

When Our Hearts Need Healing

A Sermon Delivered on April 28, 2019
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

“Hearts are meant to be broken.”

-- Oscar Wilde

Unitarian Universalist Church
of the Monterey Peninsula
490 Aguajito Road
Carmel, CA 93923
(831) 624-7404
www.uucmp.org

Meditation: by Thomas Rhodes, “Meditation on Broken Hearts”

Let us enter into a time of meditation, contemplation, and prayer.

Feel the earth beneath your feet as it supports you.

Feel the love of this community as it surrounds and enfolds you.

Feel your breath as it flows in and out of your body.

Listen to your heartbeat.

Listen to your heart . . .

And how is it with your heart?

Does your heart feel whole, shielded by intellect, cocooned by reason, closed to feeling?

Or is it broken, fragile to the touch, brimming with the pain of loss? Or has your heart

been broken and healed so many times

that it now lies open to the world,

knowing that true growth comes not without pain,

that tears may wear down barriers,

that we may carry the hearts of others

even when our own is too heavy for us to bear.

None of us has an unblemished heart, not one.

For such perfection can be found only in death,

and we who are alive still have much to heal.

So let us give thanks for the broken places in our hearts,

and in our lives.

For it is only through such brokenness that we may truly touch one another

and only through touching one another that the world may be healed.

Let us give then thanks for the brokenness that we share.

First Reading: by the Unitarian Universalist minister Sean Parker Dennison, a graduate of Starr King School for the Ministry, who has served congregation in California, Utah and Illinois. This is from a piece entitled “Hope for the Heartbroken.” (*UUWorld*, Winter 2016) He writes:

I’m sitting here broken-hearted. I could try to convince you that it’s about the state of the world with its tragedies, suffering, and seeming lack of compassion, but it’s not. I’m broken-hearted because a relationship that had swept me off my feet is over. I’m sad because sometimes love isn’t enough. There are patterns, habits, preferences, and just ordinary circumstances that get in the way. Relationships end.

As a minister, I sometimes feel like I’m supposed to take my heartbreak and transform it immediately into hope with some instant alchemy. I think to myself, “I have to find a way to bring this back around to how Love never fails. I’m a minister!” I’m embarrassed to be so weary with grief, so heavy with disappointment.

I do believe Love (with a capital L) never fails. Still, heartbreak hurts and it takes time to heal. Even if you’ve been to seminary, preach regularly, and have a well-articulated theology rooted in Love, you don’t get a pass from the pain. And even though it’s hard, that is a good thing. Sitting here broken-hearted reminds me how tender we all are.

Heartbreak happens. Love never fails. Both these things are true, and when I make room for this seeming paradox, I feel a little better. I remember I'm not alone. I remember that I can choose to be kind and loving to people all around, who may be heartbroken too. And I remember that I am held by a Love that is bigger than any one relationship, a Love that has never and will never let me go.

Second Reading: by the Brooklyn born poet, spiritual advisor, and cancer survivor, Mark Nepo

Having loved enough and lost enough,
I'm no longer searching
just opening,

no longer trying to make sense of pain
but trying to be a soft and sturdy home
in which real things can land.

These are the irritations
that rub into a pearl.

So we can talk for a while
but then we must listen,
the way rocks listen to the sea.

And we can churn at all that goes wrong
but then we must lay all distractions
down and water every living seed.

And yes, on nights like tonight
I too feel alone. But seldom do I
face it squarely enough
to see that it's a door
into the endless breath
that has no breather,
into the surf that human
shells call God.

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Let me tell you about my first lesson in heartbreak.

When I was in my early teens, I fell in love with a girl named Susie. We met at an international youth conference in Switzerland. I lived in Germany at the time, she lived in the U.S. It wasn't love at first sight. Actually it wasn't even romance. We were the same age, and enjoyed hanging out together. After the weeklong conference we each headed back home, and in the months that followed exchanged letters. That's when I slowly realized we were in love. I realized she loved me, and so I loved her.

How did I know she loved me, you ask? She didn't call to say she loved me. She didn't write long love poems, nor did she count the many ways she was in love. Her letters simply described what was going on in her life. But she signed each of her letters "Love, Susie." There it was. That proved it.

