Breaking Open
Rev. Darcey Laine

Chalice Lighting

Bring your Broken Hallelujah Here
by Rev. Julián Jamaica Soto

Bring your broken hallelujah here.
Bring the large one that is beyond
repair. Bring the small one that's
too soft to share. Bring your broken
hallelujah here. I know that people
have told you that before you can give
You have to get yourself together. They
Overstate the value of perfection
By a lot. Or they forgot. You are the gift.
We all bring some broken things, songs
And dreams, and long lost hopes. But
Here, together, we reach within.
As a community we begin again. And
From the pieces we will build something new.
There is work that only you can do. We
Wait for you.

Story for All Ages

The Wing by Ray Buckley

Readings

Blessing for the Brokenhearted By Jan Richardson

Let us agree
for now
that we will not say
the breaking
makes us stronger
or that it is better
to have this pain
than to have done
without this love.

Let us promise
we will not
tell ourselves
time will heal
the wound,
when every day
our waking
opens it anew.

Perhaps for now
it can be enough
to simply marvel
at the mystery
of how a heart
so broken
can go on beating,
as if it were made
for precisely this—

as if it knows
the only cure for love
is more of it,

as if it sees
the heart's sole remedy
for breaking
is to love still,

as if it trusts
that its own
persistent pulse
is the rhythm
of a blessing
we cannot
begin to fathom
but will save us
nonetheless.

Blessing for a Broken Vessel by Jan Richardson

Do not despair.
You hold the memory
of what it was
to be whole.

It lives deep
in your bones.
It abides
in your heart
that has been torn
and mended
a hundred times.
It persists
in your lungs
that know the mystery
of what it means
to be full,
to be empty,
to be full again.

I am not asking you
to give up your grip
on the shards you clasp
so close to you

but to wonder
what it would be like
for those jagged edges
to meet each other
in some new pattern
that you have never imagined,
that you have never dared
to dream.

Sermon
Breaking Open

You know what it's like to be broken. No one gets this far into life without breaks and tears, if not in our body, then broken hearts, broken spirits. Imagine a favorite mug, used every day- it develops cracks, and stains. As we move through life we develop cracks in the self we present to the world, the self that feels competent, and in control. How brittle and easily broken our sense of who we are and what we can depend on feels in times like these. Things that used to make sense no longer can be assembled into a meaningful whole- even our sense of meaning feels fragmented.

Imagine our hearts as vessels for the movement of life, of love. Sometimes I feel as if something is pulverized in the center of my chest as I process some new loss, some new disappointment. There is pain in the breaking, and in feeling broken, and even in the mending. Pain and fear, sorrow and anger. We need our spirituality to accompany us in those places. A spirituality that would desert us in our brokenness is itself broken.

Sometimes our breaking is precipitated by some choice or action of our own, but more often it is out of our control. Either way, we are broken not because we are bad or wrong or inadequate, but because humans are breakable. This is important- a theological point- that parts of us the feel broken are not left out of what is sacred. Our broken parts have inherent worth and dignity. Our broken parts are holy too.

Perhaps you woke this morning feeling broken- and Good for you for joining us in that tender state. I bet all of us have felt some proximity to brokenness this past year, so I want to give us a grounding in a spirituality of brokenness -- for those moments when we feel like a pile of shards.

We begin with compassion for our broken places. If you were mending a broken bone, you would put it in a sling, and treat it gently. We can all probably

remember physical injuries that hurt with each jostle- an injury to the body heals more quickly, and more cleanly when we treat it with gentleness, with patience, with quiet. The broken places in our hearts and spirits need the same gentleness, patience, quiet. Compassion makes space for healing.

The path of the spirit asks us to open our hearts to our brokenness, which requires compassion and courage. We might feel unproductive, out of control, unkempt, and the first instinct is to put ourselves back together again as quickly as possible, to hold ourselves together with an act of will if necessary. Because the demands of life keep going- the kids need to be fed, the bills need to be paid, so the question is-- can we keep our hearts open, instead of doubling our defenses as seems instinctive after an injury. This takes so much courage- to be open hearted after heartbreak, to allow our spirits to be tender when they feel crushed.

I was struck by this poem by Max Mundan who often writes about his struggles with addiction:

> Why do we spend all of our precious soft?
> trying to be hard
> talking like we're hard
> dressing like we're hard
> pretending to be hard
> moving like we're hard
> acting like we're hard
> writing like we're hard
> living like we're hard
>
> until we wake up one morning
> stone
> cold
> hard
> and we'd give anything
> everything
> to feel a little bit of
> soft

That softness is often hiding underneath our hard exterior; sometimes when we are broken there is a rare and precious opportunity to touch that soft part of ourselves that many of us have been trained to hide away. That soft, vulnerable part is sacred, is holy. A broken heart cannot be puffed up and proud, it is humble, and open to the reality of what is. If you catch a glimpse of softness, vulnerability, humility when our hearts are broken, please honor it as a blessing and a gift.

When I was on retreat, right after the death of my father, my heart felt trampled. Fortunately, I had nothing to do, nowhere else to be for a week, and so my spirit seemed to take the occasion to bring me every broken shard, of every loss that had never healed. It also brought up past mistakes I had made, failures and disappointments. I allowed myself to just be broken that week. It was the first week of Lent, as it is today in the Christian tradition, and one evening in worship the congregation repeated the response "God loves a broken and humbled heart[1]." And I felt that was speaking right to me, to where I was in that moment. I felt so broken, I was relieved by the reminder that the spirit of Love included even me. As a Universalist, I believe that the divine is a love that will never let us go, but I was amazed that even in my brokenness I was still loved by the divine in a compassion more perfect than my own heart was able to offer. And, in fact, I noticed that my heart was more open to the divine than it had been in a long time. That the hard protective coating that allowed me to move and work in the world had muted my perception of that love, but now was stripped away. [2]

When our hearts are broken, sometimes things shine through those new openings. Many of you have spoken to me of the love that reached you in times of deepest grief - the love for the person you have lost, or the love of your family and community supporting one another in the loss. In the very place of the breaking, love is shining through.

