

Wholeness

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Once upon a time, at a multigenerational event at a Unitarian Universalist congregation, everyone was encouraged to create a heart. They were given some construction paper and some glue and some markers to design their heart. Emily worked diligently to create the most perfect, beautiful heart she could. It even had glitter in the shape of diamonds all around the outside. As she was helping to clean up, she noticed the heart of one woman who was around the same age as her grandmother sitting at a nearby table. It was a mish-mash mess of odd colors and had pieces which were ripped and torn glued haphazardly upon it. Parts of it were wrinkled and crinkled and there was even a little hole in it!

Thinking there was something wrong, Emily offered to help the woman fix her heart. But the woman merely smiled and explained that there was nothing wrong with her heart; it merely revealed all the things which had happened to her in her life. She said there were happy times here: the beautiful colors and designs represented when she first met her husband, their wedding, and the birth of each of their three children. There were other beautiful parts, too, which stood for watching her children taking their first steps on their own, riding a bike for the first time and graduating from college. "But what about all the rips and tears and wrinkles?" Emily asked. "Why are they there?" These were for the sad times in her life, the woman explained. The time her best friend was stricken with measles, the time someone lied or did something to hurt her feelings and the hole was left when her husband died. "In fact, every time a person comes into my life that I care about," she explained, "they take a piece of my heart with them."

This was distressing to Emily, thinking of the woman having to give part of her heart away to others. "But what happens if you give it all away?" she asked. "You'll be left with nothing." "No, I won't," the woman responded with a smile. "Because you see, they give me a piece of theirs as well." Emily looked down at her beautiful, perfect heart with the glitter and the designs she worked so hard to make. Then she looked again at the woman's mish-mashed heart with the jagged colors, rips, and wrinkles. Without hesitation, Emily ripped a piece from her perfect heart and handed it to the woman. "Thank you," the woman said as she placed it with her mish-mash heart and tore off a piece to hand to Emily.

There are several other variations in folk literature of this story of the "perfect heart" which are all poignant in grasping the truth of the matter. If it were possible to view our hearts – that metaphorical version of our core – either through a transparent glass pane or in some physical sense outside our bodies (as if we could carry it around in our hands) if human nature holds true, we would very much want it to appear as unblemished as possible. The brokenness we all experience as part of life on this earth - we see as flaw, imperfection, as a complete reflection of who we are. There is an inherent wholeness that exists within each of us, beyond and despite our experiences of brokenness. The Quaker writer and teacher Parker Palmer refers to this as a "hidden wholeness".

The World Health Organization defines health as, "A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." In the world of psychology and mental health, we are good at defining what is wrong with us, but what does it look like to be right, healthy, or whole? Would we know it if we saw it? Are there degrees of wholeness? Does wholeness look the same for you as it does for me? Wholeness is a complex issue because it involves all of what makes us human - mind, body, soul, emotions, and relationships. None of these can be scientifically studied in a vacuum, put under a microscope, or dissected.

Our understanding of "whole" comes through the old Germanic and Norse languages: *hal*, *haila* which give the sense of entire, unhurt, uninjured, safe; healthy, sound; genuine, straightforward, undamaged, complete. Our word for health has similar roots. We Unitarian Universalists understand the urge to restore what once was. Nothing is more human. Who doesn't want to reverse the damage? Who doesn't hold on to the humpty dumpty hope that all can be put back together again? But our faith teaches us that this is just not how the world works. Transition and change rule the flow of life. There is no going back. The current of time is just too strong.

And so, the wholeness offered us is not that returning our lives to their original state but working with what remains to make something new. The shards are not pieces of a puzzle that needs put perfectly back together, but building blocks waiting to be molded into a yet to be imagined form. To be made whole again is to be reorganized, not restored.

Let me tell you a folktale from India called *The Cracked Pot*. It goes like this: Long ago there lived a man whose job it was to haul water from the stream uphill to his master's house many times each day. To do this work, the water bearer had two large pots that hung from each end of a pole he carried across the back of his neck, balanced over the top of his shoulders. The two pots were identical, but only one of them was perfect – the other one had a small crack in it, so with every trip up the hill the cracked pot lost nearly half of its water while the perfect pot delivered a full portion. The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments and loved to brag about them. He also loved to point out to the cracked pot how flawed it was...that no matter how hard the water bearer worked, the cracked pot only ever managed to deliver a half portion of water to the master's house. The cracked pot felt ashamed of his imperfection and was miserable that he could accomplish only half of what he had been made to do. One day the cracked pot spoke to the water bearer when they had stopped by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I must apologize to you for my flaw...for my inability to carry all the water you need me to carry. You work so hard and I fail to give you the full value for your effort." The water bearer listened and looked upon the pot with compassion and said, "As we return to the master's house this time, I want you to pay attention to the beautiful flowers growing along the path." And indeed, as they went back up the hill, the cracked pot did take notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and felt cheered somewhat. But at the end of the trail, the pot once again felt miserable and apologized again for having lost half its water along the way. The water bearer said to the pot, "I'm afraid you do not understand what I was trying to show you. Did you not notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, and not on the other pot's side? That's because I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. I have known about your crack for some time and could have crafted a new pot. But because of your flaw, we have been able together to

grow beautiful flowers and with them bless many tables. Without you being just the way you are, where would we have found such beauty?

Another way to put this is to say that there is freedom in the breaking. The cracks make room for creativity. That's not to minimize the pain. And it's certainly not a way of justifying tragedy as "part of God's plan." Rather, it's a call for us to perceive the broken pieces of our lives as more than just a pile of worthless and ruined rubble. "Look closer," says our faith, "that ash, if worked with, can give birth to a Phoenix." So, what piles of rubble in your life need revisited? What longing for what was needs let go so a new wholeness can emerge? And how might you break open even further? Because that's part of this too, isn't it? "Your broken pieces are more than rubble" is not the only counterintuitive thing our faith tells us about wholeness. It also urges us to "crack wider!"

As odd as it sounds, we were meant to be broken, broken open to be exact. Over and over again, our faith reminds us that protecting our personal wholeness is only half the game. The equally important part of life's journey is about letting in the wholeness of world! It's about cultivating cracks on purpose. It's about becoming intentionally exposed. As Leonard Cohen famously put it "Cracks are how the light gets in." It's one of the most important but paradoxical spiritual truths there is: Broken people end up bigger people. So, in the end, maybe that's our most important "wholeness question": How are your cracks inviting you to become larger? What cracks do you need to cultivate on purpose?

The Rev. Anya Michael writes, "My father is a professor and I learned from him that you don't really know something until you teach it to another. We don't really know our own wholeness until we see the wholeness of another or work to serve wholeness in our world. Wholeness, a sense of our own fullness, a spiritual realization of our own strength and beauty, is given when we give of ourselves... We heal our own aches by healing the aches in others. We put back the pieces of our own souls by helping others redeem their own wholeness."

We all want to feel whole. It cannot be attained. Often, the harder we try to become whole the more we experience our brokenness. Wholeness must be realized and therefore received. It is a gift and free of cost to any who would ask. Our transformation as becoming more fully who we are rather than becoming something different. Wholeness is the awareness of connectedness to life around us, but it is also about finding or restoring connection to who we are most deeply called to be. And it is also authenticity, leading a life where we don't work to hide our broken pieces but unveil and honor them as the work of a life well-lived, a life through which we've constructed beauty out of the broken moments.

Let us end with the words of Wendell Berry:

Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that human wholeness — mine, yours, ours — need not be a utopian dream if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life.

May it be so.