Brave Love

BY **PEGGY CLARKE**, MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF WESTCHESTER, HASTINGS ON HUDSON, NEW YORK

Adorning almost every Protestant church is a cross—inside, outside, over the altar, in the vestibule, in the minister's office, and sometimes many stories high on top of the building. The cross, in the Christian tradition, is a sign of victory. Jesus suffered, died and was buried, but on the third day he rose. He suffered and died on the cross, but that cross became the gateway to everlasting life. Jesus conquered death and because of that, we will rise again in body and in spirit. It's a sign of triumph; our greatest fear has been defeated. We will live forever. The cross is a sign of hope and of glorious things to come.

Roman Catholics are also Christian, but the clean, straight cross isn't likely to be seen standing ten stories high in their church yards. Instead, Catholics have opted for the crucifix. This is a very different symbol, one that shows us Jesus nailed to the cross, broken, bleeding, dying. Sometimes it's quite graphic—full-bodied suffering in Technicolor. He's suspended in anguish, nails through flesh and bone, a crown of thorns pressed into his head, blood dripping, eyes beleaguered. This man is struggling for his last few breaths and the moment of the crucifixion has been captured and memorialized for believers down through the centuries.

On first glance, it's not pleasant. Certainly not triumphant. Who wants to stare at the image of a young man at the height of his distress, in the last throes of a painful death? I'm sure many of you spent a good number of days in Catholic school looking at the crucifix over your teacher's head, wishing just about any other symbol was hanging on that wall. Plenty of people find it disturbing, and for good reason.

I, on the other hand, love that symbol. It's far more powerful for me than the cross. The cross is all cleaned up; it's the end of the story. Easter, not Good Friday. *See, everything worked out in the end. Some stuff happened and then we won.* Victory. Triumph. Success. But, that's not my theology. My theology understands, and even needs, that broken body.

I know that broken body well. I have known it in my own life and I have held that body, beaten and bleeding, for many others. In some theologies, the cross is all that matters in the story of Jesus. In the end, there is victory. In the end, there is resurrection. To me, the story of love and healing and inclusion, the story of a man who inspired his followers to give all they owned to the poor and devote themselves to radical community and preaching news of hope—that's the story of Jesus, that's the triumph. But that story only has a happy ending because of the risk of love so many people took. Jesus *on the cross* becomes for me a metaphor of what it looks like when we allow our hearts to be broken, when we break ourselves open in service to the world.

I believe our power comes from our brokenness. I don't think the end of that story is the crucifixion. In fact, I'm not sure there is an end to the story. We are still called to live our lives with our hearts wide open. A heart that has been broken is a sign of strength. It's when we allow ourselves to feel the pain of the world that we become brave. Courage and compassion are byproducts of healing a heart that has been smashed.

Mother Teresa once said: "May God break my heart so completely that the whole world falls in." It's when our hearts break open that the world can fall in.

Quest

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The world
breaks everyone,
and afterward,
some are strong
at the broken places.
—Ernest Hemingway

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT BROKENNESS

But allowing our hearts to break is an act of courage. To love is a risk. The loss of love, the betrayal either from the beloved or from this difficult world with its sickness and violence, can so completely devastate a life that it sometimes seems easier not to love at all. When we parent, when we fall in love, when we bring animals into our homes, when we enter ministry or join congregations, when we befriend each other, we risk both great joy and great loss.

> Brave love faces all our wild contradictions, the many ways of being human, and brings love to bear on all of them.

Not having relationships is a difficult way to live, and in almost every case, humans take the risk. We allow people to enter our lives even knowing that pain could be on the other side. We pour ourselves out for our children, knowing they will one day leave. They may even reject our devotion, and yet humans continue to parent. We fall in love and commit ourselves to another person over and over again from the time we're teenagers, even though much of that love is temporary and sometimes ends in shattered lives.

This is our work, this is our risk. And this is our joy.

