

## **“ON THE MEND: BROKENNESS AND HEALING”**

A sermon by the Reverend Dena McPhetres

A friend of mine slipped on the ice and broke her ankle one winter and was laid up for weeks and weeks. As I expressed my sympathy for her misfortune, pain and suffering, a surprising phrase slipped out of my mouth. I said to her, “I didn’t realize you were breakable!” But of course, we all are, it comes with being human – our breakability. Even the strong ones among us, the ones who are always there, like my friend, taking care of others, even the strong ones are breakable.

Any one of us in this room today may have arrived here this morning in some condition of brokenness and in some stage of healing. It comes with the territory of being human. We are often “on the mend” from the slings and arrows life throws at us: the injuries, both physical and emotional; the illnesses, both mental and physical; the diseases in our individual bodies or spirits and in the culture at large; the losses and the old wounds.

Any one of us in this room may have arrived here this morning healed of some malady. A sickness vanished, a disease in remission, an injury healed – the bandage or the cast removed, or an insult forgiven, an intractable grudge released, a second chance offered and received.

Broken hearts, broken bones, broken trust, broken ties – there is much brokenness in our lives and much to be mended. What does it mean to be broken? What do we do with our wounds? What does it mean to be “on the mend,” seeking healing, and how do we know when we’ve found it? These are questions I hope to address today.

What does it mean to be broken? It means to be fractured or damaged and no longer in one piece, no longer in working order. The pottery has cracks in it. The machinery is broken down and doesn’t function properly. The system isn’t working. The person is not feeling whole.

Sometimes broken things can be fixed. Sometimes broken people can be healed. Sometimes the brokenness in our lives can be mended, through a process of transforming our relationship to what is broken.

Some of you know that I’ve been dealing with chronic pain from injuries sustained in a car accident a little over a year ago. As car accidents go, it was not terribly severe, but my injuries persist, much longer than I expected. I have had ample opportunity over the last year to explore my relationship with brokenness and the long journey of healing.

Just for the record, I want you to know that I do NOT believe that we draw every experience into our lives for a purpose. But I DO believe that we can learn from every

experience in our lives, if we want to. The meaning I attach to my car accident is pretty basic, but worth stating. Accidents happen, sometimes out of nowhere, and often when they are not our fault. One minute we can be fine and the next minute we can be injured or sick. Life and health are fragile.

On the physical level, I got hit by a driver who ran a red light. On the emotional level, I was blind-sided by my vulnerability. On the spiritual level, I received the message that perhaps I was driving myself too hard and it was time for me to slow down.

Healing from the accident involved learning and growing in some new ways. I learned about my pain threshold, pain meds and pain management. I learned to ask for help with things I suddenly could not do around the house and the church. I learned even more about posture and office ergonomics.

I learned to readjust my identity. I was not an able-bodied person for the time being. I had to drop out of dance class (my truest love) and go swimming instead, panting for breath at the end of each length of the pool. The illusion of my independence was revealed to be just that – an illusion. As I kept adjusting to a “new normal,” I learned to lower my expectations of myself. This, it turns out, was not a bad thing.

Most profoundly, I learned (again and again) that healing takes time. The first several months after my accident, I prayed for healing. When that didn't seem to be working, I changed strategies, and prayed for patience. Right about the time I started asking for patience, one of you gave me this prayer by Teilhard de Chardin, called “Patient Trust,” which gave me some needed reassurance.

“Above all, trust in the slow work of God.  
We are quite naturally impatient in everything  
to reach the end without delay.  
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.  
We are impatient of being on the way to something  
unknown, something new.  
And yet it is the law of all progress  
that it is made by passing through  
some stages of instability –  
and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.”

The prayer continues, but what I needed of it is contained in these first few lines. It gave

me such permission – to trust in the unknown, to understand and let go of my impatience. It named where I was at in my healing process: in the intermediate stages. Here I was: in the seemingly interminable intermediate stage, but it was a worthy and essential in-between place. The prayer gave me assurance that instability is normal and that progress takes a long time. Even for me.

My car accident is not the first time I have been broken. But it is the most recent, and my freshest learning about being human. The thing about being breakable, as every human being is, is that just as you are vulnerable to being broken *down*, you are also given the opportunity to be broken *open*.

You've probably all heard the phrase: "that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Well, yes, but only if you work it. It doesn't happen automatically. You can be broken down by life – by accidents and injuries, by chemicals in your brain going awry, by cells in your body turning against themselves. You can be broken down by individual illnesses or by sickness in society, like racism or sexism or homophobia.

You can be broken *down* and stay that way. Or you can be broken *open*, and move through the intermediate stages of healing, learning about yourself and others, growing in compassion, and emerge stronger in the broken places.

How we relate to our own brokenness is the key. American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron writes in her book *When Things Fall Apart*,

"Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy."

Pema Chodron's wisdom reminds me that there is a difference between healing and curing. A person can experience healing even if their illness is not cured, because there is so much more to a person than their illness.

Dr. Jeff Kane, who wrote a book called *The Healing Companion*, says "there is a crucial difference between curing a disease and healing a person." He points out that every time we get sick, we have on the one hand, a name for the ailment, and then we have our experience of the sickness. If we are lucky enough to get a diagnosis, we have a name for the illness, but then we have the meaning that we attach to the diagnosis. He quotes the ancient Greek philosopher

Epictetus, who wrote, “People are not disturbed by events, but by the view we take of them.”

Decades ago, when my mother was hospitalized with a recurrence of cancer, she went through kidney dialysis. It made her intensely cold and uncomfortable. The nurse applied heated blankets, but mom was still shivering. She asked my dad and I to each take one of her feet and cover them with our warm hands.

As I concentrated on sending warmth into her foot, the heat coming from my hands grew and grew. Mom said, “Wow, where did you learn to do that?” I replied, “It’s chi!” that universal life force running through all of us.

My hands were warm with chi energy, but they were also full of love for my mom and compassion for her suffering. My family and I couldn’t cure her cancer, and neither could the doctors, but we could try to ease her suffering. We could offer ourselves as conduits for healing. We could remember that she was more than her illness.

I am more than my injuries and so are you. We are more than our wounds and scars, whether they be physical, emotional, mental or spiritual. We are breakable and we have each been broken in some way, shape or form. It’s part of being human. It’s part of what makes us human.

How we carry our scars and relate to our wounds is up to us. Our scars are potent. They carry lessons that we may not have learned even yet. I trust that we will know when to learn from them. When we bump into them again and again. When we get tired of the same old messages playing in our heads, the same patterns keeping us from living fully. When they send us down the wrong street again and again, when we notice ourselves reacting to situations in the same painful ways. Maybe then we can see our injuries as golden opportunities, not as shameful or something to forget or repress, but as teachers.

I believe our wounds and scars are holy. Because our brokenness is what makes us who we are: imperfect human beings encountering an imperfect world.

But just as I know we are all broken in some way, I also trust that we are all “on the mend.” I know I am, and I hope and trust the same for you. Even though I really don’t know if I’ll ever literally get back to dance class, I carry these words from Rumi, the Sufi poet, to inform my healing process and I offer them to you:

“Dance, when you’re broken open.  
Dance, if you’ve torn the bandage off.  
Dance in the middle of the fighting.  
Dance in your blood.

Dance, when you're perfectly free."

REFERENCES:

*When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chodron

*The Healing Companion* by Dr. Jeff Kane