

Ruminations on Brokenness

Clay Nelson © 22 March 2015

So, as is my practice, I was very busy procrastinating a few weeks ago. I was going to start writing my sermon just after I visited every website on the Internet when I came across a poem by Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi or just Rumi to his friends. It sounded familiar. It began: “Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving. Ours is no caravan of despair.” But then came an unexpected line, “Though you have broken your vows a thousand times...” before finishing as expected with, “Come, yet again come.” The song in our hymnal leaves that line out...understandably. It is a bit of a downer in such an upbeat song.

To leave it out is such a human thing to do. Look at John Key, who vowed to resign if the bill he was trying to pass last spring let the GCSB spy on us. It turns out it did and yet, he is still inexplicably in the Beehive. When he writes his autobiography I’m sure he will leave out that pesky little broken vow episode. I’d condemn him for it, if it weren’t for the fact that we all tend to try to forget or rewrite the history of those times we have failed to live up to our own standards. Those moments rarely show up as a status report on our Facebook page.

Life breaks us on a random basis often enough as it is--cyclones, a cancer diagnosis, the death of a partner, family and friends not living up to our expectations; our career plans left in shambles when the company downsizes, a bad hair day; rain on our parade. Who wants to remember as well those times we have shattered our own lives? Best to leave those moments out of our narrative.

I know I would like to. Unfortunately I don’t find it that easy. If you could see my brokenness physically you would see I look like some antique painting or piece of pottery with cracks and fault lines all over me. They would reveal the times I have been shattered, actually broken, and then reassembled sometimes by myself and sometimes by friends and professionals when I couldn’t get a good look at the part that was broken or it was out of reach. While you might not be able to see them, when I’m shaving they are reflected clearly in the mirror. It can be debilitating.

According to the Myers-Briggs Inventory, which teases out our personality type, I am hardwired to be an idealist with strong values I expect myself to live up to unerringly. So, when I judge that I have broken a vow to another or myself it can be crushing. As a boost to those with the same affliction, I recently posted on Facebook this quote by Augusten Borroughs, the author of *Running with Scissors*, “I like flaws and feel more comfortable with people who have them. I myself am made entirely of flaws sewn together with good intentions.”

Augusten should feel comfortable with everyone. The clinical psychologist and Buddhist lay priest, Tara Brach, reminds us of this in her book *Radical Acceptance*. “Imperfection is not our personal problem. It is a natural part of existing”ⁱ. Rumi as well reminds us that our brokenness is a part of the universal human condition. Rumi was a poet and mystic living in 13th century Persia and he knew about wounds. When he was a youth the Mongols invaded his country and his family became refugees who journeyed for many years before finding a new home. They passed through many countries and when they finally arrived in Turkey, Rumi’s mother and brother died soon after settling in their new land. Rumi married and his first wife died. His life was

filled with richness and tragedy. He knew that we couldn't travel on with the caravan of life without valuing all of our selves, broken vows and all.

But how do we value that which often humiliates and shames us? Our failures and flaws are much more likely to draw us into alienated isolation than to send us off to only the gods know where with the caravan. If we are to join up and leave despair behind we need to understand our love of self-criticism.

To understand it myself I turned to an article by Adam Phillips in the London Review of Books entitled *Against Self-Criticism*. I was hooked with the first paragraph where he refers to psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's observation that "there was surely something ironic about Christ's injunction to love thy neighbour as thyself – because actually, of course, people hate themselves. Or you could say that, given the way people treat one another, perhaps they had always loved their neighbours in the way they loved themselves: that is, with a good deal of cruelty and disregard."

Phillips sees Lacan as implicitly comparing Christ to Freud. From his Freudian point of view, Christ's story about love was a cover story, a repression of and a self-cure for ambivalence. In Freud's vision we are, above all, ambivalent animals: wherever we hate we love, wherever we love we hate. If someone can satisfy us, they can frustrate us; and if someone can frustrate us we always believe they can satisfy us. And who frustrates us more than ourselves?

Ambivalence does not, in the Freudian story, mean mixed feelings, it means opposing feelings. In *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*: "Ambivalence refers to an underlying emotional attitude in which contradictory attitudes derive from a common source and are interdependent, whereas mixed feelings may be based on a realistic assessment of the imperfect nature of the object." Phillips explains further, "Love and hate are the common source, the elemental feelings by which we understand the world; they are interdependent in the sense that you can't have one without the other, and that they mutually inform each other. The way we hate people depends on the way we love them and vice versa. According to psychoanalysis these contradictory feelings enter into everything we do. We are ambivalent, in Freud's view, about anything and everything that matters to us; indeed, ambivalence is the way we recognise that someone or something has become significant to us. This means that we are ambivalent about ambivalence, about love and hate and sex and pleasure and each other and ourselves, and so on; wherever there is an object of desire there must be ambivalence. But Freud's insistence about our ambivalence...is also a way of saying that we're never quite as obedient as we seem to be: that where there is devotion there is always protest, where there is trust there is suspicion, where there is self-hatred or guilt there is also self-love. We may not be able to imagine a life in which we don't spend a large amount of our time criticising others and ourselves; but we should keep in mind that self-love is always in play. Self-criticism can be our most unpleasant – our most sadomasochistic – way of loving ourselves."

