

“Broken and Whole”
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November 29, 2009

When I was 13 years old, like everyone else in my gym class, like many of you, I was examined for scoliosis. One by one, we bent forward, and a nurse's gentle hands felt along our spines. In the middle of my exam, I remember her pausing – and going over the same place a few times, and writing something down. A mild case, she concluded. Enough to notice, enough to be interesting to a seventh grader, but not enough to wear a brace, to worry about, to correct.

Fast forward a few decades. About a year ago, I am walking outside with my gym bag, my briefcase, my lunch bucket, purse and probably something else, wearing these cute, little tottery heels, and ::krk:: I feel a pain so sharp in my lower back I gasp, I can't move, I feel nauseous. Fortunately for me, my husband Robert is home, standing right behind me. He calmly ushers me back inside, sans the ridiculous shoes, and leads me through some very gentle stretches. Emergency yoga, we now call it. A little miracle, I am unfrozen, my stomach has righted itself. I move on through my day, aware of some soreness, taking it easy. Stretching.

Since Robert teaches yoga and reads people's bodies for a living, he sees a lot more than most people would. “You have a right thorasso lumbar curve with a rotation in the spine”, he says, showing me the drawing in his book on yoga for back problems. “Dodgy back”, I call it. And I am grateful for his kind attentions. Every so often the dodgy back flares up, and I am learning what to do, besides pop Aleve, whimper on the couch, curse God and die. I am slowly learning how to befriend this condition. It's one more way I am learning to forgive this very imperfect body I have been given.

I am also learning a little bit more of what people mean when they talk about their pain. It used to be that I'd hear someone say that their back “went out” - a genteel expression for this experience, I now know, designed to make others more comfortable around them, to make people who have back issues not sound like whiners. And I'd say, “Gee, I'm very sorry.” Now, after more intimate acquaintance with back pain, I'm likely to say something more like, “Oh my GOD, I'm so SORRY!!!” Though I'm not sure this is any more helpful to you than the first response. And strange, but I notice that it's everywhere. Ads for back pain treatments of different varieties have sprung up all over, like daffodils in March.

We truly don't get something like this until it happens to us. Health educator

Andrew Weil points out that we tend to think of ourselves as either sick or well, broken or whole, with a thick, bright line between the two states. We so much want to believe ourselves to be on the “well” or “whole” side of the line, that we will do our best to ignore what our bodies may be telling us. I may have felt some stiffness now and then, but I have had scoliosis for decades, maybe my whole life. I just forgot. It took years of aging and incremental increases until the condition finally got my attention. We really don't like to think of ourselves as being broken, and yet we are. There are broken places in all of us. We just forget.

One reason we forget because we live in our heads and not our bodies. D.H. Lawrence described one of his characters this way: “Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.” Do you feel this way? I do. I've always thought of my body as a handy device to carry my head from place to place. It's so much safer up here. None of those cr-razy “feelings” to have to deal with. After so much education, learning our jobs, figuring out how to manage our households and families, and get everything DONE, we are lodged pretty firmly up in our heads and it takes a long time to travel downward.

Here's what I think, though. I think that our body is where our real life happens. Our body is our real life, and our head is just our *idea* about our life. And our body tells us that we are both broken and whole. Both at the same time. It's not that we go from one state to another, though I will acknowledge that there are thresholds we cross where our awareness of the broken parts, or our awareness of feeling whole, make us think in more absolute terms. But both states are there, and both states are valuable to us.

Matthew Sanford, the young paraplegic man whose story we heard as our modern reading, has the gift of seeing both. I was deeply moved by his story, and hardly able to comprehend how he could be paralyzed from the chest down, and yet could practice yoga – and teach yoga to people who could move fully. A few years after his accident, he was introduced to a man who was a paraplegic, but had become a race car driver. He was meant to inspire young Matthew and to motivate him to overcome his limitations. This race car driver had literally muscled his way to functioning in the world, developing a body-builder's upper torso and arm strength. But there was something hard about him that bothered Matthew. He was, to a sensitive teenager, strangely distant from his heart, from the feelings of grief and the kind of silence and darkness that Sanford says dwell in a paralyzed body. Through some personal grace, he could sense that this man's actions, as the poet Rumi would say, did not come from his soul.” And Matthew Sanford rejected his message.

