

We Are All Broken

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What Is This About?

Every day in the people I meet, especially in my role as chaplain, I get the privilege of hearing their stories. These are stories about their lives - victories, defeats and everything in-between. When you listen carefully, however, you can hear more to the story underneath the words.

I discovered that deep down, no matter how much a person holds it together...

We are all broken.

There is something each of us hides from the world, burying it deep within and smothering enough layers of ourselves on top of it so others don't notice. Some of us wear our hearts on our sleeves, but there are some wounds that run deep beneath the skin. Even the altruistic among us who seek something greater in life are still brought down by their human brokenness.

And that is the clincher - it is a universal human experience to be broken. We all feel it, but we're afraid to admit it. We're worried that we're the only ones who are experiencing pain and soon enough, it begins to surface.

It surfaces in ways that does not always correlate to what's hurting us. It could cause us to be more cynical about life, to protect ourselves more, to be angry towards those close to us or to feel sad without understanding why. Some of us seek professional help and some may peruse the endless self-help books hoping one can give us the answer to a question we're not even sure about.

While I can't encompass every single theme that has come through my office (and by office, I mean the physical one at my workplace and the space in front of me in life), I did notice some commonalities. These are the themes I've tried to capture in this manuscript.

I guess I'm writing this to let you know you are not alone. Many of these themes are also coming from my own life and while your story is different, and maybe some of these themes will not be applicable to you, that's okay. This isn't some guide providing definitive answers, but rather messages of encouragement.

Nobody has all the answers in life.

Nobody.

Death

We don't really get over the death of a loved one.

We have ways of coping and we get reassurances from others that life will go on, but it never really does. How can you honestly forget about losing someone who has been close to you?

We understand the psychology about loss and the proper, healthy way to continue forward. We trudge through each day, inching forward and waiting for the day when everything will be all better. We can smile about it when it happens, but then the pain of loss hits us again.

What do we do?

Intellectually, the ideal is to change the way we think about death. I use the word intellectually because it needs to start there if we ever hope to internalize it. We can learn a lot about ourselves from studying death. It can teach us that our bodies may physically rot in the ground, but we continue onward. It can teach us about what really matters in our own lives and forces us to take a hard look at ourselves.

It can change relationships and bring people together who have been apart for extended periods of time. Consequently, it can cause us to seek relationships and to stay close to those who we may have distanced ourselves from for whatever reason.

More importantly, if we take death seriously, it can teach us to love others around us with everything we have, while we still can. It pushes us beyond the lip service of staying close to loved ones and taking action to do so.

The secrets of death are numerous, but the brokenness it can leave us with overshadows two important ways to move forward:

Learn to grieve, then learn to love.

Death always has a way of coming out at the seams.

Naturally, I'm an extrovert and will make friends with anybody, at any place, at any time. My comfort zone is to be around people and I'm that person who makes friends with all the neighbours. After the deaths I've dealt with recently, I unknowingly retreated from society and became a reserved person. I made no effort to meet new people or even connect with those who I knew.

It was never an issue talking with others and being cordial, but I had no willingness to go beyond that point. I wasn't even consciously doing it, but

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it took a support group I unknowingly joined to help me see what happened.

The many people I've had the joy of coming across in my life all show those telltale signs of not being able to move on. Certain behaviours cannot be let go because to do so would feel like betraying that person's memory. Even having to let go of objects that person owned seems like something that cannot be done out of fear of feeling like it's the only lifeline left to their memory.

Perhaps behind it all is the fear that losing someone so close to you, who has been a big part of your life, means having to face a part of yourself you aren't willing to see. It's the part that is completely vulnerable and it feels impossible to show that to anyone else.

Yes, we must be strong and move on knowing that death is an inevitable part of life. We must march forward knowing that we're still suffering from our loss and are unwilling to share that hurt with other people. We must continue day after day with the knowledge that no one can really understand how much that person has meant to you.

But we're all doing it, even unconsciously.

Jealousy

We've been conditioned as a society.

We're led to believe that who we are is not enough and what we have is never enough. We are conditioned to always want more, seek more and be unsatisfied with what's currently in front of us.

We've also been conditioned to be the centre of the world. Who we are matters and our story is one the universe needs to hear at the expense of all others. Humility has been relegated to remaining silent and letting others point out our greatness.

