

## Wholly Worthy

A reflection by Jackie Clement

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### Reading:

Broken Buddha (excerpts)

Meg Barnhouse, UU World 7/5/2010

I have a photograph in my online art collection titled “Broken Buddha.” It shows the lap of a painted statue. One graceful hand has broken off and is resting on the sole of an upturned foot. I’m trying to figure out why I’m so drawn to this image.

The enlightened one as imperfect, cracked, and chipped—maybe that is how my enlightenment feels. It is not all that shiny anymore. A piece or two might have gotten knocked off.

The broken Buddha says I don't have to be scared of being the way I am.

The broken Buddha tells me that sometimes agony is appropriate.

The broken Buddha tells me that life is not neat.

Life is gorgeous and horrific and beyond understanding. We may create certain situations, draw certain things, but other suffering strikes like a tiger from the tall grass, snatching us from one life into another without cause or warning.

I meditate on the broken hand of the Buddha and it comforts me. It tells me that the spiritual moves in and through cracks and gaps, that it is wild and doesn't make sense. It sits with you even through something that can't be fixed by intelligence or kindness or love.

Curious about the statue, I learned that his broken hand is in the “Karana Mudra,” the shape used for warding off demons.

“The enlightened one is still whole,” one of the comments under the photo reads. Someone was made nervous by the Buddha's broken hand. The one who wrote that comment wants it to be true but he doesn't know. Maybe you can be enlightened and broken too.

Sometimes I feel like I understand so much, that I can be a lot of help to people. Other times my mind is blank and there is nothing in my mind or heart to say but “I'm so sorry.” I want to reach out but my hand is lying in my lap, still in a shape of warding off demons of fear and illness, financial terrors and loss, and I can't do anything with it.

The broken Buddha says he knows how I feel. Our hearts beat together for a time, and we are both strengthened.

## Sermon:

- ❖ The broken Buddha says I don't have to be scared of being the way I am.
- ❖ The broken Buddha tells me that sometimes agony is appropriate.
- ❖ The broken Buddha tells me that life is not neat.

*[from Broken Buddha by Meg Barnhouse in the UU World, 7/5/2010]*

I have had ample opportunity this past week to sit with the imperfect, with the not neat, with the knowledge that sometimes agony is indeed the appropriate response. I have had ample opportunity to engage with my own broken parts, the way my own hand sits inactive and useless instead of reaching out, not even always able to shape itself into the mudra of warding off demons. And so I have leaned into this image of the broken Buddha, the image of enlightenment imperfect, cracked and chipped. And I have reaffirmed for myself that in our brokenness lies strength.

It isn't always our broken places we go to in order to find strength. I would even go so far as to say it's rare that we seek the source of our strength in brokenness, but we might be looking in the wrong place. I have no doubt that to look to our moments of enlightenment, accomplishment and triumph can let us know that we are capable of great things, but I think, perhaps, it is in the cracks and gaps and broken places where some of our greatest gifts and greatest strengths lie. There lies the knowledge that even in the days of our powerlessness we are capable of healing.

At the UU General Assembly a few years ago, the Reverend Alison Miller (currently one of the candidates for UUA President), told the story of discovering her own source of strength. As a child, Alison had a rare cancer that left one arm weaker than the other. This is the how she ended the story:

*Long after being cured of cancer, when I thought my healing was complete, I was serving as a chaplain. I recall intentionally reaching out to patients with my "good" arm and not my "bad" arm. I wanted to be sure to touch them from a place of strength and wholeness. One day, I met a patient, the only person I have ever met with the same cancer.*

*When she asked me to pray with her, for the first time it felt right to reach out with my left arm. I opened the fingers as far as I am able, and placed them on her shoulder. I knew in an instant that I had the story wrong. This is my strong arm, the one that knows something about withstanding pain and loss... the one that has experienced healing. It's not as functional as the other arm, but it most definitely embodies strength. I never thought of it as my "bad" arm again.*

I think Alison's story embodies one of the messages of the broken Buddha, that in brokenness is strength. That to have endured the process of being broken or chipped and to still be here, this is the very definition of strength. For brokenness to be not only a source of strength, but also to be source of enlightenment, we have to find the gifts our broken places can offer. If they offer only

bitterness that the world is not a fair place, they cannot become the source of compassion. If our broken places offer only the self pity of “how could this happen to me?” they can never teach us that healing is possible. If, in our wounds, we find only self involvement, they can never be the source of helping others.