It is of course true that we are never as good we could be; and neither, it seems are other people. So, dropping our self-critical faculty entirely doesn't seem appropriate, but questioning where we get our information about others and ourselves is. For Freud, the human psyche has three tiers at war with each other: our id, ego and superego. It is in the superego Freud believed that our conscience resides. Freudians understand the superego as the voice of the authoritarians in our lives: the strict father, a monotheistic religion; the absolutist state. It insists on diminishing us. It is

unimaginative about morality and our selves. Were we to meet this figure socially, this accusatory character, this internal critic, this unrelenting faultfinder, we would think there was something wrong with him. He would just be boring and cruel. We might think that something terrible had happened to him, that he was living in the aftermath, in the fallout, of some catastrophe. And we would be right.

The superego lives in fear, seeking to protect us from our desires that it believes endanger us. It is judge, jury and executioner and doesn't engage in conversation with us about other possible interpretations of our behaviour. Like George W Bush, it is the "Decider." Freud used Hamlet and his self-loathing that was an expression of his conscience to demonstrate that conscience is a character assassin of everyday life, whereby we in complicity with it continually, if unconsciously, mutilate and deform our own character. So unrelenting is this internal violence that we have no idea what we'd be like without it. We know almost nothing about ourselves because we judge ourselves before we have a chance to see ourselves. He argues that to have only one interpretation of Hamlet is to kill him. Yet that is what we allow the superego to do to us. It gives us a very narrow, single interpretation of whom we are, killing us. Fortunately there are countless interpretations of *Hamlet*. To live our lives in a way that lets us go join the caravan of life requires as many interpretations of our decisions and actions than what the superego is prepared to provide. Philosopher George Santayana once lauded our Unitarian forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson for doing just that, "Emerson was distinguished, not by what he knew but by the number of ways he had of knowing it."

To do as Emerson, we need to take away the superego's supreme control over us. We need not deny its existence, but put its input into proper perspective and give it appropriate weight. It is not the voice of truth but of the authorities who surround us and who fear our desires. We need to take Hamlet's observation about the conscience to heart, "Conscience makes cowards of us all."

Freud reminds us that we made our superego out of the whole cloth of our past experiences and then the superego returns the favour by making us. We are bit like Frankenstein, whose monster turns him into something he wasn't before. Phillips explains, "The super-ego... seeks to tell us who we really are... it claims to know us in a way that no one else, including ourselves, can ever do. And, like a mad god, it is omniscient: it behaves as if it can predict the future by claiming to know the consequences of our actions – when we know, in a more imaginative part of ourselves, that most actions are morally equivocal, and can change over time in our estimation... In stead of a forbidden pleasure, self-criticism is an unforbidden one: we seem to relish the way it makes us suffer. Unforbidden pleasures are the pleasures we don't particularly want to think about: we just implicitly take it for granted that each day will bring its necessary quotient of self-disappointment, that every day we will fail to be as good as we should be; but without our being given the resources, the language, to wonder who or what is setting the pace, or where these rather punishing standards come from."

Our superego is intimidating because it is intimidated. If it makes us cowards, it is because of its own cowardice. We need to ask with Shakespeare's Richard III, "O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me?" If we are cowardly, it is because we have been living by the morality of a coward. Its task is to leave us so self-mortified, so loathsome, so inadequate, so isolated, so self-obsessed, so boring and bored, so guilty that no one could possibly love us that we cannot move into the unknown.

Because we are slaves to the monster of our own making, the superego, we can relate to Richard III when he asks, “Who do I fear?” and then answers lamentably, “Myself.” Superego forbid we leave with the caravan into an unknown future where we live by a morality of desire instead of fear.

To leave despair behind we need to realize that our conscience is not moral but moralistic. Like a malign parent it harms in the guise of protecting; it exploits in the guise of providing good guidance. In the name of health and safety it creates a life of terror and self-estrangement. There is a great difference between not doing something out of fear of punishment, and not doing something because one believes it is wrong. Guilt isn't necessarily a good clue as to what one values; it is only a good clue about what (or whom) one fears. Not doing something because one will feel guilty if one does it is not necessarily a good reason not to do it. Morality born of intimidation is immoral.

I love how the Universe rarely lets a teachable moment pass us by. After spending a full day trying to absorb and make sense of what Phillips and Freud were trying to say, I went to a theatrical interpretation of Guus Kuijer's *The Book of Everything* at the Q Theatre.

It tells the true story of Thomas an almost ten-year old boy living in post-war Amsterdam. He has a vivid imagination and records all that he sees in his Book about Everything. He sees an alternative reality that others can't see. He lives with his appropriately obnoxious teenage sister, his loving but oppressed mother and an insufferably pious and abusive father who is a lay preacher. He is a gentle, sweet, and loving child who lives in fear of his father's wooden spoon, which he experiences harshly one Sunday after altering the chanted response of “Merciful Lord, forgive us miserable sinners” to “Musical Lord, forgive us miserable singers.”

When a neighbour everyone thinks (correctly it turns out) is a witch, asks him in front of his father what he wants to be when he grows up, Thomas infuriates him by answering, “When I grow up I want to be happy.” It turns out that the only thing preventing him from growing up happy is fear. The rest of the story is his journey of overcoming his fearfulness through sharing an occasional cordial with the witch, listening to music and reading nonsense poetry aloud. In doing so he releases all those around him from their fear and brings his narrow-minded, moralistic and cruel father to his knees and then to redemption.

Thank you Universe. I get it now. When I grow up I want to be happy too.

How about you? Then...

Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
Ours is no caravan of despair
Though you have broken your vows a thousand times
Come, yet again come.

i *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha.* (New York: Bantam Books, 2003)