To look at another person's success is to hate them because it's what we want for ourselves. There's nothing more outrageous than other people having what we want because we "deserve it more." Even worse is to be working at something for years and have someone relatively new come into your field and leapfrog ahead of you.

The idea that life should be giving you more is nonsensical. Life gives you an opportunity to be alive and to work through anything that may come your way. Somebody will always have it better than you because your definition of better is always going to be something you don't already have.

Jealousy is the epitome of succumbing to our lizard brain that doesn't allow for emotions such as compassion, empathy and love to enter into the picture. It prevents the gamut of human interaction where two people can be together in the same room and appreciate the moment they are having.

It's a sign of our brokenness and of being incomplete in our own journey. However, being willing to work on it will allow the emotion to transform you. The more you shine a light on jealousy, the more it exposes you to its silliness. You begin to laugh at it and realize its foolishness.

This is an emotion I continue to work on when its talons begin to take hold. The years spent shining a light on it in my own life has helped me to recognize when it's coming around again. It allows me to see the triggers that would lead me into its well of misery.

We can't have what's not ours, but we can seek what we need in our own life. When we've done that part, an emotion like jealousy becomes obsolete.

Comparison

It would make sense to combine this section with the jealousy one and tackle the two subjects together. They seem like a perfect pair, but in this instance, I am referring to being compared as a shadow of another person. What do I mean?

Being the child of a parent and having people place expectations on you because you're *their* child.

Being compared to a sibling who has achieved incredible milestones.

Being compared to a friend, cousin, relative, mentor, teacher or another great person in your field.

No one, it seems, wants to evaluate you on your own terms. As humans, we need points of comparison and stepping stones, otherwise we're lost. Building a foundation from nothing has never been a strong suit for most of us. It's even in the way we do our advertizing:

"Product A achieves 60% better results than Product B! Product A is awesome and Product B can be chucked into your nearest incinerator."

Let's not even get started on the ads run during political campaigns as everyone claims to be a Messiah to deliver them from the spawn of Satan who is running against them.

This section hits close to home for me and if there's anything I could say to the subject, it's this:

You are NOT the shadow of another person.

Even if we are the ones who put ourselves into the shadow of someone else, we are still not their shadow. We truly are our own person and that can take some time to let that sink in.

It's not bad to be motivated by the accomplishments of another. It may even be the reason we strived for certain dreams, but the more you try to be a replica - the more disappointed you will become. We simply were not born in the time, place or circumstances of another. Our motivations are different and that's already something that separates us.

We have to learn to let go and become our own person. Then, we will discover the best comparison we can make is to ourselves. Compare where you are now with where you were a few years ago. Whatever you feel is missing, work at it for the next few years. Keep going until you feel complete.

You will never feel the need to compare yourself to another and neither will anybody else.

You are you and not anybody else. Do things as you would.

Family

Douglas Coupland, a Canadian author, wrote a book whose title summarized it best:

“All Families are Psychotic”

In every family, there always seems to be certain archetypes: the high-achiever, the screw-up, the one with all the self-inflicted problems, the one you want to avoid, the jerkface jerk, the funny one, the ally, the serious one, the moderator, the quiet one and the smart one. I’m sure there are more and sometimes family members can take on more than one role.

We don’t get to choose our family. The only thing we get to choose is how we react to them. Unfortunately, some family members choose to react by isolating themselves completely. Some family members can be abusive. There is nothing worse than having a young person walk through my office door and tell me about an abusive situation at home. Again, we don’t get to choose.

It’s always interesting to see how easily families slip into the same habits of their childhood when they get older. The same dynamics play out and while the conversations mature, there’s something about being around your family that has you resort to the earliest years of your time together. The jokes with each other, the hang-ups and the memories they will never let you live down.

For anyone who has raised their own family, they will tell you it’s not easy. Actually, most days are like holding onto a rooted pole in the ground while a tornado tries to blow you away. Physically, families can be very different. However, they share so many similarities that when you begin to talk about yours, almost everyone can relate.

Why include this section?

Families can be a source of brokenness for many of us. Perhaps we came from a crappy family, had no idea of what it was like to have decent parents, or never felt like you were part of any family. Maybe you feel the sting of disappointment with decisions you’ve made in your life and can feel it from family members. Or maybe your family has pissed you off to the point you never want to speak with them again.