---

[1] https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm%2051&version=HCSB

[2] I want to be careful to make a theological point here- I don't believe that we must suffer to receive such compassionate grace. I think that kind of transactional theology has allowed us to let suffering go unaddressed. We don't earn grace through suffering. (see Parker, Brock)

It's hard to keep our hearts open -- we feel so vulnerable. Jan Richardson wrote, for the first Valentines day after her husband's tragic and untimely death:

> Perhaps for now
> it can be enough
> to simply marvel
> at the mystery
> of how a heart
> so broken
> can go on beating,
> as if it were made
> for precisely this—
>
> as if it knows
> the only cure for love
> is more of it,
>
> as if it sees
> the heart's sole remedy
> for breaking
> is to love still,

What our heart contains, what flows through our heart, is love. When our hearts are broken, it is ironically love that helps them heal.

Other blessings can flow through those broken places too. Once, when my heart was broken by bullying, I was full of rage, and in that rage I felt truth shining through- the truth of who I was, and the truth of what life needs to thrive. For the bird in our story today it was the beauty of her song that shone through her broken places. If we leave ourselves open, even in our brokenness, we make space for something new to flow through, some gifts form outside ourselves to flow in, or some gift from deep inside we had no idea was in our depths.

Now we may feel pressure from ourselves, form our families, toward a premature closure. Sometimes people can't bear to see us broken, and so they want us to hurry up and go back to being the person they knew before. But the miracle of healing can't be rushed, because as we are healing, we are re-forming, like a

broken bone knitting back together. We have undoubtedly experienced a sort of battlefield healing, where there is not the safety, or the time, or the compassion to stay open, and so we become smaller and more heavily defended after a break, bound up by the scar tissue that saved our lives. Let us shine compassion on these tight places, and strive to create a world where everyone has the safety, the time and compassion they need for their healing.

Even if you know in your head that healing is possible, a broken heart will never be truly the same again, and we have to first grieve the old form before we can see the new form that is taking shape. If we don't take time to grieve, we betray the reality of that broken moment, the reality of the loss.

Like the bird in today's story, we can't always be put back together as we were before the breaking, but healing in a new form is possible. Again the words of Jan Richardson:

> I am not asking you
> to give up your grip
> on the shards you clasp
> so close to you
>
> but to wonder
> what it would be like
> for those jagged edges
> to meet each other
> in some new pattern
> that you have never imagined,
> that you have never dared
> to dream.

Sometimes, miraculously, people grow bigger and more open to life in the midst of their brokenness. I hope you have had the gift of witnessing people who have experienced great loss, transform, grow and heal beyond what can be imagined or promised. People like Jan Richardson -- whose compassionate and wise poetry has been a comfort to others in their time of great loss. In this very congregation I have known many hearts broken open.

One of the new capacities brokenness makes available to us is greater compassion. Once we know in our hearts what it is to experience a certain breakage, deeper compassion may be possible for others who have suffered a similar loss. The word compassion comes from the roots “suffer together.” I believe compassion is one of the most sacred qualities, because it connects us to one another. I have noticed this is most available when we are first compassionate with ourselves. If we harden our own hearts to our own suffering, it’s likely that hardness will ripple out to the suffering of others. If we can be brave enough to be compassionate with ourselves, to let our hearts stay open even when they are broken, we increase the odds that when finally we begin to heal, we will heal hearts and spirits that are larger, that are more compassionate than before.

Sometimes, we may find in retrospect, the veneer of control, of competence, that we prize so highly, and lost when we were broken, had been limiting who we are and how we could grow. When we break, it sometimes opens us to new truth about what it means to be alive in this world. Please understand, I’m not saying that the breaking is somehow worth it, that our losses were a necessary price for growth. As Richardson’ writes; “Let us agree/ for now/ that we will not say/ the breaking / makes us stronger / or that it is better / to have this pain / than to have done / without this love.”

Only that because we are human, loss and betrayal and pain are part of what it means to be alive. Sometimes in our pain, in our brokenness there is also a blessing, and it is worth the risk of staying open to make space for that blessing.

Our Brokenness is sacred, and the new form we take as we heal is sacred too. In fact we are breaking and healing all the time, it is part of being human, part of being alive. Have courage, friends, when your heart or spirit is broken, have courage to keep your heart open, however much you are able. And may we be patient, hopeful, courageous and compassionate for all who feel broken. Let us be a blessing to one another in those tender times.

Song #1057: *Go Lifted Up*

Closing Words

Blessing the Fragments by Jan Richardson

Cup your hands together,
and you will see the shape
this blessing wants to take.
Basket, bowl, vessel:
it cannot help but
hold itself open
to welcome
what comes.

This blessing
knows the secret
of the fragments
that find their way
into its keeping,
the wholeness
that may hide
in what has been
left behind,
the persistence of plenty
where there seemed
only lack.

Look into the hollows
of your hands
and ask
what wants to be
gathered there,
what abundance waits
among the scraps
that come to you,
what feast
will offer itself
from the fragments
that remain.