

Forgiving the Broken¹

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During the spring, Margy and I noticed that our hot water wouldn't get hot anymore. We put up with lukewarm showers while we were trying to sort out what to do. We love the earth, so we are always trying to make our home more environmentally friendly; we took time to research a lot of options.

Our hot water came from a coil in our boiler, and we were told that it would be quite expensive to clean out the coil, using lots of nasty chemicals. Did we need a new boiler? A very state-of-the-art efficient new boiler would cost \$11,000 to install. A boiler that used wood pellets instead of oil—even better—would cost \$22,000, including an automatic pellet feeder. Well, we didn't have enough money for either of those options. Solar hot water is also expensive, and we don't have a south facing roof, and we have a lot of trees. One company recommended heat exchange water heaters—they were about \$3000 to install.

I also researched more traditional hot water heaters—we don't have natural gas where we live, so that wasn't an option. I lined up all the brands and all their energy efficiency. But I found that the ones that were the most energy efficient cost a whole more, for the tiniest fraction of greater efficiency. I did a whole lot of work on it, but eventually, we just chose a standard electric hot water heater installed for about \$1000. The good news is that we can shut off our boiler during the summer months, since it won't be needed to heat water. And we have hot showers again. The bad news is that our electric bill will go up about \$50 a month. So all in all, we're probably using more energy than before.

I share this story because I felt so sad after our experience, so disappointed that there weren't good ecological solutions. Despite my values and idealism about how I want to live on the earth, despite how much time I put into research, it wasn't possible to find workable and affordable choices. The options we have as families depend on what our society chooses do with its resources. Even though we hold a vision of living in harmony with the earth, our social and economic system was built upon exploitation of the earth for resources.

One day, caught in this gap between my ideals and what I was able to do, I went outside to share my sorrow with the trees and the green earth. I want the world to be better than it is—I want there to be a path forward that is not so lonely and hard, so expensive and out of reach. I was in a painful, broken place. I sat down on a blanket on the ground, and looked to the four sacred elements of the earth for help; the earth, the air, the fire, the water. They were kinder than I expected.

¹ Copyright 2011 Rev. Mykel Johnson and Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church. Permission to reprint, except for personal use, must be requested from office@a2u2.org. Our reading today was "And Then" by Judy Chicago.

The Earth said, Forgive the people of your society. Don't hate your own kind. They didn't know the oil would run out. They were creating what seemed to be good with all this abundance. It's not evil to use oil. It is evil to fight wars and oppress workers and sully the waters in your attempts to keep it and secure it. The Air reminded me that the songs of birds can dispel sadness, and awaken joy and beauty. The Fire surrounded me with the warmth of love, and said these energy issues can only be resolved through our connection to the sun. All of our energy comes from the sun. The Water said, Weep when you are sad. Don't always try to fix it. And so I came to a place of peace.

My dream is a net-zero carbon home that generates more energy than it needs. That would be ideal. But in order to be alive in this world, I need to forgive the messiness of what is, as it is now. I am able to accept our brokenness when I feel the Sun shining down on us despite it all. When I feel the water claiming us as her own, the flowers blooming, the food growing, the birds singing. The beauty of this earth teaches me that there is something very good even in the midst of our brokenness. Yesterday, the newspaper had a story about green homes in New England. If I can expand my perspective, I can be joyful that some people are creating net-zero homes, that something is awakening among human beings that will lead to greater wholeness with the earth.

During the summer, while all of this was going on, I was reading the novel, *March*, by Geraldine Brooks.² The story is centered on the absent father figure, Mr. March, in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and draws on the actual life story of her father, Bronson Alcott. Mr. March has gone off to be a chaplain for the Union Army during the civil war. He is passionately opposed to slavery. The whole family has been involved in the underground railroad, and Mr. March had lost most of his fortune supporting the work of abolitionists. So it seems unconscionable not to support the military effort to free the slaves. He is following his highest ideals.

But Mr. March's actual experience as a chaplain in the war proves profoundly disillusioning. The Union soldiers, his heroes, are often cruel to each other and to the former slaves who seek refuge. Many battles are ill-planned and disastrous, with horrific loss of life and injury and disease. Finding himself in a deadly situation, he lacks the courage to give up his own life to save the life of one of the slaves he has been teaching to read. When he tries to follow the abductors and help to save the other captured slaves, the mission ultimately fails, despite his efforts. Eventually, he succumbs to fever and is sent to a Union hospital, a broken and despairing man.

How do any of us heal from the despair that evil or failure can bring to our hearts? Sometimes we try to isolate ourselves from what is broken—to separate the good from the bad. For our ecological values, this might mean we decide to build our own zero-carbon home off the grid, grow all our own food, and stop participating in the larger society. In some religious traditions, it takes the form of identifying sinners and banishing them from the community of the holy. For

² Viking Press, 2005. It won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

others, it may be more subtle: we may be tempted to connect only with people with whom we agree, who share our values and ideals, and stop relating to those who seem to us, "unenlightened." We imagine ourselves on the right side of a very great conflict.

But Mr. March found that the people on the "right" side of the civil war were also broken, that he himself failed to live up to his own high ideals. How can he heal from the wounds of self-betrayal? Near the end of the war, Abraham Lincoln reached out to the whole nation, north and south, to try to help bring people back together into one community—which was of course the root purpose of the war—to preserve the union. His second inaugural address closed with these words of healing:

*With malice toward none; with charity for all;
with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right,
let us strive on to finish the work we are in;
to bind up the nation's wounds;
to care for him who shall have borne the battle,
and for his widow and his orphan...
to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace
among ourselves and with all nations.*

Our brokenness tears us apart, but our healing must bring us together. Mr. March slowly finds his healing through the love of the people who care for him, just as he is. Marmee comes to him at the military hospital, and eventually he returns to his family, chastened, fragile, not whole yet, but able to be united to those familiar little women, his daughters.

