



Brokenness

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

My friend Leena once brought me a gift from a trip to her family's homeland in Myanmar. The gift was a small seated figure carefully carved in rosewood with great attention to his hatted face, robe and bare feet. But when Leena retrieved the figure from her suitcase after the long flight home, she discovered the wood had split. A crack, starting between the figure's feet, extended up through his torso all the way to his left shoulder.

Leena was disappointed and apologetic. The crack was beyond repair. But I appreciated the carving even more with its cleft and have treasured it for decades since, even as the crack has deepened. An added line in the wooden figure, it reminds me of the broken openings that inevitably occur in the course of every life and the new contours created by time and travel.

Today, in our disrupted era of so much brokenness, writ large across the globe and also as personal as it comes, I am looking at this carved figure and asking, what could it mean to notice and accept the broken cracks within and around us all as the gift they might be? Not denying the pain and grief caused by brokenness, but accepting the fact that neither life nor love, relationship nor growth is possible without it. As philosopher Judith Butler has said, "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact."

This is true not only of the human heart and in personal relationships, but also of the systems and covenants undergirding our communities and nations. What might we learn by being present to the brokenness so apparent all around us today? What might be possible if we accept the invitation brokenness issues

to bring our fractures together, side by side, discovering what might emerge from their reassembled pieces?

In the ancient story of the Israelites fleeing Egypt, when Moses received the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, it is said that the first pair of tablets was carved by God's own finger. These were the sacred tablets Moses broke in anger, dashing them to the ground when he returned and found the Israelites worshipping idols made in Moses' absence. The second set of tablets, created in Moses' next trip up Mount Sinai, was dictated by God and recorded by Moses' hand.

Jewish teachings on this story suggest that both sets of tablets — the broken and the whole — were kept in the holy ark as the Israelites traveled through the wilderness, prompting poet Rodger Kamenetz to muse of the fragments:

*how they must have rattled around
until the pieces
broke into pieces, the edges
softened
crumbling, dust collected at the
bottom of the ark
ghosts of old letters, old laws.¹*

Today, as the old year has ended and a new one begins, perhaps we are each asked to consider, what are we each carrying in our hearts, broken and unbroken? What ghosts of letters and trusted words are still whispering to us from the dust of shattered dreams, personal or shared — dreams of peace and well-being, of democracy and justice, of habitat and ecology? What old patterns of relationship remain present inside each of us, carved into our being despite the divisiveness and isolation of our times; what deeper patterns of interdependence are still shaping and supporting the tattered communities we tend today?

In this threshold month of review and resolutions, we might begin the new year by naming these patterns as covenants to be treasured, despite the cracks running through them. By noting that what is broken can be an invitation into relationship and sharing, into creativity and discovery. By asking, what will we do to carry our covenants forward, to remember the larger wholeness in which all brokenness is nested? What resolutions and realities might be born of a brokenness noted and tended like that?

*By Associate Minister Karen Hering
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¹"[The Broken Tablets](#)," Rodger Kamenetz

Brokenness Theme Resources

BOOKS

Broken Open: how difficult times can help us grow by Elizabeth Lesser

Horizon by Barry Lopez

How to Heal a Broken Wing, children's book, by Bob Graham

POETRY

An Atlas of the Difficult World by Adrienne Rich

"The Broken Tablets" by Rodger Kamenetz

MOVIES

Still Alice (2015 feature film starring Julianne Moore)

Broken Rainbow (1985 documentary about the relocation of Navajo peoples)

For more resources, visit the Chalice Circle packet on the theme, available online and in the brochure racks at Unity Church.