It could be any number of reasons.

Whether you were raised by a great family, or a horrible one, it’s time to recognize the family you have now should be one built on love.

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Unfortunately, love is messy. It's not a straight line or a clear path. It involves sacrifice and pain, but there's no limit to how much it can grow.

Loving your family can be easy one day and almost impossible the next. The important part is to keep loving them and hold a broader perspective than just the events of the day. Consider the years past and the *many* years ahead. As someone told me when I had my first kid:

"The days are long, but the years are short."

That's love... and that's family.

Past Mistakes

The stupid things we've done in the past always seem to creep up at the most unexpected times.

We'll suddenly lose sleep at night over something dumb we said fifteen years ago. On a long drive, we'll feel horrible about something from our childhood. We then go over every mistake we've made from childhood until now and cringe at the thought of how could be so dumb.

We do our best to exercise those thoughts out of us, but they keep coming back. There are even a few popular bloggers and writers who bleed their history with every post and they keep coming back to the painful moments. We just can't stop hemorrhaging all the mistakes we've made.

While we do hear some who claim they wouldn't change a thing about their past because it defines who they are today... that may just be a self defense mechanism. If that same person is seeking to make changes in their life, then they *are* changing and actively making choices to not make the same mistakes.

Do we need mistakes to give us that learning experience?

It doesn't matter because we're going to make them anyway. But the brokenness comes with that one question we like to utter, which causes a cascade of thoughts that lead us to question our past even more:

What if...

It can lead into a lifetime of regret if that question gets asked too often.

The recognition of past mistakes is a positive indicator. It tells us what we did was wrong and what we need to do to make better choices for the future. Yes, our past did bring us to the person we are today, but our past is not a stone that holds us down. It is a teacher that's trying to help us become better people.

We cannot change what has been done (to my knowledge), but we can acknowledge what's happening right now. The big push for mindfulness in schools, the workplace and at home, is touching upon a nerve that we're beginning to recognize: we live in the moment.

We learn from history and we plan for the future, but we live right now.

Friendship

Friends should be the most solid foundation of people in our lives.

They are people you get to choose, but they're also people that get used. It's easy to take advantage of the people we consider the most important in our lives and yet, it happens. Sometimes, friendships just drift apart and other times they shatter.

Deep, meaningful friendships are a cherished commodity that enables us to keep moving forward. Unfortunately, we've entered into a new era where dependability is not always at the forefront. Convenience has taken over and it's causing hurt to happen.

Calling a friend to spend a few minutes in conversation with them is no longer the norm. Instead, we interpret text messages and dissect every punctuation mark, word and even the timing of the reply - if one comes at all.

(Please do not expect this to be a rant against technology. I am using that example to illustrate a point.)

Some people we consider friends can actually be poisonous to our health and the longer we stay friends with them, the worse our own situation will get. It takes some serious self-reflection to move away. Upon doing so, we will discover better friends just around the corner who will have a positive impact in our lives.

Some people we think are friends turn out to be cadavers who only want to spend time with you to gain something. It could be monetary, but in most instances, it's to boost their own self-esteem.

A friendship that lasts twenty-plus years doesn't happen by accident. They happen because both people are willing to put in tremendous amounts of effort to keep it alive. Yes, it's easier to do this when we are younger and do not have the busyness of daily life to keep us from staying in touch often. That's why it's important to work hard at keeping that solid connection.

Life circumstances will also change the friends you keep and the ones who stay. Some friends will come and others will go. There's not much that can be done in those circumstances, but it's best not to get frustrated. Appreciate the time you've had, anticipate something might come around later, but don't put all your hopes into it.

The hardest part of friendship is watching the other fall into a horrible situation in which you can do nothing to help. There is nothing you can say, do or contribute to make it any easier for the person. Instead, you must be willing to do something more important:

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Tell them you still love them and then sit back.

We all hit low points in our lives. Points where we think this is the worst it's going to get and there's nobody around to see us through. It's at this point, we are blinded by our own despair that we fail to see the love and support of our friends. Remember, if they are solid friends, they will always be there.

And if you're a solid friend, so will you.

