

“This Broken Glass”

A Sermon by the Rev. Terry Sims

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Chautauqua Institution, New York

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Reading: from The Wounded Healer, by Henri J. M. Nouwen, 84

“[T]he more I think about loneliness, the more I think that the wound of loneliness is like the Grand Canyon – a deep incision in the surface of our existence [. . .] which has become an inexhaustible source of beauty and self-understanding. Therefore I would like to voice loudly and clearly what might seem unpopular and maybe even disturbing: The [religious] Christian way of life does not take away our loneliness; it protects and cherishes it as a precious gift. Sometimes it seems as if we do everything possible to avoid the painful confrontation with our basic human loneliness, and allow ourselves to be trapped by false gods promising immediate satisfaction and quick relief. But perhaps the painful awareness of loneliness is an invitation to transcend our limitations and look beyond the boundaries of our existence. The awareness of loneliness might be a gift we must protect and guard[. Because our loneliness reveals to us an inner emptiness that can be destructive when misunderstood, but filled with promise for [the person] who can tolerate its sweet pain.”

Responsive Reading: # 468, “We Need One Another,” by George E. Odell

“We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.

We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.

We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again.

We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.”

Sermon:

I went back to Kansas about four months ago, back to the small college town where I grew up. My dad was being inducted into the Fine Arts Hall of Fame at the college where he received his undergraduate degree. Then he taught vocal music there for many years. All but one of Dad’s seven children and step-children were there, as well as many of his grandchildren and friends. He stood on the raised stage of the auditorium to give his acceptance speech, as the audience looked up at him. Dad

talked about how honored he was to be awarded a place alongside his teachers, colleagues, and friends.

All of us were very proud of him. Dad is 88 now. He'll turn 89 in a week and a day. As I looked up, so pleased and proud and moved by what he said, I could not ignore that he is nearing the end of his life. He is aware that every day brings him closer to his death and makes no attempt to ignore that. As he crossed the stage and stepped up to the raised lectern, I was concerned that he might stumble and fall. His mind is still sharp and he carries on physically. But walking requires a good deal of effort. It is no longer what he used to do for fun and exercise. Everything is harder for him now. He is carrying on, but his body is giving out.

I came home from being with my dad in Kansas to my friend and roommate, Mike Daneker. Some of you might remember Mike. He was with me here in Chautauqua when Nancy asked me to speak to this congregation two summers ago. Mike is, without any doubt, the healthiest, most vigorous and physically disciplined person I have ever known. He eats incredibly healthfully. He exercises at least six days a week, never less than an hour, often for three hours or more. He ran around the entire perimeter of Chautauqua several times every day of the week we spent here. Mike inspires me to try to lead a more healthful life.

He has trained my dad with some exercises when Dad visited us. The contrast between them is striking. Mike is 28, still in the prime of life. Dad is 88, near the end of his. I'm right between them, 30 years older than Mike, 30 years younger than Dad. Mike is doing everything right to have a longer and more healthful life than most. But eventually, even Mike's health will fail. His amazing strength will fade and his life will end. I'm glad that I probably won't be around to see that.

I have great-nieces and nephews now. We recently celebrated my great-nephew Jace's first birthday party. He is just beginning his life. It is full of promise, hopes, and dreams. And as written in the Wisdom of Solomon, "[N]o king has had a different beginning of existence. There is for all one entrance and one way out."

The first UU minister I knew well was the Rev. James Ishmael Ford. I remember walking into his study once for a conversation, probably about the possibility of my becoming a UU minister. I noticed a saying that he had hanging on his wall. It said: "I know this glass is already broken. That's why I enjoy it incredibly." Have you ever had an experience where you knew something important had happened, but you weren't sure you understood it? That's the way I felt when I read that framed saying on the wall of James' study. I wasn't sure I understood it right away. But I knew I would keep thinking about it.

Years later, after I had come to my own understanding of what the saying meant, I found that James had written on his blog about where the saying came from. "Achaan Chah Subato, the great Theravadan meditation master [said something] once about broken glasses. I have it framed and hanging on a wall in my office:

'One day some people came to the master and asked 'How can you be happy in a world of such impermanence, where you cannot protect your loved ones from harm, illness and death?' The master held up a glass and said 'Someone gave me this glass, and I really like this glass. It holds my water admirably and it glistens in the sunlight. I touch it and it rings! One day the wind may blow it off the shelf, or my elbow may knock it from the table. I know this glass is already broken, so I enjoy it incredibly.'"

