

Fragments of Holiness

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There's a story from Jewish mystical tradition that says when God created the world, God formed vessels to hold the divine light. But as God poured the divine light into those vessels, the vessels shattered, and the shards were scattered throughout the material world. And so our world is made up of these countless fragments, each containing a bit of that divine light, and our great task as human beings is to piece them back together – to restore the broken world to wholeness – or holiness. This is one interpretation of the Hebrew phrase Tikkun Olam, which literally means to heal or repair the world. It's up to us to put the pieces back together.

Some people go a little further with the story, and say that we each carry within us one of those fragments of perfection, that we each contain a shard of those holy vessels and a bit of that Divine Light. Like the Indian term Namaste – that which is divine within me greets that which is divine within you – or like our first principle, which lifts up the inherent worth and dignity of each person – or like the Quaker philosophy of the light of Christ within each of us – or the Buddhist idea of our connection to essential goodness – in each case, the idea is that we each contain or embody part of that divine light. We each have a piece of holiness within us.

I find these images very beautiful. And sometimes I can sense the presence within each of us of that holy essence. But this morning I want to play with a slightly different image. Because as much as I love the idea of each us containing a fragment of perfection, the fact is, I more often feel like a whole collection of fragments, that are not at all perfect - all kinds of broken bits and pieces jumbled together with no sense of wholeness or cohesion. Maybe one of those bits is divine, but I get stuck on what to do with all the rest of them, how to make sense without feeling so fragmented.

Maybe you know the feeling. Maybe you have days when you just feel broken into pieces, as if you will never be able to get it all together. Sometimes life is just too much, and we feel scattered, fragmented. And when that happens, I don't sense within me a fragment of perfection. I just feel flawed.

When I have those days, I tend to blame myself for them. I have deeply ingrained in me this idea that I ought to be able to put all the pieces back together, mend my fragmented life and have everything make sense again. And when I can't do it, I assume there is something really wrong with me. I feel like a failure.

And you know what? I think part of my problem is that I grew up a Unitarian Universalist during the heyday of the humanist movement, and I absorbed the all those wonderful messages about human potential, and they backfired. Let me explain.

In Unitarian Universalism, we have always put a tremendous emphasis on human goodness, human potential. One of our early affirmations of faith came from James Freeman Clark, a Unitarian minister who took the five points of Calvinism and revised them into what he called “Five Points of the New Theology” in a sermon in 1886. It became a sort of Unitarian rallying cry that even Clarke's biographer on the denomination's website referred to as “overly optimistic” – the Unitarian affirmation in “the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.”

Of course we need to translate these five points a little in light of modern sensibilities. While some early Unitarians, like William Ellery Channing, sometimes prayed to “our mother/father God,” most were traditional in their language, and gender inclusivity was unheard of in those days. So I translate it like this: the nurturing nature of God, the kinship of all humanity, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and our human progress onward and upward forever.

Heady stuff. But heavy stuff too. Salvation by character – that's a lot of responsibility. While more orthodox Christians were fighting over whether we are saved solely by God's grace, or by earning God's favor through our good works, Clarke took a much more humanistic stand. We are people of character and potential. We are saved by our own decency, by the exercise of our character. This emphasis on self-development was a big piece of early Unitarianism and it was deeply empowering as a counterpoint to the prevailing theology of the day that had no room at all for human goodness or agency.

But as empowering as the idea of being able to save ourselves by virtue of our own character might be, it sometimes leaves me feeling inadequate and overwhelmed. My character does not always feel strong enough for the task of my salvation, and I wonder if we still have room for the old Universalist faith in Grace and the possibility of being held in a greater Love and wholeness even when our character falls short and we struggle with self-doubt.

I remember more than twenty years ago, early in my first ministry, I got a note in the mail – sent to my apartment, not the church office from a member of the church, an elder of sorts, highly respected. Of course this was before the days of email. And I

stood there looking at the envelope, afraid to open it, just looking at his name and return address and thinking: “Oh no, what did I do?”

I spent a while trying to figure out how I could have offended this man to the point that he would feel he needed to write to me about it. Finally I opened the envelope. It contained a hand-written thank you note for the previous Sunday's sermon, which he had found particularly meaningful.

I won't ask for a show of hands on this but I'm willing to bet that at least some of you have had similar experiences. And if that's what we put ourselves through when we haven't actually done anything wrong, what will it be like when we have, in fact, disappointed or failed someone? Because inevitably, of course, we do. When we're juggling a lot of balls in a complex world, we're going to drop a few from time to time. And sometimes we drop the really important ones. I recently disappointed some people very badly who are very dear to me. I blew it, in a big way. We've all been there. And it's easy to get lost in self-condemnation.