What I didn't know at the time, is that in American English it is quite common to sign letters "love, so-and-so" as a simple expression of friendship, like writing "yours truly" or "warmly." Somewhere in the midst of my English/German translation, I got the idea that this must be true love.

When I flew to the U.S. the next summer to re-establish and deepen our relationship, I quickly realized how mistaken I had been. I was heartbroken. I was crushed.

And I decided to never put myself in such a position again. My favorite song, at that stage of my life, was by Paul Simon:

A winter's day
In a deep and dark
December
I am alone
Gazing from my window to the streets below
On a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow
I am a rock
I am an island

I've built walls
A fortress deep and mighty
That none may penetrate
I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain
It's laughter and it's loving I disdain
I am a rock
I am an island...

And a rock feels no pain
And an island never cries

As it turns out my early heartbreak didn't last a lifetime. As you know, I met and married Elaine. What you may not know, is that yesterday we celebrated our 29th wedding anniversary.

But it is a fact that one common response to heartbreak is to withdraw from the world, hoping to protect our heart from any further harm. This can take many different shapes. We may seek solitude, or surround ourselves with protective layers of cynicism or anger. Even irony and humor can serve as ways to stay aloof and remote. We may try to put on some sort of psychological armor, surrounding our heart with a hard shell, hoping to never let it break again.

As Chris (our Worship Associate this morning) reminded us earlier, our hearts can be broken by any number of painful experiences of loss – the loss of relationships, or loved ones, the loss of our hopes, when life's tragedies shatter our dreams. Our first response is often to harden our hearts.

The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron recounts her first memory of this experience, and the lesson she learned at an early age. She writes:

“When I was about six years old I received an essential [Buddhist] teaching from an old woman sitting in the sun. I was walking by her house one day feeling lonely, unloved, and mad, kicking anything I could find. Laughing, she said to me, “Little girl, don't you go letting life harden your heart.”

Right there, I received this pith instruction: we can let the circumstances of our lives harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us and make us kinder and more open to what scares us. We always have this choice.”

A broken heart feels raw, she writes. Sometimes it causes anxiety and panic, sometimes resentment and blame. “But under the hardness of that armor there is the tenderness of genuine sadness. This is our link with all those who have ever loved,” she writes. “This genuine heart of sadness can teach us great compassion.” Choosing to soften our hearts, daring to open our hearts, is the first step toward healing. It is the first step toward spiritual growth. But it isn't easy.

In his book *A Path with Heart* the Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield writes, “Many people first come to spiritual practice hoping to skip over their sorrows and wounds, the difficult areas of their lives. They hope to rise above them and enter a spiritual realm full of divine grace, free from all conflict.” But it doesn't work that way.

Kornfield writes:

“Most often, opening the heart begins by opening to a lifetime's accumulation of unacknowledged sorrow, both our personal sorrows and the universal sorrows of warfare, hunger, old age, illness, and death. At times we may experience this

sorrow physically, as contractions and barriers around our heart, but more often we feel the depth of our wounds, our abandonment, our pain, as unshed tears. The Buddhists describe this as an ocean of human tears larger than the four great oceans.”

* * *

The feminist author and activist bell hooks believes firmly that a broken heart can only be healed by love. In her book *All About Love*, she writes,

“the intensity of our woundedness often leads to a closing of the heart, making it impossible for us to give or receive the love that is given to us. To open our hearts more fully to love’s power and grace we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice.”

We live in difficult times. In the face of the many challenges confronting us, it can be tempting to close our hearts to people we don’t understand, people we disagree with, and problems we can’t solve.

bell hooks writes:

“Life-threatening nihilism abounds in contemporary culture, crossing boundaries of race, class, gender, and nationality. At some point it affects all our lives. Everyone I know is at times brought low by feelings of depression and despair about the state of the world. Whether it is the ongoing worldwide presence of violence as expressed by the persistence of man-made war, hunger and starvation, the day-to-day reality of violence, the presence of life-threatening diseases that cause the unexpected deaths of friends, comrades and loved ones, there is much that brings everyone to the brink of despair. Knowing love or the hope of knowing love is the anchor that keeps us from falling into that sea of despair.”

