

How to Heal a Broken Heart

Readings: 'Everything We Don't Want Them to Know' by Maria Mazziotti Gillan
'Want' by Carrie Fountain
'Lead' by Mary Oliver

Poet Mary Oliver tells us a story to break our hearts. Are we willing? The story she tells in the poem written years ago is the story of loons dying of lead poisoning.

The story breaks our hearts in a new way now. Lead poisoning breaks our hearts in a new way now. We have been hearing the stories of Flint's water crisis, of lead leaching from the water pipes into the drinking and cooking and bathing water of the people who live in that city for the past 18 months. We've been hearing about this for months on the local news, but it just went national in recent weeks. A whole city poisoned breaks our hearts. A generation of children whose lives will be forever altered by the poison that now lives in them breaks our hearts. We know this was not an unforeseeable accident. We know this was the consequence of not following laws designed to protect public health. We know this was the consequence of overriding the democratic process. We know this was the consequence of the persistent lie that some lives matter more than others. We know this was the consequence of prioritizing saving money over safety. The anti-corrosive agent that could have been added to the Flint River water to prevent it from corroding the lead pipes would have only cost \$100 per day. And now, because that crucial step was skipped and people drank and cooked with and bathed in leaded water for 18 months while public officials told them it was safe, thousands are poisoned. And now, children will grow up with learning difficulties, hearing loss, and the other consequences of lead poisoning. And now, it will likely cost hundreds of millions of dollars to repair the damaged infrastructure. And now, for months if not years, we will watch politicians and public officials discuss responsibility and place blame. We will hear stories of the long term consequences of the poisoning of an entire city. Our hearts will keep breaking.

Mary Oliver closes her poem with

"I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world."

And the open question is – how will this story keep our hearts broken open? Will the Flint water crisis be crisis enough to transform us, to transform our state? Can it make us here in Michigan more democratic, more open-hearted, with hearts broken 'open into greater capacity to hold the complexities and contradictions of human experience,' with hearts broken open to create change and new life? Can our hearts break open in ways to make justice and righteousness flow like water?

Last October, we had a question box sermon during worship. Everyone gathered had a chance to submit questions to me – and I did my best to answer them on the fly during the time in the service when I usually preach a prepared sermon. You all submitted wonderful questions – and so many questions that I didn't have a chance to answer them all that day. One of the great questions that I didn't answer that day was "how do you heal a broken heart?"

I imagine the writer—whoever you are—didn't mean the kind of heartbreak that comes from awareness of the suffering in the world – the heartbreak of witnessing from a distance the Flint Water Crisis, the Syrian Refugee Crisis and all of the other crises that fill the headlines and the news broadcasts. I imagine the writer wanted to know how to heal a broken heart that comes from individual suffering. We've all been there, one way or another. We've experienced the broken heart of divorce or break-ups, the broken heart of unrequited love, the broken heart of friends who stop being friendly, the broken heart of relationships of all sorts that end painfully before we want them to.

How do we mend a broken heart? First, we wallow. We feel our sadness, maybe even let it overwhelm us for a little while. We weep. We retreat from the world. We briefly take up residence in the pit of despair. We might live out the cliché from movies and television and sit on the couch in our pajamas with a spoon and a gallon of ice cream.

And then, not too much later, we do something else. We feel something else. We return to a favorite hobby. We see a friend. We do the laundry. We go for a run. We go for a walk. We go to the gym. We find a new activity here at People's Church or somewhere else and try it out, even though we'd rather stay home. We return to our routines. We slowly remake a life without our beloved in it. We still feel the loss acutely—healing from a significant loss takes months—but we sometimes can go hours or days without thinking about it. We find ourselves smiling and laughing sometimes. We are on a new trajectory. Our heart might never be as good as new, but we can rebuild a life with our mish-mash heart.

If this isn't how your heartbreak story goes, if it's been five or six months since the relationship ended and your feelings of loss and are still intense, it's time to ask for help. If half a year later, a loss is interfering with your ability to live your life, go to work or school, and fulfill your various responsibilities, that is when it is time to seek out professional help. That is when a therapist or counselor can make all the difference. This is not a sign weakness and shouldn't be a source of shame. Sometimes, the pit of despair is too deep for us to leave alone, we need a trained helper to give us the tools we need to escape. If this is your story and you need help connecting with resources, please talk to me.

When we are broken-hearted, it can be powerful to remember that we are not alone. We have this community and we have our faith. I haven't spoken with you all much about my understanding of God – I'm going to do that now. The God I know is one who shows up heartbroken alongside us. I experience God as love – and not very powerful, which means God is always broken-hearted. I don't think that God is powerful. That's in contrast to most of the Abrahamic traditions that say that God is all-powerful and all-knowing. For me, God is all-loving, which means that God can't be all-powerful. This world is too broken and heart-breaking for a powerful and loving God to be pulling the strings. If there was a powerful loving God directing things, I think the world would be so much better, so much more just and full of love than it is. So God witnesses the events in Flint and Syria and our everyday heartbreaks and is heartbroken alongside us.