Relationships

There are a multitude of books dedicated to this subject, not to mention thousands of websites, and I even co-authored a chapter about it in a previous book. So what can possibly be said that hasn't been said already?

We know that relationships are tough. They take work and they don't always go the way a person wants. We often get blindsided by our own willingness to think it's working (or not working) that we end up sabotaging ourselves in the end. This is not to be confused with relationships that are abusive (although we can blind ourselves to that as well) where an immediate exit is needed.

The most depressing answer I've seen on this subject came from Quora.com where somebody asked what people don't know about marriages after several years. The most upvoted answer came from a person who said the relationship ends up feeling like two people who are roommates instead of partners.

Ouch.

However, here's another story that came to me from a friend who once had to emcee a wedding. He asked all those in the audience who were married for over twenty years to stand up.

He then asked them to keep standing if they've ever had a fight in their marriage.

Laughter.

Keep standing if you've had a serious fight.

They continued to stand.

Keep standing if you've had a fight that could've broken your marriage.

All of them remained standing.

We all wish there was some magical formula that we can plugin to our own situation that will make everything perfect. It's just not going to happen, but there are many things we can do to lay a strong foundation for when things get tough.

Every day, we must learn to love our partners. We must be willing to show that love and to always remember our origin story. What was it that bonded us together in the first place?

If we can always keep that in the forefront of our mind, it will help us to make better decisions about our relationships each and every day.

On the flip side, there are those who do not engage in relationships. There's a societal pressure that one must be in a relationship or something

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is wrong with that person. This is slowly beginning to dissipate, but it can cause people to ask themselves, "Is something wrong with me?"

Sometimes, the decision to avoid one was caused by a great hurt that happened in a previous relationship. Other times, it can just be skeptical about the reasons for relationships in the first place. After all, we've been inundated with the romantic comedies of the past thirty years that tell us it's happily ever after in the end. However, real life stories tell us otherwise.

Regardless of what people tell you, or what they've experienced, they don't understand your situation. To try and explain it is attempting to bypass several filters that a person has already put in front of themselves. Understand your reasons, feel confident in your decisions and walk boldly forward.

Acceptance

At some point, we want acceptance into somewhere or from somebody.

This section should've been titled "Rejection," as that would be more appropriate for the event that hurts us. However, it's the need for acceptance that leads us to the road of rejection and our continued pursuit for the time we get to hear yes. Feeling accepted goes hand in hand with feeling like you belong.

It's also a validating feeling in knowing you are "good enough" with wherever you've been accepted. It gives the strength and assurance you're doing something right with your life. Acceptance builds the barrier around the child in all of us who feels like our adult exterior is nothing more than a mask. We become a part of something and therefore, no longer need to worry.

The need for acceptance is such an ingrained part of the human condition that others have used it to manipulate others. They've created groups called "us" and preach how it's better to be part of "us" than to be a part of "them." It inherently creates an in group and an out group and in turn, has the out group create another in group and the cycle continues.

Some of us go through life looking for acceptance from just another person. If this one person can just accept you, it would give validation to your existence. We can go through turmoil trying to please just that one person and never come to a resolution. Should that person pass away, we spend the rest of our lives always feeling rejected.

Sometimes it's our work we want to be accepted - our blood, sweat and tears given over to another who will judge it. The work only means something if they are willing to accept it. In some instances, lives could be at stake if it's not (e.g. a doctor giving a life saving medication to a patient).

Rejection hurts... but being ignored is turmoil.

There is nothing more heart wrenching than becoming invisible, losing all contact with humanity. At the very least, rejection still gives you a sense of community if you are on the outskirts. Being ignored, on the other hand, elicits behaviour that we consider on the extreme ends of our personality; sides of ourselves we never thought we would see.

What are we really trying to validate in our lives?

Deep down, we are all flawed, broken human beings. We do not know what qualifies as something to be accepted or rejected any better than the next person. That's why ideas that seemingly come from nowhere take the world by storm. No algorithm can predict it and no expert can see it coming. It just happens.

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We have the illusion of safety with the people we accept, or don't accept, into our close circles. The people who are in are the people who will uphold the image we have collectively tried to portray. Yet, even those groups falter, splinter, disperse and die. They cannot see their own end.