* * *

There is so much broken in world in world around us and the world within us. Religious traditions have tried to make sense of this brokenness for a long time.

Judaism tells the story of Moses, who received the commandments from God at the top of Mount Sinai. They were written on heavy stone tablets, which Moses carried down the mountain. When he got to the bottom he saw his people were dancing around an idol: the golden calf. In anger, Moses hurled the tablets to the ground, shattering them. Later Moses received a second set of tablets. But what about the broken pieces of the first set? The Talmud says the broken pieces were still precious. So they were placed in the most sacred place the people had: in the Ark of the Covenant, right beside the intact commandments. According to mystical Judaism, the Ark of the Covenant is a symbol of the human heart. And there, in our hearts, our brokenness and wholeness live side by side. We hold them there, and carry them wherever we go. The Hassidic Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk perhaps put it best. He said: “There is nothing more whole than a broken heart.” (T. Schwartz)

* * *

Love heals, bell hooks says. When we are brokenhearted, it is hard to imagine that love really has the power to change everything, but it does.

“No matter what has happened in our past, when we open our hearts to love we can live as if born again, not forgetting the past but seeing it in a new way, letting it live inside us in a new way. We go forward with the fresh insight that the past can no longer hurt us... Mindful remembering lets us put the broken bits and pieces of our heart together again,”

she says.

* * *

For example: Naomi Remen is a doctor who works with cancer patients. She tells the story of a young man who was twenty-four years old when he came to her after one of his legs had been amputated at the hip in order to save his life from bone cancer. When she met him, he had a profound sense of injustice and a hatred for all “healthy” people. It seemed bitterly unfair to him that he had suffered this terrible loss so early in his life. His grief and rage were so intense, it took several years for him to slowly come out of himself and to heal - not simply his body, but also his broken heart and wounded spirit.

“He worked hard and deeply, telling his story, painting it, meditating, bringing his entire life into awareness. As he slowly healed, he developed a profound compassion for others in similar situations. He began to visit people in the hospital who had also suffered severe physical losses. [Once] he visited a young singer who was so depressed about the loss of her breasts that she would not even look at him. The nurses had the radio playing, probably hoping to cheer her up. It was a hot day, and the young man had come in running shorts. Finally, desperate to get her attention, he unstrapped his artificial leg and began dancing around the room on his one leg, snapping his fingers to the music. She looked at him in amazement, and then she burst out laughing and said, “Man, if you can dance, I can sing.”

When this young man first began working with drawing, he made a crayon sketch of his own body in the form of a vase with a deep black crack running through it. He redrew the crack over and over and over, grinding his teeth in rage. Several years later, to encourage him to complete his process [the doctor] showed him his early pictures again. He saw the vase and said, “Oh, this one isn’t finished.” When she suggested that he finish it then, he did. He ran his finger along the crack, saying, “You see here, this is where the light comes through.” With a yellow crayon, he drew light streaming through the crack into the body of the vase and said, “Our hearts can grow strong at the broken places.””

For Jack Kornfield this story shows that when we truly come to terms with our sorrow, a great and unshakable joy is born in our heart.

bell hooks says, “contrary to what we may have been taught to think, suffering wounds us but need not scar us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands.” She quotes James Baldwin, who wrote: “I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering – but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they [truly] are.” “Growing up is, at heart, the process of learning to take responsibility for whatever happens in your life. To choose growth is to embrace a love that heals,” bell hooks says.

* * *

It’s our choice.
Having known love and loss,
We can choose to open our hearts.
... just opening,

“no longer trying to make sense of pain
but trying to be a soft and sturdy home
in which real things can land.”

Like the hard-shelled oyster that holds kernels of sand, small irritations, and rubs them into a pearl. We can learn to listen to our lives the way rocks listen to the sea. And listen for the surf that human shells call God – a love that surrounds us all.

The pearl of great price is love.
May we choose to open our hearts to everything life offers us:
To pleasure and pain
To sorrow and joy
To all things broken and whole
So that our hearts may heal
and our love may grow.

So be it. Amen.

Sources:

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Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*, New York: Bantam Books, 1993.

Teri Schwartz, “*Stronger in the Broken Places*,” *Quest Magazine*, September 2017