To be who we want to be, to live our faith by risking love is a core value. The UU story started as a Christian story, with the story of Jesus who broke himself open in love for the world. And it continued with the Universalists who knew that love to be open to all, inclusive of everyone without question or hesitation. Loving everyone, loving the world in all its complications, is Universalist theology. It's a call to radical inclusion grounded in the idea that God has saved us all, that we are all worthy.

Brave love is critical to the call to ministry. Ordained ministry for sure, but I think we're all called to minister to and with each other. And that's a call of love toward people who aren't living up to expectations or who behave in ways we might think are inappropriate. And it's a call to love for the stranger, the newcomer, the person with mental illness who acts in ways that feel foreign; it's a call to love for the crying child and ornery teen and for all the people who just plain bug you. Our faith asks us to open ourselves to loving the whole world. The whole world and all its hate and violence and xenophobia and homophobia. It's loving the world with all the racism, sexism, ableism, ageism and speciesism. It's loving the climate deniers and anti-vaxers and creationists. Brave love faces all our wild contradictions, the many ways of being human, and brings love to bear on all of them.

That's the message of Universalism. Everyone is loved. And the message of Unitarianism is that we must be the ones to do the loving. Whether there is an all-powerful God or not, we are the ones on the ground. The work of love is our work.

But promoting love is only part of the call. I can promote love without the vulnerability of loving. I can fight for justice without letting the borders of my heart dissolve, without breaking myself open.

Brave love is different from promoting love or fighting for justice. Brave, honest, open, vulnerable, compassionate love is bold and courageous and life-affirming. It's a world-embracing love, the kind of love that leaves us exposed but not defenseless. Brave Love is the kind of love that has the power to transform the world. When done properly, symbols of that love might adorn houses of worship and cemeteries and schools and people's bodies for millennia. ■

Try to Praise the Mutilated World

BY **ANITA FARBER-ROBERTSON**, MINISTER, FIRST PARISH UU OF NORTHBOROUGH, MASSACHUSETTS

What must it have been like for folks living through World War I, 1914–1918? The horror of that war is still something I struggle to understand. I have read many books about those times, fiction and non-fiction. Seen movies too. Soul-stirring accounts that helped me understand the pacifists who rebelled and the patriots who persecuted them. Each was gripped by the horror, each perceived a different way out.

Yet, with all my reading, my movie-going, listening and studying, I never fully grasped the horror of the First World War. Later events, such as the Holocaust and Hiroshima/Nagasaki, were much more real and present to me—until a few years ago when my husband and I went on a hiking trek in the Dolomites.

I was excited to be going. The Dolomites were purported to be beautiful—unique mountain formations of limestone. And they were in Italy. I love Italy. I love the warmth, the hospitality, and I love the food.

So we were a little shocked when we got there. Our grasp of European geography and history had failed us. The Dolomites are in the German part of Italy. I didn't know there was a German part of Italy! The local folks spoke German. The local foods were German. As we donned our packs and began our trek, the reasons became apparent. The Dolomites marked the front line, the place of some of the most pitched and devastating battles of the war—something for which we trekkers had not been prepared.

All along the hiking trails that wended their way through the mountain passes

were little shrines set up and kept up by local villagers. (They looked a lot like small shrines we see erected near our local streets where someone was struck and killed by a car.) Flowers. Words of love. A memento held with wire. What to me was ancient history was to them a living story, and living sorrow. I noted that as we walked.

Until the day we came through a particular pass. The mountain cliffs rose sheer and tall and beautiful on either side of our trail, not that many yards apart. Our guide stopped us. We looked up at the brilliant blue sky, through the dazzling white cliffs, the pebbled path below our feet. *See those hollows*, our guide pointed out. *The ones up high in the rock cliffs?* We looked. There were holes carved in the stone by the wind and weather, human-sized holes, looking like insets for some anticipated statuary.

That's where soldiers stood and shot across at the soldiers on the other side. They were lined up in this place, Germans on one side, allies on the other, along the tops of the cliffs and in these wind-worn shallow caves. And they shot at each other, kept shooting, until nearly everyone was dead. 6,000 men died in this pass that day.