Did the nation take to heart Lincoln's words? A short time later, he was assassinated. Perhaps we are still living with the brokenness in our nation that erupted in the civil war. The divides between black and white, between south and north, between liberal and conservative, between rich and poor, still undermine our capacity to live up to our country's ideals. I don't have an answer to fix it.

But I believe that all people and all beings are connected, that the earth is a whole; that belief shapes how I can imagine a way forward. The way forward is always rooted in forgiveness. Forgiveness for the failures we see all around us, the ways that others betray the ideals we hold dear, and hurt and wound each other. And forgiveness for our selves, when we too are unable to live up to our values and ideals, which happens almost every day. Only when we can forgive the past, can we return to the dreams we hold, can we find wholeness, and receive a new start.

This time of the Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur reminds us of the necessity of reconciliation and forgiveness if we wish to be inscribed in the book of life. It is the time when we are meant to seek out those whom we have hurt, or who have hurt us, to make things whole again. This is the time to mend the threads of connection between ourselves and other people, between ourselves and the earth, between ourselves and the spirit of life.

This is not easy work. It is not just big societal evils that we face. We also face the everyday betrayals and regrets. Self-forgiveness may be the hardest of all. We face the perennial faults that are unique to us, yet common to so many. How often do we fail to live up to our own values and ideals? We mean to be kind, but find ourselves cranky and rude instead. We mean to be supportive to a friend or family member, but feel judgmental instead. We mean to be honest, but tell little lies to avoid upsetting someone. We mean to be generous, but feel greedy about our pleasures.

Can I forgive myself the belief that I am right when I argue with my neighbor? Can I forgive myself the angry words shouted at my child as we are trying to get out of the house to make it to school or work on time? Can I forgive myself the end of a relationship with a partner or spouse? Can I forgive myself for needing help when I don't know how to face a situation on my own?

What helps me to forgive is to remember the sun. The sun shines down on all of us, each day, making no distinction between the good and the bad, making no distinction between when I am in tune with all my values, or when I fail. Its light is constant, never changing because of virtue or vice, but merely following the rhythm of the seasons and lighting up the blue sky or the gray clouds. Its light keeps shining, giving life to all creatures. When I remember that I am accepted as part of the circle of life, it seems easier to open my heart to forgive myself.

And if I am a part of the circle of life, so is everyone else. If I believe that all people, and all beings are connected, then in order to be whole, I must open my heart to that larger whole, to the connections between all beings. This is the heart of spiritual practice—to open our hearts to the larger whole of which we are a part.

And yet, when I open to the whole, I experience more profoundly its brokenness, the ways we hurt each other and our earth, the ways we are not in harmony. It is tempting to retreat, to draw a circle around my self to try to achieve some sort of individual harmony and balance—but that would cut me off, into the brokenness of separation.

I realize in this tension that there can be no individual salvation. If we want to heal ourselves, we must be healers of our world. If we want to heal our world, we must be connected to all the broken people. We must embrace the broken to heal the broken. Relationship is at the heart of everything. So, to be whole is to experience the broken. To be whole is to be broken.

It might be too much to bear. How do we find joy in the midst of it? Again, I remember the sun. The sun shining on each being, the sun the source of all life on earth. When I feel the sun warming my face, I realize that I am connected to the sun. Each moment of connection can be a source of joy. Each moment of connection rings true to our deepest purpose. To be connected to spirit, to each other, to the earth, awakens joy.

And the truth is, even our brokenness, our limitations, can become doorways into connection. We are all incomplete without each other. We each have just one small piece of the puzzle. Alone, all we see are jagged edges and random colors... and maybe all together we see just a jumbled pile of jagged pieces—but sometimes we catch a glimpse of the puzzle box cover—what we might become all together. That glimpse can fill us with joy. And sometimes, we find another piece that fits together with our own jagged edge—and joy comes from each small connection like that. We have to find our joy in each moment of connection.

Our jagged edges teach us that we need each other. When I reach the limits of my knowledge or ability, it is a gift to reach out to another person, whose knowledge and ability might balance my own. Mr. March, like all returning soldiers from the battlefield, needed the tenderness of his family to find self-forgiveness. One day, when I was weary and sad about my recurring impulse to tell my partner what to do, my partner said, "I know you can be controlling sometime, but I love you just the way you are." Leonard Cohen sang, "Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."³

We must embrace the cracks, embrace the jagged edges, embrace the broken pieces. Forgive and be forgiven. Ask for help. This is the path to wholeness.

I want to close with a prayer from the Ojibway Indians, that is found in our hymnal:⁴

Grandfather,
look at our brokenness.
We know that in all creation
Only the human family has strayed from the Sacred Way.
We know that we are the ones who are divided.
And we are the ones who must come back together
to walk in the Sacred Way.
Grandfather,
teach us love, compassion, and honor,
that we may heal the earth and heal each other.
So may it be.

CLOSING WORDS

The sun shines down on all of us, each day, whether cloudy or clear, making no distinction between the good and the bad. May we return to the great circle of life, may we hold each other and all beings tenderly, for we are one. Shana Tova!

Note—for our Lesson for All Ages we played a Rosh Hashanah music video, "Dip Your Apple," by the Fountainheads. You can find it at <http://einprat.org/thefountainheads.php>

³ From "Anthem," on the album *The Future*, released in 1992.

⁴ Included in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #518.