

When Wounded Emerge as Healers

ATTENDING THIS BEAUTIFUL SERVICE
each year, I have wondered sometimes what

I might say if ever I were asked to address a graduating class from Harvard Divinity School. First, what an honor it has been to encounter the religious traditions of the world with you, to witness your intellectual insight, your spiritual courage, and your moving commitment to so many forms of ministry—to accompany you on these short, intense years of the journey, all the while trying not to drown in the river of my own life as it repeatedly refused to run in pre-carved channels. ¶ Time and again, by your example, by your passionate engagement with vocation, you taught me not to fear the unruly flood of life as it is lived, often so different than life as it is planned; not to avoid the place past the bend where the flood turns into plunging falls, but to embrace it, row *toward* the embattlement, as Mary Oliver says. For to turn the boat around is to live a life out of fear, not out of love, a life not worth a bent penny or a scuffed shoe. To row back up the river is to try to

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is like a labyrinth.

BY KIMBERLEY C. PATTON

*Opposite: "The Girl and the Heart"
by Edvard Munch*

exempt oneself from being acted upon by the forces that so urgently carry us all, not toward safety but most surely toward salvation. These are the same forces described by the religious traditions of the world, whether their sacred histories exist in texts or rock paintings, forces with which we live in relationship, whether we like it or not. You have known this, and have shown it to me even when I could not face it. The truth is that you were always the teachers and I was always the student.

THE STUDY OF RELIGION HAS NEVER BEEN A “FIELD” for me as much as it has been a labyrinth. Having entered this maze, like many other scholars, I have never truly emerged, lost in a world well beyond my comprehension or “control,” but whose twists and turns I continue to follow because I must, sensing that there is somewhere, hidden deep down, a chamber I probably should avoid but cannot. To study religion is to encounter a fire—a funeral pyre at times, the burning nest of a phoenix at others; a river of ashes into which I wade at dawn straining to hear the *Gayatri* mantra; an alchemical crucible; a Pentecostal shout; a frog’s splash, awakening Bashō. It is the majesty of the Kol Nidre or the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgy; the first steps of the hajj; a Maori war outrigger flying across the surf, the realm of the sea god Tangaroa; the Delphic Pythia raving on her tripod; a carved fertility figure beneath a woman’s bed in Ghana; the traces in the red clay-pans of the Balgo Hills left by Rainbow Serpent or Barking Spider; the rainy slopes of Wu Tai Shan where dragons fly; a Tibetan sand mandala of a thousand colors, days in creation but seconds in destruction; the roots of the great bo tree snaking through the walls at Anuradhapura; the library of Alexandria; the tender faces of Elegua and Guan Yin; the spinning orbits of Sufi *dhikr*; the swinging candelabrum at a monastery on Mount Athos, tracing the gyres of the heavens; a classical Mayan ballgame, kinetic, balletic; the flutes broken by a human sacrifice as he climbed the final steps of Templo Mayor to become the food of the gods.

Human religious expression is a feast; a lament; a sickness; a hospital; a massacre; it can be the gale-force wind behind great movements of liberation and change for the good, or it can be a theater of systematic depravity. It can dignify human beings or degrade them beyond recognition.

So, as long as I thought I could impart to you something oracular about the future—your future—something splendid or clever or wise, I never had this opportunity. That day did not come until all I could tell you about was the one thing that I truly can say I know, and that is the broken heart. Even if a broken heart does not lie in your past or present, it awaits you in your future, at some place, at some time when you will almost certainly be unprepared. But in myth, in ritual, and in theology, the broken heart is not a regrettable symptom of derailment, but is rather the starting point of anything that matters. As Laurette Séjourné describes the heart in ancient Mesoamerica: “The heart is the place of union where the luminous consciousness is made. . . . Human existence must reach out to transcend the world of forms that conceal the ultimate reality. This reality lives in the heart and

must be set free at whatever cost. . . . Thus to reach one's heart, to possess oneself of it, means to penetrate into spiritual life. The operation is extremely painful, and that is why the heart is always represented as wounded, and why the drops of blood issuing from it are so significant that they alone are a sufficient symbol for it." The religious imagination reveals the broken heart as the very best means to wisdom and growth, even when it disrupts the dreams and goals that have inspired us; even when it overshadows the résumés we craft or the faces we publicly present; even when it scatters the ducks we have so carefully lined up in a row. If we are associated with Harvard in any way, we have learned in our various ways to marshal those glossy ducks in tight formation, and to keep them waddling under strategic control.