It was mind-boggling. Heart-searing. They'd just stood there, looking at each other, shooting, until everyone was dead. The terrain was so beautiful. How, I wondered, could anyone commit such horror in the face of the overwhelming beauty of creation?

The group walked on. My husband and I waited, riveted to the spot, trying to take it all in. I bent down and picked up something that had emerged through the stone shards and pebbles. It was the sole of an old boot, surfacing after all these years. I held it, trying to love its dead owner, asking forgiveness for the folly of the human race, letting my tears run freely.

While I stood there, boot sole in hand, my husband picked something else up from the ground. To me it had looked like a stone shard in the path. But he pulled it up and held it out. *A human bone*, he said. *Part of a femur.*

We stood in silence many minutes, in this hallowed place. *How*, I wondered, *could they desecrate this beautiful space, awash in the beauty of creation, God's country, like that*?

I do not know the answer. But I know we need to remember. "Try to praise the mutilated world," The poet Adam Zagajewski advises. *Try to praise the mutilated world.*

> Try to *love* the mutilated world, I say. For surely love is what it needs.

It is an important charge the poet makes. So easy it is to allow the mutilated world to darken all our days, color our perception of the world, fill us with despair. There is so much that is damaged, broken, mutilated. It is easy to be angry or disconsolate, withdrawn into our armor of protection.

"Try to praise the mutilated world," the poet says. To praise it. To see what is wondrous and amazing despite its horrors and its disappointments.

I would go even further. Try to praise the mutilated world, yes, but push it further. Try to *love* the mutilated world, I say. For surely love is what it needs. Try to love it despite the ways it hurts you. Try to love it despite the ways it disappoints. Try to love it despite its failings, despite our own.

Love it for its own sake, for what it really is, not what we wish it were. Love it in all its truth and sorrow, its shame and glory. For it is in that kind of love—all-encompassing—that we begin to understand what love really is, who we really are. And maybe even through that, we can truly begin to love ourselves—our mutilated, wounded, imperfect, beautiful selves. We can love ourselves and our world into healing. ■

An Apology

by **Douglas Taylor**

In the January 2015 "Transformation" edition of Quest, I had a sermon titled "Transformation vs. Acceptance." In that sermon I gave passing mention to Jane Rzepka for the concepts I was writing about. I failed to indicate the extent to which my thinking, and indeed my words, were borrowed from Jane's work.

This failure resulted in plagiarism on my part. The fourth point listed in our UUMA Code of Conduct is: "I will honor the intellectual property of others, assuring that appropriate attribution is given to avoid intentionally creating the impression that the work of others is my own." I dishonored (Jane) by giving the impression that they were my insights.

It is my hope that my mistake will not block me from the deep collegiality I need to do my ministry in our movement. And I hope that these amends I offer will open others to see more clearly the importance of our relationships and how we can best show our respect and honor to one another. ■

Broken

BY **LEISA M. HUYCK**, COMMUNITY MINISTER, GRASS VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

Have you ever come to a place in your life where everything is broken? Not only that, but broken by you? Where you have said and done things that have caused so much hurt that a relationship is beyond repair? Or you've made mistakes or lived in ways that caused great suffering, and you didn't even know it? And then when you found out, you felt so much shame and despair that you didn't know how you could go on?

When I was very young I married an also very young man who seemed like home to me. Everything about him felt familiar and comfortable. I thought we would be happy forever. But we weren't. After about six months he suddenly became miserable, which made me miserable. So did I seek counseling? No. Did we try to get help? No. Not right away. What I did, after about six years and two beautiful children, was fall in love with someone else. Do you think that helped anything?

No, it did not. And after that extremely short and excruciatingly painful love affair ended, everything was broken. Shards of trust, of love, of hope lay everywhere, so that every step caused terrible wounds. I could not see how to leave the marriage and I could not see how to stay in it, so finally I did seek counseling.