I keep finding situations the framed saying applies to. That's what fascinates me about it. On one level, it applies to everything. Let me share a few examples with you.

Maybe the most obvious thing the saying applies to is that everything ends. Everything we love ends. Nothing is safe over the long run. We can't protect the things or people we love. "I know this glass is already broken." If the wind blows the glass off the shelf, or I knock it from the table and it shatters, that is the end of the glass.

But the glass that is already broken is not just a saying about objects we care about. It is a metaphor, of course. Our lives are like the glass that is already broken. They will end, no matter what else happens. Everything contains the seeds of its own destruction. Death is a part of life because there is no life without death. Mary Oliver wrote: "To live in this world you must be able to do three things: To love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; And, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

But we are not just broken because we and those we love are mortal. We're broken in many ways before we die, even when we do not shatter. Injury and illness break us. Disappointment and disapproval and cruelty break us. Fear breaks us. Tragedy breaks us. As our reading from Nouwen this morning said, the inescapable loneliness of existence breaks us. Oh, often we recover enough to go on living, thank goodness. But that doesn't mean at least a hairline crack didn't appear in us.

I used to work with a woman who was very bright, a devoted mother, and a very good lawyer. She and I became friends. We'll call her Jen. Jen had accomplished a lot, made a success of her life both personally and professionally. But she told me something that happened to her when she was in high school. Jen and her mother had gone shopping for a dress for some school event, maybe a prom. Jen said that after she found a dress she liked, she tried it on. She came out of the dressing room wearing the dress and asked her mother what she thought. Her mother said, "I think that will do fine. It hides most of your defects." Jen had carried that experience of her mother's disapproval for more than forty years when I knew her. It didn't prevent her from having a successful life. But it broke her and that brokenness became part of her.

When I was in high school, there was a football player we'll call Steve. Steve and I were not friends. I thought he was an arrogant jerk. Part of that was that I envied Steve. He was popular and a star athlete, things I would like to have been but was not. Part of it was that I'd seen Steve be mean to others who were not as popular as he was. He'd made fun of me, too. I'm sure he thought I was also arrogant. I was. I did well academically and wanted people to know that. It was all I thought I had. It turns out we were both just using what we did best to try to have the best life we could.

Well, somehow Steve and I got stuck at school one evening together. There was no one else around. I don't remember what the circumstances were; maybe we were waiting for rides after everyone else had left some school event. To Steve's credit more than mine, we had a conversation – a real conversation. I don't even remember how it happened. But Steve started telling me real concerns he had about his life. He wasn't sure his parents were still happy. He didn't know where his relationship with his girlfriend was going, how he really felt about her, didn't trust her feelings for him. He was anxious about whether he could go to college. Wasn't even sure he wanted to. He knew he needed to make some big decisions soon. He was afraid he'd mess them up, and his life. Steve let me see his brokenness that evening. His insecurity, his

vulnerability, his fears. I never liked him better than I did right then. Because I finally felt a connection between us.

We spend so much time and energy displaying our competence, our virtue, our worthiness to ourselves and others. But brokenness is what connects us most. When we display ourselves, we often try to hide our brokenness. When we compete for a job, or a significant relationship, or some honor, we want to show only how deserving we are. I don't think anyone wants to be seen as broken and hurting. If we succeed in hiding that we are broken, we might obtain something for ourselves by taking it away from someone else. Steve and I were busy competing with each other. He wanted to show that he was a much better athlete. (That bar was set pretty low, by the way.) I wanted to prove that I was smarter. But that pitted us against each other. It pushed us apart.

What brought us together was Steve's willingness to show me that he was broken. That was something I could connect with; I was broken and hurting, too. When others let us see their brokenness, it lets us know we can trust them. And that lets us know it is safe to tell them that we are broken, too. We have all been broken . . . or will be. If we see clearly, we are all already broken, now or eventually.

Brokenness does not make us unlovely or unlovable or less than perfect. It makes us human. It makes us precious. Brokenness makes us worthy of compassion, worth caring about. It makes us need each other to care about.

I wonder what would happen if I always saw the brokenness within wholeness. Hurt beneath competence and pride. Death as just postponed, within the life that pulses all around me. It might make real the second part of the saying: "[S]o I enjoy it incredibly."