In an age of small communities and local villages, acceptance was of prime importance for social and economic means. Today, we live in a global village where not being accepted locally doesn't need to be our stopping point. With over seven billion people on the planet, almost all connected together, we can find our tribe who will accept us. If that search becomes difficult, then we start our own.

By demanding acceptance from others, we give over our own power to them. If we dwell in any rejection we receive, we allow that group, or person, to keep that power over us. Nobody can take power over you unless you allow them.

Don't let a need for acceptance be your breaking point. Sometimes, when you're just who you are, it's all the acceptance you'll ever need.

Money

Whether you have \$1 or \$1 billion, you will never have enough.

The answer to the question, “How much money do you need?” always seems to be, “Just a little bit more.”

What’s really going on here?

Money is the mask through which everything gets funneled through. Money is the marker, the visible sign of success and yet, it’s only a tool. It pays the bills, puts food on the table and clothes us, but it can’t give us the intangible things we want: freedom, happiness, love, respect and so on.

Sure, it’d be nice for many of us to wake up and never have to worry about money and goodness knows there are enough people in the world struggling to make ends meet. Having to make the choice of whether a family eats or pays their rent is never a situation one would want to put themselves in.

Yet, money amplifies all the other conditions of our brokenness because of what it represents. It drives jealousy, can put us in the grave, causes us to compare with others, breaks apart families, hurts you because of past mistakes with it, puts rifts in friendships, causes tension in relationships and can cast you in an economic social strata of society from which you are stuck.

“If only I had a little more....”

You would still want a little more and it wouldn’t solve your problems. Having your personal self worked out is always the first step in learning how to deal with money. Money only amplifies what’s going on inside of you. If you’re bitter and resentful towards society, money amplifies it. If you’re gracious and thankful for life, money will amplify that as well.

Take care of yourself first, even if that just means eating a proper meal. If you’re in a better position in life, learn how to take care of others, even if that just means providing a proper meal to one in need.

Learn how to use money as a tool and not as a means or an end.

The rest will take care of itself.

Where to Go from Here

I find myself in a serendipitous position writing this final piece. After finishing the previous section, I looked at what I wanted to write about next and wasn't sure where to go from there. It's something that often happens to writers and time away from the work is usually a good way to bring it together.

The next day, I was with my co-chaplains on retreat and our facilitator showed us a video from the theologian, Ron Rolheisser, who summarized everything I've been writing about (almost down to the chapter headings) and speaking about the next steps. If I could implant the video into this final section (albeit slightly edited), I would and call it a day.

Instead, I'll do what I normally do, which is merge his thoughts with my own to create a synthesis of something slightly new. However, if you want to see the full video check out part two of, *Mysticism: The Heartbeat of God*.

The first part of our lives are pretty strong. We find ourselves constantly seeking pleasure and joy, finding company to have some fun. Even those of us with horrible upbringings will bury it and move on to live a more adjusted life. However, as we inch closer to our midlife (close to our forties), those wounds begin to surface and we start to marinate ourselves in them.

That's why your conversations with friends shift from gossip and fun to financial woes, life problems and health issues. Yes, it's what we're facing at the time, but we're really doing is marinating ourselves in the wounds of our past.

Now it's time to make a choice.

We can acknowledge our brokenness and grieve it, allowing ourselves to find healing in the process, or we can continue to get bitter about it. Nobody has all the answers and nobody might have a specific answer for you. That's why it's important to have a bigger story about yourself.

If you understand your story to be, "I'm broken, life sucks, people suck and nobody understands..." that's where your story is going to end. You will never get over it.

Instead, if you understand your story to be something greater - "I'm broken, others I've encountered are also broken, we share the same themes, I'm going to acknowledge it, grieve it and start to be grateful for all the good things in my life and leave this world a happy person," your story ends much better.

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It's like living the Cinderella story knowing the ending before it's happened. You know you must sit in the ash before you get to go to the ball and live happily ever after. Side note: the ash and the happily ever after are both metaphors for our own human condition and not our physical realities.

We don't know things are going to be okay.

But - if you speak to those who are ahead of you in life, you'll notice two types of people: those who accepted the first story and those who accepted the second. Both of those people could be coming from the same set of circumstances, but their outcomes are different.

We are all broken.

It's how you view life from here on out that will be your narrative.