Little by little, insights began to emerge. My children's father was addicted to alcohol. He lived with severe depression. He was abusive, because he knew no other way to be. The reason he had seemed like home to me was because that was exactly how my father was. I was codependent. The fact that I was unhappy in my marriage was actually a sign of health.

If I wanted to pursue real health, I had to get treatment. I had to do things differently.

I started a 12-step program for codependence. Anyone who has done 12-step work knows that recovery depends on openly acknowledging we have a problem. We do a fearless and searching moral inventory of ourselves. We tell at least one other person all the harm we have done. We make amends where possible, and we commit to continuous growth and learning from our mistakes.

I also went looking for a church. I was filled with spiritual longing and I needed to be with others in community. But—I was also so filled with shame and guilt that I could not imagine a church that would accept me. I had gone to a Catholic high school where I had been taught the doctrine of original sin, which meant I believed as a teen that I was inherently bad, rotten at the center. The way to get clean was to be like Jesus: suffer and forgive, suffer and forgive. While I had rejected the church and that doctrine as a young adult, the pattern was so deeply inscribed in my soul that I continued to live it in my marriage. I did not know if there was any church where I could become healthy.

This was the situation when I walked into a Unitarian Universalist church for the first time. I felt utterly broken. I went inside and sat down in the back. Then, I picked up a hymnal, read the seven principles, and began to weep. I knew exactly what that first principle meant. This was a religion that said even I had worth and dignity. I knew I was home.

At first, each Sunday I sat in the back and cried. Then I started participating around the edges. Finally, I joined a women's group, in which we told each other our real stories. When it was my turn, I hesitated, but other women had shared deeply and their stories were riveting. Every single one of those women had at some point in her life done something she deeply regretted. But no one had been judged; no one had been rejected.

So I told my truth. And instead of turning away from me in disgust, the women leaned in and listened, murmuring softly, patting my arm when I cried, nodding in recognition of what they heard. It was the first place I had ever been where I could be my whole real self and be truly loved. My community looked into my face and saw who I really was. They saw the light in me, and reflected it back tenfold.

> "I'm not ok, you're not ok, and that's ok!"

As they did, I began to heal. I thought I would even be able to stay in my marriage and make it work. But there came a time when life with my children's father became too frightening, and I had to leave. I was broken again. Again there were shards everywhere, and this time my children were in pieces, too.

But here my 12-step work and my religious life came together. As I did my moral inventory, I realized that I was a perfectionist, and that this was not a good thing. Perfectionism is part of being codependent. A codependent child grows up believing that in order to be loved, she or he must be perfect. I had been trying to stay in an unhealthy marriage because I could not bear failure. I had been hiding the truth about my marriage from my family because I could not bear for them to know I had made a mistake.

But now, because I was held in the loving care of my religious community, I could let go of that. Because I was sharing deeply with other women and seeing the truth of their lives, I was beginning to understand that there is no such thing as perfect. There is no perfect marriage, no perfect love, no perfect children, no perfect friendship,

not even a perfect church or a perfect sermon! There is no such thing as perfect. What a relief it was to figure that out! Because it meant that I did not have to be afraid anymore.
I did not have to fear that if I wasn't perfect, I would not be loved.

Once I saw that, I was able to start putting the pieces of my life and my heart together in a whole new shape. With scars, with fault lines, with some pieces missing, but also with new pieces from my community. My heart was larger, less brittle, more resilient. And the thing is, I am not the only woman in my group who needed this kind of help. All of us have gone through something—or done something—awful and needed each other to get through it. Because that's the way life is; all of us get broken in one way or another. All of us. As Reverend William Sloane Coffin once said, "I'm not ok, you're not ok, and that's ok!"

But our brokenness is not a permanent state unless we choose to keep it so. As 12-step programs and most religions in the world understand, being able to admit that sometimes we miss the mark and cause harm is absolutely essential for our health and for the health of our communities. It is how we begin the process of healing. If there is enough love in our communities, we can make mistakes and feel badly and learn from them and make restitution and seek forgiveness—and then change and grow into a new state of wholeness.