Some of my most profound experiences of God, the moments when divine presence is closest and most real for me, are moments of heartbreak, in the moments when dreams for the future are shattered. I have felt that heartbroken God alongside me in my moments of despair at the end of a relationship. I

have felt that heartbroken God alongside when I accompany people in moments of despair, especially when I worked as a hospital chaplain. God was a brokenhearted presence when a family decided to remove life support and let their beloved die. God was a brokenhearted presence while I supported a person who needed to make major changes in their life to avoid an early death from heart disease and diabetes. God was a brokenhearted presence when I baptized babies who lived for only a few hours. As people struggle with heartbreak and lives set on new, unexpected trajectories, it is my faith that God is there, brokenhearted alongside us, weeping with us, cheering us on as we escape the pit of despair.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are a community of diverse believers. Some of us don't believe in God. Some of us do. Many of us are agnostic. Those who believe in God think about God and experience God in different ways. I expect that most of you do not share my understanding of God; that makes for rich conversation and community. What is your theology of heartbreak? How does your belief system offer comfort and strength at the end of a relationship or in other heartbreaking situations? How do we live out our faith to bring comfort to others when they are heartbroken?

I am not the only one who thinks of God as broken. In the Hindu pantheon, there is a Goddess named Akhilandeshvari. Akhilandeshvari is a form of Parvati, the goddess of love and fertility. Akhilandeshvari's name means in Sanskrit "never not broken goddess." She is the always broken goddess and in some images of her, she is shown broken into several pieces and riding a crocodile. That is a powerful image, a Goddess broken apart for the times we are broken apart. Akhilandeshvari is a goddess for broken-hearted times.

In an article titled 'Why Being Broken in a Pile on Your Bedroom Floor is a Good Idea,' Canadian yoga teacher, Julie JC Peters writes, that Akhilandeshvari represents "the kind of broken that tears apart all the stuff that gets us stuck in toxic routines, repeating the same relationships and habits over and over, rather than diving into the scary process of trying something new and unfathomable..."

Peters continues, "The thing about going through sudden or scary or sad transitions (like a breakup) is that one of the things you lose is your future: your expectations of what the story of your life so far was going to become. When you lose that partner or that job or that person, your future dissolves in front of you. And of course, this is terrifying.

But look, Akhiland[eshvari] says, now you get to make a choice. In pieces, in a pile on the floor, with no idea how to go forward, your expectations of the future are meaningless. Your stories about the past do not apply. You are in flux, you are changing, you are flowing in a new way, and this is an incredibly powerful opportunity to become new again: to choose how you want to put yourself back together. Confusion can be an incredible teacher—how could you ever learn if you already had it all figured out?"¹

After heartbreak, we slowly put our pieces back together, perhaps in a new order. We make our way through the confusion. We learn. We start down a new path with new dreams. And then what? What do we do once we've survived our heartbreak? We return to the world, knowing that more heartbreak is sure to come. We return to the world with our hearts more mish-mashed, but also stronger, with more wisdom and more clarity about what matters to us in a relationship. Returning to the world is key.

¹ Peter, Julie (JC). 'Why Being Broken in a Pile on Your Bedroom Floor is a Good Idea.' *Elephant Journal*. June 1, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2011/06/why-being-broken-in-a-pile-on-your-bedroom-floor-is-a-good-idea-julie-jc-peters/>

We can make the choice in the aftermath of heartbreak to stay cut off from the world. To retreat and nurse our wounds forever. But that doesn't serve us or the world. To live in this world—to be vulnerable, to be passionate, to care—is to risk a broken-heart. British Christian thinker and author C.S. Lewis 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." We our heart breaks, we heal and then return to the world. The other option is to live life with an unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable heart – and that's no kind of life at all.

To live in this world—to be vulnerable, to be passionate, to care—is to risk a broken-heart. Perhaps to live in this world, in all its pain and promise, in all its triumph and tragedy, is to live with a perpetual low-grade broken heart. A broken heart, that if it is not broken for ourselves and our relationships is broken for the world – for Flint, for Syria, for all of the suffering around us. When our heart breaks, perhaps it never again closes again to the rest of the world.

If we are to live with this low-grade perpetually broken heart – and that might be our calling as people of faith, as people who stand on the side of love, we need to strengthen ourselves, strengthen our hearts, prepare our hearts to get mish-mashed. How do we prepare for the next inevitable heartbreak? For our next encounter with suffering, whether it be ours or the world's or both?

Quaker educator, Parker Palmer has words of wisdom for us. He recommends we work to make our heart more supple.

"There are many ways to make the heart more supple," he writes, "but all of them come down to this: Take it in, take it all in!"

He continues, "My heart is stretched every time I'm able to take in life's little deaths without an anesthetic: a friendship gone sour, a mean-spirited critique of my work, failure at a task that was important to me. I can also exercise my heart by taking in life's little joys: a small kindness from a stranger, the sound of a distant train reviving childhood memories, the infectious giggle of a two-year-old as I "hide" and then "leap out" from behind cupped hands. Taking all of it in — the good and the bad alike — is a form of exercise that slowly transforms my clenched fist of a heart into an open hand."²

So in our times of acute heartbreak, may we care for ourselves and ask for the help we need to leave the pit of despair.

In the midst of our often heartbreaking world, may we transform closed and clenched hearts into open, perpetually broken mish-mash hearts.

And may our hearts break open and never close again to the rest of the world.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

² Palmer, Parker J. 'Heartbreak, Violence, and Hope for New Life.' *On Being*. April 15, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/heartbreak-violence-and-hope-for-new-life/7476>.