Years ago I had a friend who told me that she was actively working to change how she thought about herself. She had overheard me saying, after I had made some kind of mistake, “Oh, I'm such an idiot.” And she told me that she had a new strategy. When she makes one of those stupid mistakes, she laughs and says “Oh, that's not like me at all!” It helps her remember that doing a stupid thing does not mean she is a stupid person.

What a difference a few words can make. I make one mistake and classify myself as stupid. She makes a similar mistake and reminds herself that much of the time, maybe even most of the time, she's perfectly competent, and that mistake is not the defining factor of her being.

Getting stuck on our mistakes can be paralyzing. David expressed this so well in his reflection! But there's a paradox here. Because I believe that part of the reason we have trouble forgiving ourselves and moving past our mistakes is because we think we aren't supposed to make them in the first place. So if we could spend just enough time with our mistakes to accept that they're an inevitable part of being human, we might have an easier time forgiving ourselves – and each other – and moving on.

Take that phrase “the progress of human kind onward and upward forever.” Unitarians also used – and sometimes still use -that enlightenment phrase “the perfectibility of humankind.” Now, it's great to remember that we can always be getting better – that we have the capacity to grow and change and learn. A challenge to grow should always be

part of religious life. But “perfectibility?” If that's what we're striving for, we will always be defeated. I do not believe we are perfectible. And this optimistic Unitarian theology does not leave much room for our human brokenness.

We may be intellectually convinced of our inherent worth, but at the same time, we may have a deep awareness of all the ways in which we fall short of what we think we should be. And the more we believe we're supposed to be perfectible, the more impossible it can feel to overcome our imperfection. What might it feel like to accept the idea that brokenness is simply part of our human reality?

It was an meditation led by my colleague Carol Taylor during a worship service years ago that began to give me a new way to think about this. Among other things, she asked us to sit with some part of us that needed care. I was feeling profoundly fragmented and broken at the time, and so that's what I sat with.

I tried to visualize the fragments coming back together, creating a seamless whole. I wanted to mend the brokenness, “fix” what was wrong with me. I kept trying to form an image in my mind of all those pieces settling into a picture that felt unified. I wanted to glue down all the pieces of my life and make them hold still. And I couldn't do it.

Gradually, as we sat in silence, I began to accept that all those broken pieces are simply the reality of my life, and that they will always be shifting and changing. There is no way to glue them down – our lives are comprised of those fragments. And as I wondered how on earth I could possibly learn to appreciate that image, the image of a kaleidoscope rose up in my mind, and I began to feel different.

In a kaleidoscope, all the broken fragments of glass are constantly rearranging themselves to form new patterns, patterns of intricate beauty that would be impossible without the fragmentation. The beauty is born of the brokenness.

There was healing in that realization – although I have to come back to it again and again and re-learn the lesson. We can still seek to learn from our mistakes, to grow and deepen, to keep getting better. But there's also an element of surrendering to Grace, trusting that our broken pieces come together in a larger whole. William Novak, a collector of kaleidoscopes, wrote:

I collect kaleidoscopes because I love them and because I enjoy colorful art that moves and changes when I touch it. If pressed to find some deeper meaning, I'll also admit to enjoying the paradox that scopes embody: While they afford you a large measure of control, the only way to completely appreciate them is to surrender. And while you can change the image as often as you like, you never

really know what the next moment will bring.

That sounds like life. We never really know what the next moment will bring. A time for sadness, a time for pain, a time to find happiness again – as Ann reminded us in her notes for the beautiful anthem the choir sang this morning reminded us, life's melodies are not always simple. The elements of our life are constantly shifting, and the pieces don't always make sense to us, but they can still come together in patterns of beauty and possibility.

Accepting our brokenness doesn't let us off the hook for all our mistakes. Take my recent experience of letting down those people I really care about. I still had to wrestle with why it happened, and to figure how to keep it from happening again. I had to ask forgiveness and hope for a second chance. But at the same time, even in that place of feeling broken and inadequate, I could believe that the overall pattern of my life still creates beauty. It may sound like a small shift, but for me it is changing how I live in the world. We may not be perfectible, but we can be beautiful in our imperfection.

So the kaleidoscope has become my new metaphor for life. Constantly changing, always beautiful, endless patterns of wholeness and beauty formed out of the broken shards of our lives. So when my character feels woefully inadequate for the task of salvation – as it often does – I can rest in that larger wholeness that somehow continues to make perfectly beautiful patterns out of my fragmented and imperfect self.