

## *The Blessings of Brokenness*

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Our theme for this month is Brokenness. I know what you might be thinking, “Oh good a whole month about being broken.” You know I would never bring you to a dark place without showing you the way out. In fact, today, I’ll offer you the beauty, the advantages, the blessings of brokenness. So, fear not. As I thought of the blessings of brokenness my father came to mind. You see, as a hobby he built furniture and restored furniture. I can still see his workshop and smell the sawdust and the wood stain vapors. This was a place he escaped to and I know building and restoring furniture was like meditation for him. We’ve all seen restored furniture. Restoring furniture involves stripping away old varnish or paint. This reveals all the old scratches, gouges, and spots on the piece. The sanding takes place next—the wood is rubbed with coarse sandpaper to smooth out its imperfections. Then the furniture is ready to receive a new stain or paint color. New glory can be given to old furniture. In the brokenness of the old furniture my father could see and uncovered beauty and blessing.

This is how I’ve become to understand brokenness. Within it there is revelation and new life. We shouldn’t run from being broken. Even though it’s not pleasant, it will produce meaning in our lives. Brokenness is a blessing because it puts us on the road to a discovery. Emotional and spiritual brokenness can mean a lot of things. It may imply a messy life full of imperfection. It may mean being heartbroken from a past relationship. It may mean emotional scarring from the deep wounds of the past. Sometimes, brokenness makes us a victim; for others, it motivates us to be strong. With some, their life seems so incongruent due to the brokenness that they don’t know how to stay “true to themselves.” It has even become a trendy word that gives some people a sense of identity. There are a lot of different ways that we could define the meaning of brokenness.

We are all broken. We think of this as our biggest liability, but the reality is that the beauty in our brokenness is overwhelming. Cancer. Addiction. Chronic pain. Anxiety. Poor physical fitness. Depression. Job burnout. No one I know wants experiences like these, but everyone I know has some. Does that mean we are somehow diminished? Not at all. We come into the world as a small bundle of needs, completely dependent on our parents, unable to control even the movements of our limbs. Our will is frail and flawed. Yet, as we grow, we are told to seize the day, hold the fort, take charge of our future. We are fed with illusions of control and individuality, and we begin to believe that sanity consists of the ability to shape our world to our own desires. Our entertainments feature actors and athletes who are strong, beautiful, powerful. Our cultural narratives promote constant self-improvement, rising above our humble beginnings, and eliminating our flaws. We learn to fear our weaknesses as cracks in the armor that protects us from harm.

That’s all backwards. You see, it is our brokenness that connects us to others. We tend to feel like we won’t have the relationships we want until we are better. But in reality all of us

are incomplete, we all need each other to function, and it is this giving and receiving that ties us all together. We have been given an opportunity to share in healing love not only by loving others with their flaws, but also by allowing others to love us in our brokenness. Accepting our own dependency is essential to participating in this beautiful reciprocal gift that is human life. Yet for thousands and thousands of years, perhaps back to the story of Adam and Eve, we haven't managed acceptance. Why? We are afraid. That was the first reaction of the first man and woman to the first bite of apple. Fear. The more we reach and grasp for control, certainty, security, and invulnerability, the more our limitations threaten us. Like quicksand, the harder we struggle and fight to rid ourselves of weakness, the more we are trapped in fear.

As I told you minutes ago, fear not. To follow this advice means embracing our brokenness rather than battling it. We lean into it and allow it to touch us. And like when we imagine ourselves in quicksand, the more we contact our need, our dependence, the less it sucks us down and the more of our weight it will bear for us. It is beautiful to know someone who embraces their humanity in all its imperfection. I hope you read my newsletter article for this month. It is there I reveal my humanity through imperfection. My cousin recently died after a long battle with cancer. He was 49 years old. We spoke a lot over the past year. We were quite close as children as he lived across the street from my house. As he fought the cancer, he and his wife shared their struggles, disappointments and triumphs, asking and allowing others to support them. His physical weakness prompted an outpouring of love from those who knew him. This couple's suffering invited others to more fully enter into their humanity, brought others together in supporting them, and prompted a beautiful sharing of love. The community quite literally *came alive* around them.

My brother has a more private struggle – he faces a powerful addiction. When he shared this with me, it allowed me to see a different aspect of his humanity, to know him more in his brokenness. This in itself is beautiful, seeing him more as he is, with less pretense. Being asked to support him has also forced me to confront my own failings, my impatience, my selfishness. His vulnerable request for help has not only brought us into a deeper relationship, but also brought me into closer contact with my humanity and neediness while gifting me with an opportunity to love despite my faults.

Moments of vulnerable, human beauty are what make being a minister rewarding for me. Those I serve are often much closer to their own brokenness. They have felt it, struggled with it and know that they have been unable to “overcome” or “fix” it. They know they have needs. They take risks. They allow themselves to peel back the layers of masks which have sheltered them from the world, and allow me to know them. We may be talking about depression, isolation, loneliness; the moment may be shrouded in tears; breaking out of a shell is often painful. But the moment is also marked by intense vitality. In the revealing and responding, knowing and being known, we are also amazingly and unmistakably alive. It is at moments like this that I understand why St. Irenaeus said “The glory of God is man fully alive.”

As your minister, I have watched you struggle deeply with brokenness in your lives. I too have experienced the depth of such darkness. Yet, together, out of the midst of that darkness, out of

the desperation our brokenness drives us to, there is hope. Out of a fractured heart over grief, over pain, over shame and guilt, our work is to produce humility in each other. It is humility that allows us to recognize and come to grips with our brokenness. We all face and struggle with brokenness on our journey — because we are all broken and much of what troubles us comes out of the broken places in our hearts crying out for some sort of relief. As Harold J. Duarte-Bernhardt shares, “We are all broken and wounded in this world. Some choose to grow strong at the broken places.” I discovered that more often than not, one’s suffering and brokenness amplifies our helplessness and truly exposes our need for interdependency.

The reason brokenness is beautiful and a blessing is because of how we can use it in our lives. It is something that can draw us near to one another and our faith. Brokenness makes room for a contrite heart and repentance to bring us back into fellowship with one another when we have miserably failed. It is not lovely in and of itself, it is not the end of the journey, it is not a title to be used for identity, it’s not a word to use when you want to feel “authentic.” Emotional and spiritual brokenness itself is messy and sad. BUT, as our eyes are opened to truth in the midst of that brokenness and we begin to see the promise of the “binding up that which was broken,” we once again have hope. When we are broken, we see the frailty of human strength and come to grips with the reality that we can do nothing in our own strength. Then, new strength emerges. Do not fear brokenness, for it may be the missing ingredient to a life that emerges with a new kind of strength and experience not known before.

Our brokenness allows us to begin to care for ourselves in an unconditional way—in a sense of finding out how to soothe ourselves. How to find acceptance for ourselves even at our most vulnerable and broken level. When we begin to love ourselves and realize our interdependency. We begin to know that even our brokenness is a part of who we are and that we can live with that. That we are still whole, even though parts of ourselves are wounded.

May it be so.