But there have been or will be times in all of our lives when the ducks will not line up. They scatter and squawk, or they are devoured by a starving coyote. Far from being distractions, these times of apparent anarchy are the most important times in our lives, and again, this is an ancient idea. For it is highly likely that during such broken-hearted, disorienting times, illusions will shatter; old ideas and attachments will be burned up; old ways of being will dissolve; and the one thing or person or way of life we thought we could not live without will be taken from us. These are times when we will learn compassion, what in Buddhism is called *bodhicitta*, the awakened heart, times when the unbearably wounded will themselves emerge as healers.

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MY STUDENTS SAY TO ME SOMETIMES, AS THEY APPLY to doctoral programs or jobs in parish ministry, "How shall I account for the two, or the ten, missing years on my résumé? How should I explain the gap?" And how I wish I could always answer them, "Tell the truth. Say, 'I took in a child whose mother was in prison and sang her to sleep every night while she cried. I worked the night shift in a rifle factory. I battled an addiction, and I won. My husband was crushed by a boulder that fell in our own backyard, and I tended his grave. I worked as a stripper to save money to go to graduate school. My marriage made in heaven turned to hell. I fled to Caledonia. I fled to Paraguay. I lived in a monastery in Thailand where I came to see that all things, all things, are empty and undeserving of our outrageous attachment to them. I swapped dirty needles for clean. I took photos of skulls left by the Khmer Rouge. I cut down trees all day and made them into tables.'"

These are all true stories of the things my students have done during the "gaps" in their résumés. These experiences are how hearts are broken, and re-made; how souls are forged; how we become human beings with credible beliefs about existence itself.

The gaps on the résumé are the abysses into which we fall from time to time, and in the process, fall into the hands of the living God. The gaps are when the initiations take place. It is our profound ignorance that makes us ashamed of such times, living as

we do in what storyteller Michael Meade calls this “uninitiated, out-of-control country.”

Over and again, the world’s religious traditions speak of the preciousness and power of the broken heart. The Aztecs called it *tlazotli noyol*, “precious, perforated, bleeding heart,” without which the sun could not even rise one day. Its successor in Mexico, the image of the bleeding heart of the self-offering Christ, remains central in Catholic devotional piety. The prince Siddhartha Gautama escaped his protected palace compound in disguise, only to encounter burning suffering and mortality for the first time, and with his heart broken, set out in the middle of the night upon his path toward Buddhahood. He left behind his wife, Yashodhara, and their newborn son, Rahula, little “Fetter,” who also awoke to their own new lives of broken-heartedness. The psalmist reminds God that even if He turns in disdain from burnt offerings and elaborate sacrifices, He cannot ignore a broken and contrite heart. And on the Day of the Resurrection, writes the Sufi commentator Maybudī, God will welcome into the house of His friends only the burnt, the broken, and the grieving, only those washed and purified by their own tears.

Tears are the holy water of the broken heart. “All through history,” writes Clarissa Pinkola Estés, “tears have done three works: called the spirits to one’s side, repelled those who would muffle and bind the [simple] soul, and healed the injuries of poor human bargains.”

Harvard is a place of astonishing light; but, even at the Divinity School, it is also a place where, in the shadow, very poor human bargains can be made. I have made many such bargains myself, and my tears have not yet healed them. The shadow side of Harvard’s obsession with excellence is the relentless fear of failure, insecurity, and the reluctance to ask questions that might

reveal one did not come to Harvard already knowing everything. But as both myth and cognitive psychology show, failure is *how* one learns; indeed, it is the most important element of the natural process of learning. And entering new territory one does not already “control,” without a passport, is how one keeps moving outward from the known center, how one avoids calcification, how inquiry and wonder are not stifled by self-righteousness.