Compassion, reaching out to others, knowing that healing is possible – these are some of the qualities of enlightenment. These are gifts that strengthen rather than diminish our enlightenment. These are also qualities that require practice, repetition and reminders. The bumps and scrapes and breaks we suffer, those can be the reminders. The experiences we went through to still be here despite those bumps and scrapes and breaks, those are the wise guides to enlightenment.

The person who offered the comment on the photo of the broken statue that “The holy one is still whole” was oh so human. We don’t like the broken places. We don’t generally like other people’s broken places, and we really don’t like our own. It’s not a comfortable place to go, into the pain that the broken places remind us of. It is a basic animal instinct to avoid the broken and the weak. We like to think of everything as whole, as beautiful and fine and whole.

Unitarian Universalism is the poster child of this sentiment. Our historical theologies held such an optimistic view of human and divine capacity that no one could ever be cut off from eternal reward of heaven. While our modern principles might not be as explicit, still we are drawn to an optimism that never counts anyone wholly outside the circle of redemption. We are determined to see everyone as whole. But we are not. We are whole and holy *only* in our imperfection and brokenness. The world is not such a simple and simplistic place that we are ever *only* whole or *only* broken.

And we know that really because even though showing weakness is not readily embraced in our culture there is something comforting in knowing that not everyone else has it all together oh so much more than you do. Early in my career in corporate marketing, I took a course in public speaking. I remember the presenter urging us not to worry about making mistakes because it actually drew you closer to your audience. Showing signs of vulnerability humanizes us to all those other imperfect beings who secretly fear that, just like John Travolta, when put in front of several hundred million people, they too would mispronounce Idina Menzel. We may not be crazy about those imperfections, those cracks and chips and broken places, but they allow us to connect to other people more than any sterile display of perfection.

Brene Brown, a researcher on vulnerability and joy, agrees with this idea that it is our vulnerability that makes us most connected. While she acknowledges that vulnerability is at the heart of connection and belonging, Brown also says that, as a society, we are losing our tolerance for vulnerability. We equate vulnerability with weakness. Vulnerability is the core of fear and anxiety and shame, really uncomfortable emotions that we all have and mostly would like to avoid, and so we try to push being vulnerable out of view, and we try to push those who readily display vulnerability out of view. Still, according to Brown, that very same vulnerability is also the birthplace of joy, of love, of belonging, creativity and faith.

Having faith is one of the most vulnerable acts we can undertake. Whatever it is we have faith in, whether it is the human capacity or divine providence, these are things we cannot guarantee. We may have evidence of them, but faith by definition deals with things that are not certainties and to have faith is to step into vulnerability. So although that vulnerability might well be the birthplace of joy and belonging, when it comes to the things we anchor our very lives on it would be nice if there was a little less uncertainty or frailty or yes, less weakness, and a little more perfection. It's a lovely theory that our imperfections connect us to other people and even to the holy, but we still seem to be in need of heroes and gods who reach the ideals of perfection. And that's why the Buddha can't be broken. Because the perfect can't be broken, can't be made of the same fragile stuff as we humans.