This is in the work of religious community. This is what it requires of us: that we bring our whole imperfect selves to it. That we be willing to tell the truth about how we are broken. That we be willing to repair what we damage. That we be willing to forgive and be forgiven. That we be open to transformation. All of it is messy, imperfect, and absolutely beautiful. ■

Midori and the E Strings

BY **THERESA SOTO,**
MINISTERIAL INTERN,
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF SALEM, OREGON

When Midori Goto was three years old her grandmother gave her a 1/16 violin for her birthday. Her mother and grandmother sensed that music was one of her gifts, and they were right. By age 11, Midori and her mother moved to New York City so that Midori could study with excellent teachers. Midori played many challenging pieces, including *Chaconne*, a 13-minute violin solo written by Bach that is considered one of the most difficult violin solos ever written.

However, one of the most remarkable things Midori ever did was to play through. The summer that she was 14 years old, Midori played at Tanglewood Festival, one of the most prestigious festivals in the United States. She was playing *Serenade*, a very difficult piece by Leonard Bernstein. All of a sudden, right in the middle of playing, the E string on her three-quarter size violin broke.

That happens sometimes, right? We can be poised to do something that we feel is important or urgent, something that we prepared and worked for, and all of a sudden, something breaks.

A flat tire, bad grade on a test, an argument with a loved one, we can experience these as moments of breaking, when things no longer work. Do you know what Midori did when her string broke? She borrowed the violin of the concertmaster. It was a Stradivarius.

Sometimes we have to borrow from our Beloved Community. We borrow strength. We borrow hope. We borrow joy. In a way, this kind of borrowing is like window shopping. We see the joy of another and allow it to reach us. It might not be ours, but it is near and it is real.

Midori played for a while and then, the E string broke again. This is another thing that we experience as we try to grow in our ethical and spiritual lives: we tackle one obstacle, deal with it, and find ourselves blocked by another challenge. In addition to borrowing resources from our Beloved Community, sometimes we have to make adjustments and keep on going.

Everything is not all your fault. The obstacles you face can come from a variety of sources. No matter where they come from, though, they don't have to be the end. I imagine that Midori could have gotten stuck blaming herself for breaking the string of a very old, very valuable violin. She would have missed playing the rest of her piece. Instead of getting stuck, Midori borrowed the violin of the assistant concertmaster.

It can be easy to confuse a moment of breaking with a moment of disaster. When it's hard to see the whole picture, it's hard to trust that everything will turn out. But, just as Midori's violins demonstrate, a broken moment, like a broken heart, is not the same as all being lost. Having a broken heart doesn't make you a broken soul. We, as Unitarian Universalists, affirm that each person has inherent worth and dignity, broken moments and all.

What is your song? Will you continue to play it, even when, woven into it, are broken moments? You might face the pressure of perfection, both from yourself and others, but that might not be the only way. Your true song, imperfect and played through all the way to the end, is one way that you can bring your gifts and your love to the world.

With the second borrowed violin, Midori finished the piece. The audience cheered with joy. The conductor, Bernstein himself, kneeled before her in appreciation. The applause and appreciation wasn't because Midori had played perfectly, but because she had played no matter what, making the broken moments a part of her song. ■

From Your Minister

BY **MEG RILEY**
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

According to some folks, everything wrong in this world is because of one disobedient woman who listened to a snake. She just had to eat that apple, and then everything that was whole became broken. We were all doomed.

Time was, I thought that story was just plain upside down, and that Eve was actually the story's hero. *Long live disobedient women!* I said, and became one myself. Now that I'm older, and a parent, and have watched the way things work, I have more appreciation for obedience than I used to. But not unquestioning obedience. Maybe something more like respect; and understanding that simply obeying certain reasonable demands that are made on us (not smoking in restaurants, say, or getting vaccinations) makes life better for everyone.

