

## **Broken Hearts**

*A Homily by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon*

*Delivered at the UU Church of Columbia, MO*

*On Sunday, March 3, 2013*

Spoiler alert: In case you couldn't tell, I'm getting ready to talk about the poignancy of our broken hearts.

But before I do, I want to begin with a note about bad theology, acknowledging the extreme care we must take when talking about the strength we find in the broken places.

Too often the relationship between our suffering and our strength is used to support a shallow vision of a cruel puppet-master God who doles out suffering to us 'for our own good.'

That is not the theology we promote here.

Yet this bad theology makes its way into secular and religious language both, with platitudes that seem to imply you should welcome your suffering as a gift; statements like: "God never gives you more than you can handle" or "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

When spoken in this way, I reject these statements. Suffering is no gift, and we are not called to be cheery about our pain. Sometimes what doesn't kill you *almost* kills you. Sometimes God gives you a sack of garbage too heavy to lift and you *can't* handle it and your survival is a miracle gained by human resilience and a lot of help.

Sometimes you grow immensely from an experience and if you were offered that experience again you would still say emphatically No, thanks. No way.

Our growth does not justify our suffering or explain it away.

Rather, as the Buddhists teach, suffering is simply a fact of existence in this paradoxical life of beauty and tragedy. Brokenness is what happens when we open our hearts to the world.

And we fight it valiantly because we are human.

And sometimes we accept it.

And miraculously, so often, we grow. It is the growth we admire, not the pain. It is our growth amidst brokenness that is a miracle worthy of celebration and praise – a sacred testament to the resilience and forgiveness and love hidden deep in the human soul.

So it is yet another paradox of life that we would not wish brokenness on anyone, but we celebrate the incredible beauty and strength made manifest in every broken place.

Which is why I like the way this morning's story "The Mish-Mash Heart" tells us that our hearts are beautiful even as they are crumpled up and torn by living and loving.

I even appreciate the image of tearing off bits of our hearts to share with others.

But let's keep it real. Heartbreak rarely feels like such a gentle tear. More often, it feels something like this...

*(Smash Coffee Mug with hammer)*

Don't you think?

God, in that moment how desperately we wish to go back to how we were before. How we long to be like this again.

*(Hold up Whole Mug)*

Uninjured, unblemished, unmarked.

And yet, as CS Lewis reminds us, the effort to make our way through life with hearts uninjured, unblemished and unmarked all too often leads instead to hearts that are unbreakable, impenetrable, and irredeemable.

He writes: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."

And so it is that we move through the world, loving people, animals, and places, loving the world even as its tragedy chips away at our hearts. So it is that our hearts are broken again and again, and repaired just as often.

And just as the knitting together of broken flesh is painful and itchy and often slower than we would like, so too is the healing of the heart.

I don't know about you, but after a period of healing, my heart usually feels much less like this:

*(Hold up unbroken mug)*

And a lot more like this.

*(Hold up poorly- mended mug)*

Jagged, ugly, and malformed. Molly the franken-hearted monster.

Though perhaps this view is skewed. Perhaps, just as we look to photographs for our own flaws and others' beauty, we also fail to see our own strength even as it grows through the bitter and the sweet events of our lives.

I imagine, if we could see our own hearts the same way we recognize the resilience and courage of those around us – we might see our scarred hearts a little more like this:

*(Hold up kitsugi-style mug with golden repairs)*

Whole though cracked, and repaired with substance as precious as gold.

So - what if our deepest wish amid the inevitability of heartbreak were not a return to perfection, but to recognize in ourselves a beautiful repair like this, shot through with veins of gold?

What if our task is to integrate the heart-break that is sure to find us into a full-bodied, open hearted life – to wear our cracks as proudly as gold, understanding the beauty that comes from complexity; understanding the inestimable value of our humanness, which is breakable and resilient and real.

In Japanese culture, there is an art-form called kintsugi, which literally translates as “golden joinery.” In traditional Japanese tea ceremony culture, inevitably the precious china tea bowls would be broken and would have to be discarded. As the story goes, sometime in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a famously beautiful bowl was broken, and its owner found it to be so precious that he could not discard it as trash. Instead, he commissioned an artisan to make it more beautiful in its repair. In doing so, the artisan replaced the usual thick paste and staples with a fine laquer tinted with powdered gold.

These pieces look like a 100x more delicate and beautiful version of this mug.

*(Hold up kitsugi-style mug with golden repairs)*

The fragile beauty of these pieces, broken and made more precious in their repair, became so compelling that the art form grew and grew. Anecdotes claim that people found such beauty in these bowls, that some were accused of smashing their china themselves, just so they could have it repaired with golden seams.

I would not encourage this. It creates quite a mess.

A Washington Post review of a kintsugi exhibit at the Smithsonian notes: “Because the repairs are done with such immaculate craft, and in precious metal, it's hard to read them as a record of violence and damage.”<sup>1</sup>

A crack repaired with gold becomes a record of compassion and dignity, rather than one of violence and damage. And the addition of precious metal to an object that might otherwise be thrown away as damaged or defective is a testament to the object's inherent value.

The symbolism is clear. No matter what your heartbreak may be, it is worthy of repair in gold – every broken piece too precious to be discarded.

Further, every helping hand and every act of strength from deep within is another drop of gold – over time transforming a painful, violent crack into precious evidence of compassion, dignity, and love.

So the invitation beckons us to engage in the “golden joinery” of the soul – to treat every broken place within us and around us with tenderness and wonder - to see and marvel at our own strength and the strength of others. There is none among us whose heart has not been broken and healed a hundred times, yet here we are – beautiful, nuanced, and streaked with gold.

We are miraculously whole though cracked, and repaired with substance as beautiful and precious as gold. Joined together again with the golden gifts of the human soul – resilience and courage, and love beyond belief.

May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> “At Freer, Aesthetic is Simply Smashing,” by Blake Gopnik for *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2009. Accessed on March 1, 2013 at [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-03-03/opinions/36878173\\_1\\_japanese-art-repair-ceramics](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-03-03/opinions/36878173_1_japanese-art-repair-ceramics).