

Brokenness

When my son was being delivered he was too big to make it out, so the doctor reached in and hooked his fingers under his arms and pulled him out. Unfortunately it broke his collar bone. He healed up fine, but what was interesting is that due to the break and healing that bone was stronger than ever. There are also potters who take their pots and break them only to put them back together with gold filling. Again stronger than before but now ever more beautiful as well. These stories always make me look at brokenness in a different way.

In today's world it seems brokenness is rarely acknowledged, more likely denied and hidden. I have the privilege of having recovery friends who admit, and even celebrate their defects, and their dysfunctional thinking and behaviors, for therein lies the possibility of great healing, strength, and beauty. For us, acknowledgement is only the beginning. From there we make what is sometimes an enormous and possibly lifelong search for acceptance, understanding, and healing of our issues. Early on we consciously or unconsciously learned don't talk, don't trust, don't feel rules. We like to add don't look, don't listen, don't heal, for these go right along with the others. We gather in weekly meetings to summon the tremendous courage it takes to learn to trust others enough to tell our stories and feel our grief and pain.

The hidden psychological wounds of our past are often deep, sore, and infected. We learn we are only as sick as our secrets, so through sharing them we can reach well being. Just getting to them through our many the masks, dysfunctional coping mechanisms, and addictions that arose can be daunting in itself. It is as though we wrapped up our mental and emotional wounds in thick bandages, with leather boots, pants, and coats strung tightly with body length laces and a covering of thick and heavy armor. The masks we wear also hide our suffering. No wonder many people are dragging themselves around exhausted. We may not see a thing, as many are highly functioning like Michael Jackson, Prince, and Robin Williams were, but weighted down greatly none the less.

If these are not enough to feel safe and find some peace, we may isolate in seclusion or take up weapons of criticism, passive aggressiveness, and others to attack or otherwise keep others away. The misery of the pain, suffering, and loneliness, prompts many to seek solace in alcohol, drugs, food, and less obvious addictions like overworking, spending, exercising, or religions. We may structure our lives to keep others away such as filling our cars and homes so full of garbage and clutter there is no room for others and we are too embarrassed to even let others see what a mess our life is. We also may fill our schedule so we appear too busy for others.

When we find safe places and people we begin to at last address and care for our dis-eases. Caring for and healing these wounds can take months, years, decades, or a lifetime, but we are worth it. Some of these issues are so crippling they can never be resolved completely, so we learn to deal with them as best we can. We are handicapped, but at least we know it, so we can learn to accept it, and make the best of what we do have that functions well. We don't do it alone. We have our fellowship, but our true power comes from a higher and greater power, that of life itself. Some chose to call this power God, as that which is defined as all wisdom, power, and presence. Call it whatever you like, but make the call!

"We seek through prayer and meditation to increase our conscious contact with God, as we understand God, praying only for God's will for us and the power to carry that out". This is the eleventh step of first Alcoholics Anonymous, and now many others such as Co-dependants Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Adult Children of Alcoholics and Dysfunctional Families. The point is we are not alone. All the wisdom, power, and presence of the universe is available to us through prayer and meditation should we make good use of them.

Some people can't accept a loving Higher Power due to the extreme abuse they suffered. They feel God wasn't there for them in their time of extreme need so carry great resentment towards God so instead rely on the teachings (books etc.), fellowship, sponsors, step studies, retreats and other aspects of twelve step recovery. This is actually how it started in AA with Bill W. and Doctor Bob. No one could really understand them like someone who had been there and suffered like them. For them God meant a "group of drunks". Yet over the years they found this was not enough as the meetings that stressed a personal understanding of spirituality had twice the success in staying sober.

The defining moment of AA's birth is often attributed to the story of a man who was seeing the renowned psychiatrist Carl Jung for treatment. He fell back into his drinking disease and returned to Jung for help, but was told there was no hope unless he could somehow be transformed through a spiritual experience. He sought out, and was fortunate enough to have that experience, and become a changed man, but how can we achieve a life changing spiritual experience? The best time and place seems to be when we are knocked to our knees by life's travails and hit our bottoms. This is the first step when we realize and admit we are powerless on our own, and that our lives have become unmanageable. Only then in our desperation and pain will we be ready to give our lives and our will over to the care of a loving Higher Power.

This situation prompted Jung to say; "Among all my patients in the second half of life—that is to say, over thirty-five—there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost what the living religions of every age have given their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook. This of course has nothing whatever to do with a particular creed or membership of a church". (1932)

"The decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life. Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interest upon futilities, and upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance... The more a man lays stress on false possessions, and the less sensitivity he has for what is essential, the less satisfying is his life. ... If we understand and feel that here in this life we already have a link with the infinite, desires and attitudes change. In the final analysis, we count for something only because of the essential we embody, and if we do not embody that, life is wasted". (1965)

Although spirit is often considered absolutely pure and perfect no matter what, a spirituality of imperfection, of brokenness is possible. Coming from this point of view is entirely different from the "I've got it altogether" outlook most subscribe to. This acknowledgement is expressed in the first three steps of the twelve steps as; 1. "We admitted that we were powerless (over our addictions, co-dependency, etc), that our lives had become unmanageable. 2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. 3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.