Imagine if Eve had been courageous enough to say to G-d, as my teenager would most certainly say to me, *But seriously, why can't I eat that apple*? My kid at any age would absolutely not accept my, or G-d's answer, "Because I said so." Trust me, I tried.

And while some faith leaders would tell people that when kids don't accept that line, it's time to beat some respect into them, I believe it can't be done. *Fear* can be beaten into a kid, *and* with each blow respect for authority goes further afield. *Respect* is more complicated, and has to be built with mutuality in it, and yes, with humility that comes from understanding how broken we all are.

What if, instead of simply forbidding the eating of the apple, G-d had explained the logical consequences? G-d did tell Adam and Eve they'd die if they ate it, but what could that have meant to them? Suppose G-d had said instead, "If you eat that apple, all kinds of evil will come into the world that will affect everybody who's ever born, and it will forever be laid at your feet." Would you eat that apple anyway? Sadly, I'm almost sure that I would.

I'm not proud of that certainty, but it's born out of my lived experience that I, and everyone I know, make all kinds of irrational, even stupid choices in our lives, for reasons even we're not sure of. Mohandas K. Gandhi put it this way: "I have only three enemies. My favorite enemy, the one most easily influenced for the better, is the British Empire. My second enemy, the Indian people, is far more difficult. But my most formidable opponent is a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him I seem to have very little influence."

We—and everything else—are broken. And yet, in that brokenness, amazing things happen.

Any adult who's ever asked a kid the question, "Why did you do that?" after that kid has painted the floor with nail polish or cut off the cat's whiskers or smashed something made of glass in the street, knows what a completely pointless question it is. It is likely to be met with a blank stare and eyes that gleam with the unspoken words, "I have no idea. Absolutely none." If we're honest, many of us look in the mirror to see those same eyes staring back at us.

Years ago, when my own kid was about two and my niece four years old, I was tending to them both when a friend called to say that the musician Peter Yarrow (of Peter Paul and Mary fame) was going to meet with a handful of people to talk about his work against bullying, and why didn't I come and bring the kids? I have two memories of that day: One, which still puts a smile on my face, is that Yarrow sang "Puff the Magic Dragon," inserting the names of my kid and my niece, to sing, "Little Jie and Niko loved that rascal Puff…." Be still my heart!

The other memory, however, is less charming. While Jie and Niko were fairly quiet during Yarrow's talk, they were in the corner pinching, biting, and pulling on each other's arms as they fought over some toy or another that both wanted. I kind of sat in front of them so that their behavior wouldn't be too noticeable, periodically hissing over my shoulder at them through a clenched, fake smile to cut it out. Indeed, no one did notice what they were doing, rapt with Yarrow's presentation.

After giving us his pitch (with music) against bullying, Yarrow concluded dramatically, "Imagine how wonderful the world would be if all children played together as harmoniously as little Jie and Niko!" I kept that fake smile on my face, but with a sinking, sinking feeling about the possibility of ever stopping school bullying or anything else.

Blame it on the snake, the woman, the apple, bad parenting, rock-n-roll music. Kids and adults alike are not always our best selves. We're not always who we want to be. We—and everything else—are broken. And yet, in that brokenness, amazing things happen. Buildings are erected that don't keel over. Drivers manage to navigate crowded roadways with relatively few accidents. Kids grow up and fall in love. Every now and then, influenced by the actions of very broken people, the moral arc of the universe bends, imperfectly but perceptibly, towards justice. It's enough to keep me going.■

REsources for Living

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

One of the most important lesson we learn—and try to teach our kids—is that when something goes wrong or breaks, we need to take a deep breath and figure out how to fix it. Owies can be fixed with a kiss and a Band-Aid. Toys can be fixed with glue or needle and thread or new batteries. Friendships can be fixed with a sincere apology and an understanding that we will do better next time. Grades can be fixed with more studying or the help of a tutor. Whatever the physical or emotional damage, the best approach is to figure out what needs to be done to make things better, and then go do it.