My step-brother, Larry, says remembering that everything he loves will end does not make him enjoy life more. Contemplating that everything and everyone are already broken just leads Larry to despair at the impermanence of everything. And he says that when he spends his time that way, it just wastes time that could be used to appreciate what is in front of him now. I can see his point.

But accepting that life, that we, are already broken, does make me love life more. When I see that everything we love is already broken, it makes things, and people, and life precious to me. Much more precious than when I forget their brokenness. And I don't have to live in fear that the wind or my elbow may knock the glass off the shelf and break it. I know that will happen, one way or another. If all of time were visible to me at once, past, present, future, I would see the glass already broken. That is what might let me really love life and people incredibly before they and I end. To love Dad, and Mike, and my great-nephew Jace, and everyone else in their brokenness, in mine. To love them incredibly because of our brokenness, while there is yet time.

This past Spring, I attended the Pacific Southwest District UU ministers' retreat. On Friday night the conference was over. Our ministerial intern, Patty Willis and I decided to walk the few blocks from the hotel into downtown Pasadena to find somewhere to eat. We happened to walk by a huge, beautiful First United Methodist Church. As we stood on the sidewalk admiring the neo-Gothic stone structure, a woman from the church introduced herself. She said there was an open rehearsal of the Verdi "Requiem" that night if we wanted to come back after dinner. Patty and I decided we'd like to hear part of it.

When we got to the church again after dinner, the musicians were taking a break. Almost all the seats at the front of the huge sanctuary were empty. But as we waited, the musicians began to trickle back in and take their places. A 45-piece orchestra. A 100-voice choir. Four soloists. And they began to rehearse the “Sanctus” portion of the “Requiem.” Wonderful, thrilling music.

And I thought to myself, “On another night, the front of the sanctuary would have remained empty of people. After the performance, Verdi’s music will not resonate in the vaulted ceilings of this church. The music lasts only a little while and then disappears into silence. In one sense, it is already gone. And every one of those musicians is already broken. Every one of them carries hurt inside herself or himself. And in 100 years or so, we will all be gone, the final, inevitable brokenness of life. Eventually, the church itself will crumble to dust.”

“But tonight, this night, all of these musicians came together to recreate music that lets my spirit soar. Tonight, in the midst of their brokenness, and in mine, they let me enjoy the fleeting gift of music. Something that makes life worthwhile to me.” It made me want to hug every one of those musicians. To thank them, to know their hurts, to care about them, to acknowledge the brokenness we all share. To enjoy them, and music, and life incredibly.

In 1973, Ernest Becker wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book, The Denial of Death. “All historical religions addressed themselves to th[e] same problem of how to bear the end of life,”¹ Becker reminds us. In the “Foreword” to that book, Sam Keen wrote: “Human conflicts are life and death struggles – my gods against your gods, my immortality project against your immortality project.”²

I don’t have a god or an immortality project to pit against anyone else’s. And I think the world would be better off if no one did. What I do have is a mortality project. It is to live every day of my life with as much meaning as I can invest in it before I die.

I want to live with the awareness that everyone is already broken. If I always did that, I don’t know how I could not see past everything else, every annoyance, every weakness, every wrong. I don’t know how I could not feel my connection to another human being in our brokenness. How could I not, finally, love my fellows as myself?

I want to live with the awareness that life is already broken. How could that not lead me to doing what I can to relieve suffering whenever I sense it, to fight injustice every time I see it? And how could I not love what I love more deeply?

I want to live with the awareness that I am already broken. To feel the last time in every time, before the last time comes. The last time to taste, to run, to hear music, to see mountains; to laugh, to play with a child, to do a kindness, to draw breath. If I felt the last time in every time, wouldn’t every time be sacred? Wouldn’t every time be precious?

We are caught between sorrow and rejoicing. Between feeling that nothing matters because nothing lasts, and feeling that that is exactly why everything matters. The sweet bitterness and the bitter sweetness. But if I could just love things, people, the world incredibly, I think I could face their brokenness better, and my own. Every

¹ Becker, Ernest, The Denial of Death (Free Press Paperbacks, 1973, New York) (winner of the Pulitzer Prize), 12.

² *Ibid.*, Foreword by Sam Keen, xii-xiii.

moment is indeed precious, irreplaceable. May we love every one of them incredibly. Amen.

Benediction: "I know this glass is already broken. That's why I enjoy it incredibly." May our awareness of the brokenness of all things let us enjoy everything we can incredibly. Go shining!