how our flaws can be part of a larger wholeness. Our Universalist heritage guides us toward an understanding of God as a kind of Love that can find the wholeness in our cracked selves.

Our humanist heritage points us toward an understanding of community as a place where we create a wholeness that is greater than any one member of the group. And through all our different theologies we carry a belief that our differences are gifts, not failings. Francis David said back in the 1500s that "We need not think alike to love alike." Modern day UUs are likely to add that we also need not look alike, sound alike, have the same abilities or the same backgrounds in order to love alike.

A quote from Albert Einstein has been making its way around Facebook lately: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid." A fish trying to climb a tree looks pretty darn broken, and a squirrel in the ocean doesn't look so hot either. Our society can be quick to tell people with disabilities, or the elderly, or children, or immigrants or gay or lesbian folks, or people with mental or physical illnesses, or people living in poverty or in prison that they are "less than," that they are not fully whole, fully human.

But the gift of the Beloved Community is to see each person for the genius they are, for the wholeness that they are. What we have to offer as Unitarian Universalists is neither the ability to become flawless nor the ability to cure others of their flaws. What we have instead, at least in our best moments, is the holy capacity to appreciate the field of flowers that all of us cracked pots have created. ■





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Did You Know

That you can find personal statements and spiritual practices on a variety of difficult life issues at www.questformeaning.org, our new website?

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The Cup of Our Life



it is time for me
to see the flaws
of myself
and stop
being alarmed
it is time for me
to halt my drive
for perfection
and to accept
my blemishes
it is time for me
to receive
slowly evolving growth
the kind that comes
in...[its] own good time
and pays no heed
to my panicky pushing
it is time for me
to embrace
my humanness
to love
my incompleteness

it is time for me
to cherish
the unwanted
to welcome
the unknown
to treasure
the unfulfilled
if I wait to be
perfect
before I love myself
I will always be
unsatisfied
and ungrateful
if I wait until
all the flaws, chips,
and cracks disappear
I will be the cup
that stands on the shelf
and is never used

*Excerpted from The Cup of Our Life
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