But it's hard to have it both ways, isn't it? It's good for us to be vulnerable and relatable, but not for the divine to be. One of the arguments our ancestral Unitarians offered for why Jesus was human rather than fully divine was that without his humanity we could not relate to his suffering. If he was divine, perfect, transcendent of human reality, then he would not suffer in ways we could understand and relate to. You know, as optimistic as our ancestral theologies were, they *got* this idea of connection through vulnerability. In 1841, Theodore Parker spoke of the humanity of Jesus this way: If you "make him a God—much of the significance of his character is gone. His virtue has no merit; his love no feeling; his cross no burthen; his agony no pain." Perfection is not as relatable as vulnerability. We aren't crazy about our own vulnerabilities but they are certainly unsettling in those we need to think of as perfect, strong, invulnerable. Remember the first time you realized your parents were just human beings? And that means that the Buddha can't possibly be broken.

I think this denial of brokenness arises from a need for security, from the assurance that there is something so perfect in an imperfect world that it can save us. For me, I cast my lot with Theodore Parker and say that if Jesus has a saving message for me it lies in his example of overcoming his human imperfections, of persevering despite his disappointments, mistakes and losses.

But our need to declare the Buddha as whole or Jesus divine, to insist on perfection where it does not exist, also arises, I think, from an understanding that confuses the quality of wholeness with the idea of worthiness. We think that worthiness and wholeness are mutually exclusive from brokenness. While whole and broken might be polar opposites for vases, they are not for humans. Despite the many places of brokenness life offers us, we need not lose the worth of our lives.

But we live in a society that sees brokenness and thinks unworthiness. Think of people living with physical challenges, those who depend on wheelchairs or other devices for mobility, those without sight or hearing, those whose physical appearance in some way challenges the perceptions of normality. Don't you often hear them spoken of as impaired, disabled, handicapped, defective? That is, if you hear them spoken of at all for they are often invisible. And people living with mental illness, even more so, are often not accorded the same rights or respect as others.

If our bodies are broken, we do not lose our worth. If our minds do not work as we would wish, we do not surrender our human dignity. When our hearts and spirits are broken, we do not diminish in worth. Indeed we have the capacity to grow in compassion and understanding and all the elements of enlightenment. So maybe when the person left the comment saying that “the enlightened on is still whole” they really meant that, although broken, the Buddha is still worthy.

You, too, with all your bumps and bruises, physical or spiritual, real or metaphorical, you, too, are of worth. Embrace your broken parts, for in them lies the potential for healing, for greater strength. Because

- ❖ The broken Buddha tells us that life is not neat, and still life is worthy of our embrace.
- ❖ The broken Buddha tells us that sometimes agony is appropriate for we cannot always avoid the things that break us, but still the spirit moves in and through the cracks and gaps.
- ❖ The broken Buddha says we don't have to be scared of being the way we are because where we have been broken is where we can find our greatest gifts. And because despite the chips and cracks and broken places we, too, remain worthy.

I will close with the word of poet David Rudbarg.

The journey of reinvention is one of raw emotions  
 Emerging from dormancy  
 Surprising as a paper cut  
 Overwhelming as a hailstorm  
 One part vulnerability  
 One part rage  
 One part surrender  
 Uncomfortable  
 Unfamiliar  
 Unsure  
 Fearful  
 Alone  
 Damaged  
 Broken  
 And finding a new Self  
 Slowly  
 Different  
 Healing  
 Humble  
 Present  
 Open  
 Longing  
 Free

From whatever breaks and bruises life has dealt you, may you find healing, and whether you are at the point of breaking or at the point of healing or anywhere on that journey in between, may you know that you are not alone. May you know that your life is of worth.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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### **Closing Words:**

Go Boldly

By Jean M. Olson

May you be brave enough to expose  
your aching woundedness  
and reveal your vulnerability.

May you speak your deepest truths,  
knowing that they will change as you do.

May you sing the music within you,  
composing your own melody,  
playing your song with all your heart.

May you draw, paint, sculpt, and sew,  
showing the world your vision.

May you write letters, poetry, biography,  
slogans, graffiti, the great novel,  
laying bare your words to love and hate.

May you love even though your heart  
breaks again and again.

And until the end of your days,  
may your life be filled  
with possibilities and courage.