Starting out this writing I had no intention to incorporate the twelve steps, but it works so well please excuse me and try to keep an open mind. In the following steps we address our brokenness as "we make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" and "admit to God, ourselves, and another person the exact nature of our wrongs". many people are unwilling to face their "defects of character," or perhaps more appropriately "defense mechanisms," so it is often very difficult and painful and where many people drop out.

Personally I find this aspect of the recovery process one of the most valuable. Now I know where I screw up, and in particular when hungry, angry, lonely, or tired (HALT). Unfortunately these have been my "set point" like on a thermostat, or a default on a computer, that I have fallen back on all my life. Recognizing them, and through years of effort coming to accept and understand them has given me the power to change them. They still come back to haunt me on a regular basis, but I don't fall as fast or as far into their web of denial, dysfunction, and insanity.

My favorite teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says dealing with these dark energies is like a party where everyone is invited good or bad, so trying to keep any out is "poor circulation" as it only leads to further distress and disease. I like to say it is like a bus, as every seat holds two, one good and one bad. I have a big hesitation here to even use extremes like good and bad and right and wrong as everything has something to teach us. In this case the "good" loving aspect might deal with negativity, judgment, and resistance from the other, while the "bad" aspect might bring some healthy anger or other emotional power to put light on injustices or abuses.

From doing the step study and in particular the moral inventory numerous times I now have a list of character defects list I refer to regularly to keep on track. There is another list of character strengths I refer and defer to as well. We certainly aren't all bad, and need to focus on our good and positive side as much as the other, yet I want to know very clearly where I am broken so I can avoid problems. This really resonates with me, perhaps that is why there are a good number of songs on my favorites songs playlist that deal with brokenness. This is a sea change for me, a quantum leap, transformation, and metamorphous from egg, to worm, to broken but beautiful butterfly.

These aspects of character lie on a continuum from light to dark, but again I don't want to judge the dark side harshly as it has much to teach us except to say that the goal is whatever is life affirming, and the greater or higher good. Unfortunately the gravity or weight of these defects is at least in the beginning so great that it is as if it creates a low point in the continuum that sucks us in like a black hole. Yet this cross we bear can become our resurrection and ascension, as Eckhart Tolle so eloquently states. And like a black hole, I believe there is a white fountain at the other end spewing out all the light, life, and energy the black hole takes in.

Next we set out to heal our brokenness by asking our Higher Power to remove our shortcomings, our defects. This is tricky business as it sounds like we are shed of our hindrances completely and permanently, unfortunately this is not so. Instead, let me remind you of the bus, and each seat with a defect and attending strength. We re-move defects by getting them out of the driver's seat. We were born pure and perfect, unfortunately defects got into the drivers seat as survival traits and coping mechanisms to deal with abandonments, abuses, and similar physical and psychological injuries.

Another useful analogy is scratched and dirty glasses that skew our view towards dark distorted thoughts and feelings. Another image is that we are like gold, diamonds, rubies, and other precious metals and gems, and although perhaps buried barely recognizable in raw form and buried deeply and covered in filth no less valuable. Their goodness and ours is simply waiting to be dis-covered, purified, and made into a beautiful work of art.

The next step in healing our brokenness to "mend" ourselves, is through amends to ourselves and others. Making a detailed list of harms done to ourselves and others, and summoning the courage and willingness to make amends wherever possible is a very powerful way to find clarity of our errant ways of thinking and behaving, and through sincere efforts to find compassion and forgiveness for ourselves and others to make things right as best we can.

A few words are due here that we now have the opportunity to treat ourselves with the care and loving kindness that we may have missed growing up. Personally, I can't recall being loved and cherished as I wish I had, and as I now express with my family, friends, and dogs. Yes, it seems funny to realize how important cherishing is through a relationship with our pets, but they treat me tirelessly with unconditional love and acceptance, so often give me an example few people can match. A good example is the saying; "I want to become the person my dog thinks I am"!

I would like now to try and convey just how important it is for us to treat ourselves well, to exercise great self care. To not work or play too hard, to get good exercise and rest, to eat well, and avoid common human vices. The list of possible opportunities for self care is extensive but worth looking into. Things like having an attitude of gratitude, taking time for personal pleasures, as well as prayer and meditation are very healing. How we treat ourselves is how we end up treating others and the earth, as we are each a microcosm that extends out into our world like ripples in a pond. If you don't treat yourself well, who will? Self care is really is too big a subject to cover in depth here, but please take the time to take care of yourself, you're worth it!

The final step in the amends process is to continue to take personal inventory, and when we are wrong promptly admit it. This seems to parallel the Buddhist tradition of the eight fold path of right views, intentions, speech, actions, living, efforts, awareness, and concentration, where we transform our new way of thinking into a new way of living that is based on higher law and greater good for the benefit of all people and all life. It is a tall order, as we daily strive to watch for and make up for slip ups and breakdowns in our new and life affirming belief systems.