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THE SHADOW SIDE OF HARVARD’S OBSESSION WITH productivity is compulsion, the inability to relax or to rejoice in what has already been accomplished, or even more, to see the value in latency, dormancy, or rest. As Martha Beck observes, Harvard is a place where lovers sign letters to one another, “Wishing you a productive summer.” How can we learn not to panic as future ministers or scholars or mothers when we are “not getting any work done” or when we lose direction altogether, when there is no plan, when the manuscript is delayed or the child is ill, when the love affair sours and there is no point in getting up, when the beloved sister or brother unexpectedly dies, or when we are suddenly called to make pots, to sit with dying people, or to go to Brazil? Or when the sheer cruelty, racism, and blindness of the

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world can be kept at bay no longer, but storm our inner barriers, making normal productive life impossible? Yet in these “degree detours,” and later, in these career detours, lie gestation and receptivity, what the Japanese call “hollowness” to the divine. In these nonproductive times, new things are hatching, being born in the darkness, *if only we do not panic*.

And even in the absence of traumatic events that seem to impede our progress, we remain cyclical beings in our creativity, not consistently humming machines. In his book *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, the poet David Whyte observes: “Human beings left to their own devices—a very rare event—seem to work according to the quality of a given season and learn similarly in cycles. Good work and good education are achieved by visitation and then absence, appearance, and disappearance. Most people who exhibit a mastery in a work or a subject have often left it completely for a long period in their lives only to return for another look. Constant busyness has no absence in it, no openness to the arrival of any new season, no birdsong at the start of its day. Constant learning is counterproductive and makes both ourselves and the subject stale and uninteresting.”

And this is why the academic calendar, or the calendar of any organization into which we try to fit ourselves, with artificial seasons and ritualistic deadlines imposed upon the rich and protean stories of our lives, can be a kind of crucifixion. This is why it can be hard to tell our stories, or to live our lives with honesty. This is why we fear or hide the broken heart.

Like the wider American culture, Harvard also lionizes the loner, the brilliant individual who has won some high-level game of musical chairs where 150 players contend for 8 seats and the music is by Mahler. But the shadow side of this individualism can

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be a lack of appreciation of collaborative work, coupled with a malignant sense of scarce resources: a zero-sum game whereby your victory somehow diminishes me, and if you are recognized, I am robbed. Lost in such shadow are the unique gifts and the unique destiny belonging to each of us, which no one can take from us.

THE FACT IS THAT WE ARE PERFECTING NOT OUR résumés, but our obituaries. We are all headed to one common destination, and there is not a lot happening there. As Andrew Marvell wrote in the poem *To His Coy Mistress*, English literature's most elegant mash note, "The grave's a fine and private place; but none, I think, do there embrace." Against the meaninglessness of death, the Rajasthani woman poet Mirabai sings of the soul's passionate yearning for the absent, beautiful face of Krishna, the dark Lifter of Mountains. Amid auspicious wedding songs, on an altar of pearly tears she herself has shed, Mirabai, the *bhakta*, offers herself as a living sacrifice to God, and cleaves to that union through the tumult of birth after birth after birth, life after life. "Don't go, don't." Who has not cried out these words? In her complete surrender to love, Mirabai effects her own freedom from the wheel of *samsara*. She initiates herself.

Looking deep into the religious traditions of the world, one learns that we need not fear these initiations, these times of breaking apart. The soul cannot grow or change without them. What the human ego or the human body experience as traumas, the soul instantly recognizes as opportunities to shed what is no longer needed. When the heart is broken, the soul is released from its prior constellations. It begins the ancient process of dissolution, dismemberment, and new life. The soul rushes toward rebirth. This is not a comfortable process. But it is a normal one.

In the words of Jalaja Bonheim: "[M]ake no mistake: those who tell us we can have whatever we want, be whoever we want to be, and have full control of our lives are merely playing into our desire to avoid the discomfort of feeling our vulnerability. True wholeness has nothing to do with getting what we want. Paradoxically, we achieve true wholeness only by embracing our fragility and sometimes our brokenness. Wholeness is a natural radiance of Love, and Love demands that we allow the destruction of our old self for the sake of the new. 'If anyone needs a head, the lover leaps up to offer his,' says the mystic and poet Kabir. Life did not intend for us to be inviolable, but to be used for fodder for its workings. We are meant to be chewed up and digested and transformed into the blood and sinews of the world."

Life did not intend for us to be inviolable. Instead we are to be transformed into the blood and sinews of the world. To this end and purpose we can turn, in love, without fear, without ambivalence, letting the ducks break rank when they must, letting them fly where they will, into the air, into emptiness, into the breast of God, whose mighty and broken heartbeat joins with our own until the end of our separate lives, when the sound will become one, when we will see that all our ideas of self and emptiness and God were not enough.

May God bless you and keep you always. ■

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