Except for when it isn't. Yes, learning how to regain calm and figure out a solution is an incredibly important life skill. But the sad fact is that if you are on this planet long enough—and sometimes it doesn't take very long—you find out that there are some parts of life that you just can't fix. There are times when things simply break beyond repair. Sometimes the precious handmade baby quilt gets left on the train and disappears forever. There are some relationships that, no matter how important they are to you, are just not going to work out. There are people you love who get hurt or sick in ways that nothing can cure.

Sometimes, like Humpty Dumpty after the fall, all the king's horses and all the king's men are not going to be enough to put things back together again. So what do you do then? What do you do when there is nothing to do, no way to go back and repair what is broken?

That's when we get to religion. Most of what we human beings do—engineering and medicine and plumbing and psychology and waste management and so on—is designed to figure out problems and then find solutions. Religion is about the only field that offers us a place to sit when pieces of our lives are simply broken and going to stay that way.

Buddhism, for instance, teaches that life is naturally full of pain. There is no getting around the fact that things break, that people die, that we might never get what we desperately want. The Buddhist solution is to give up attachment, to learn to accept that the way of the world includes inevitable brokenness, and that grasping after our personal desires is only going to make it harder. Buddhist meditation practice is a disciplined way of learning to let go, to let the world be as it is without making things harder for ourselves by grabbing after things that we will never be able to hold on to.

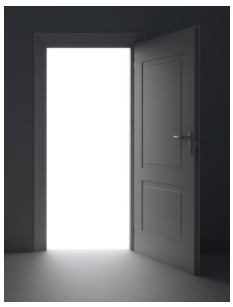
The sad fact is that if you are on this planet long enough—and sometimes it doesn't take very long—you find out that there are some parts of life that you just can't fix.

This path of detachment, of calm acceptance of the way things are, is not necessarily a strong suit for Unitarian Universalists. We tend to be people who are committed to fixing problems. We want to make things better—for ourselves, for our children, and for the world as a whole. We're willing to take on big issues because we have faith that people of good will, working together, can make a difference. And goodness knows the world has big problems that need big solutions, and a huge need for people who are willing to take on the important work of trying to figure out those solutions.

But sometimes things are just so broken that we need a way not to fix them, but rather to sit with the brokenness. In the Jewish tradition, when a family member dies you tear your clothes to show your grief, and you have an official time, called *shiva*, when you just stay home. You just sit with the brokenness of the fact that someone you love is gone, without needing to try to make it better or say that things are okay or claim that the person has gone to a better place. You just sit at home and your friends come to help and to be with you in the not-okay-ness of it all.

That piece of taking time and being together is what we can do when there is nothing else to do. Some losses aren't fixable, but almost any loss is survivable, with enough time and a chance to remember all that remains. What religion can do—along with its cousins music, literature and art—is remind us that we are not alone, that we stand in a long line of people who have had to live with loss and suffering and brokenness.

And sometimes—often, even—we manage to come though that brokenness in a new form that we could never have imagined. Religion does not offer us the faith that everything will be okay. Sometimes everything is really *not* fine. What it offers us is the promise that every hole in our lives is also a door to something new, and that we are never completely alone as we step through that door. ■



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The Unbroken

BY **RASHANI RÉA**

There is a brokenness
out of which comes the unbroken,
a shatteredness
out of which blooms the unshatterable.
There is a sorrow
beyond all grief which leads to joy
and a fragility
out of whose depths emerges strength.

There is a hollow space
too vast for words
through which we pass with each loss,
out of whose darkness
we are sanctioned into being.

There is a cry deeper than all sound
whose serrated edges cut the heart
as we break open to the place inside
which is unbreakable and whole,
while learning to sing. ■

This poem was written in 1991, after the fifth death in the author's family. You can find out more about Rashani's poetry, and the retreats that she offers, on her website at www.rashani.com.