This journey now brings us back to where we started with step eleven as; "we seek through prayer and meditation to increase our conscious contact with God, as we understand God, praying only for God's will for us and the power to carry that out". It bears mentioning again as it is of such great importance, for only through surrender to something greater than ourselves can we find true peace, the "peace that passeth understanding". I access my Higher Power most often by journaling. I start out with "Good Morning! (afternoon/evening) Lord"! I then cast my cares onto the pages in an intimate and personal conversation and communion.

It takes a lot to deal with modern life, with all the information, activity, input, and expectations that are so stressful and at times overwhelming. It takes a hero, in fact a *superhero*. Who is going to come to your rescue and save the day? YOU. This is why a Higher Power is so important. This power, this energy, not only put all life and creation in motion, but sustains it all in each moment. It is a wise and benevolent power as well, for it brought forth the amazing, abundance, complexity, and beauty of all life and creation as well.

This power, this wisdom, that is all present in the world is just as much present in each of us, as we are a microcosm of the universe, and heirs of a magnificent and awesome legacy. We are not the source of all this power, presence, and wisdom, but a conduit of it none the less. Should we "be still and know" long enough to realize this source and open to the flow, we become able to manifest it in myriad ways. These become our super powers, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Love, peace, joy, and beauty as super powers? Absolutely, but so are hate, chaos, sorrow, and ugliness, as all carry insight, energy, and wisdom.

The list of super powers we are kin to are many, some from a "higher" realm, others from "lower," but no less potent and useful. One might easily call these attributes virtues, principles, or disciplines. Wondering if my list was unique I went searching and found the powers of purity, self discipline, benevolence, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility in my Christian roots, but also loving kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, generosity, morality, awareness, and others in Buddhism. I then added surrender, faith, self inquiry, humility, prayer and meditation, and service from the twelve steps, and many others from similar paths.

I enjoy these super powers so much I imagine them written thousands of feet high across the horizon. My list on paper is counterweighted with "good" first on the left, with its seemingly opposing (but not really countering-just different) energies to the right. This reminds me that negative energies are not to be rid of, eliminated, or destroyed, but rather employed in the service of virtue. It is all tied together, and as in the image of the yin yang symbol, where there is a spot of darkness at the center of the light, and a spot of light "breaking" the center of the dark. I have since taken to celebrating these principles with inspiring pithy slogans such as; Let go, let God, Don't hurry, be happy, and Love like crazy, in fun colorful fonts so big only a few fit on one page.

I feel the reason I was compelled to start this exploration of brokenness is that first and foremost it takes surrender to make real and lasting change. We must hit bottom, give up, let go, and empty out in order to be fulfilled again. Abraham Lincoln said it well; "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction I had nowhere else to go". Churchill said: "We shall draw from the suffering itself the means of inspiration and survival". In twelve step we take this even further as not only survive but come to thrive.

The final step in this journey is to take it on the road and reach out to others; "having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others who still suffer, and to practice these principles in all our affairs". Service is stated simply in the saying; if you are feeling down, the easiest way to feel better is to do something for someone else. This reminds us that we are all in the same boat, all one at some level, so to help others helps ourselves.

Through service we also learn to deal with others, with their brokenness, openly and honestly, that all may find healing. None of this is fast, easy, or painless, in fact it can be very slow, very difficult, and painful. It is also worth it, as we are more than worth it. The alternative we already tried; faking it that we have it all together and life is no problem. That has gone on long enough. It is high time to end the charade and endure the hard work and suffering it takes to make real and lasting changes and to at last live the true and abundant life that is our birthright.

The last point is to practice these principles in all our affairs. Principles of love, peace, joy, beauty, and many others, as well as the wisdom contained in anger, jealousy, guilt, and other dark energies. The Christian populous would ask us: What would Jesus do? The Buddhists take the twelve fold path of virtuous living. Recovery folks find the twelve steps can be a way of life. However you choose to "work your program" and live your best life in service of greater good and Higher power is up to you.

I will close with a realization that sums it all up for me. When we come into this world we don't have the capacity to understand we are separate from our parents, things and others. We *are* the world, and so whole perfect and beautiful. It is necessary of course for us to find our individual selves to be a useful part of the whole, but this process doesn't always go well. Some children have the confidence to venture off a lap and out across the room and into the world in confidence and joy. For others, and for a million different reasons, fear creeps in and stifles a healthy individuation that can lead to a lifetime of fear, dysfunction, and dis-ease to varying degrees.

And just the same as when you write WE on a piece of glass and turn it upside down and backwards, it turns from WE into ME, our lives may be up-ended and spun around. Reclaiming our wonder child, loving inner parent, and loving Higher Power, we may finally get things righted and reclaim our true selves to begin anew and live the full, rich, and abundantly beautiful life for which we were intended. This is what I have been able to do, and hope that you may as well through whatever paths work for you to heal the broken, small and lonely me, and turn it into the great and wonderful reality and life that is WE.

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