“My [rehab team] made a mistake,” he writes, “by focusing on the absence of light. [They] taught me to willfully strike out against the darkness. [They] told me to

move faster rather than slower, push harder rather than softer... My arms and my wheels, fueled by a compensating will, [they said,] were to carry me through my life. My efforts would aim to prove that the room's darkness didn't matter at all. I would overcome it and become as effective as if the light were still on.

“But what if I really wanted to be whole? If I wanted to work *with* the darkness rather than against it? What if the darkness is a fundamental part of us? How do we *overcome* an essential part of who we are?” (*Waking*, by Matthew Sanford)

Not only does a paralyzed body contain some darkness, he says, but all of our bodies do. They are like darkened rooms in a house. They come through traumas, and they come through illness, and they come, simply through age. They simply come. We know about them. We just forget. Befriending these broken parts, being willing to sit in these darkened rooms, accepting them as part of us, is essential to being whole.

A chronic condition is a tremendous teacher. But it is a teacher we will do most anything to avoid. Those of us who experience addiction also know this. I've spoken before about my eating disorder and about my 12 step work. Until we accept the teacher - “Step one – admitted we were powerless over [whatever] and that our lives had become unmanageable” - unless we accept this part of ourselves, we can do nothing about it. Thinking that we are going to eradicate the problem, to somehow become “fixed”, is not the same as accepting it. Doesn't mean we have to like it. Probably not possible to like it. But befriending it - accepting it and learning from it, are possible. My scoliosis is a pretty easy friend to have at this point. My episodes are mild compared to a lot of folks, and brief. But with age it will probably worsen. And I will need, as so many of you have found you need, a lot of courage to befriend the body.

Matthew Sanford's path took him to a yoga teacher, a very spiritual woman who found working with someone like him not a frightening thing, but an honor. She taught him some things, and she urged him to teach himself, based on the signals his body gave him. There is no miracle cure here, his spine never became whole. But he did. And through accepting himself as broken, and through practice, he could find strange and remarkable connections that he had been told were not possible. Through her acceptance and friendship, he could accept and befriend the dark places and live there as well as in the bright ones. And he could accept and befriend others' struggles as well.

There is something frightening about disability for a lot of us, about seeing people with chronic conditions that are not going to get “better”. We don't want to acknowledge the chair, or the dark glasses, or the loss of memory. We want to act as if nothing is different. Why make someone feel self-conscious, we think. And sometimes that's exactly the way someone wishes to be treated. But we often do this to protect

ourselves, to deny the broken places in ourselves. To not have to face the vulnerability of our own bodies. To avoid thinking, let's be honest, that we will die. And it makes everyone awfully lonely.

I once visited a worship service in a United Church of Christ congregation led by a friend of mine. As a Unitarian Universalist Christian, I found her liberal expression of Christianity very compatible with mine. But there was a lot of confession in this service, I thought. That's where I got stuck. It seemed so gloomy. And when I pointed this out to her, she said something I didn't expect. "I think of it as admitting to our brokenness," she said, "something we have a very hard time doing." The prayers were written in the order of service, and I looked at them again. They were not about being terrible, awful people, but about being lonely, afraid, guilty, and broken, which we all are, at some time. And, she said, "I encourage everyone to say the words every week, whether they feel that way or not. That way, the people who DO feel lonely, afraid, guilty or broken - aren't alone in saying them."

Now in case you're worried that I'm about to add in some prayers of confession to our weekly worship, you can relax. It's not our tradition. It wouldn't, as they say, "play" here. We have to find our own way, though, our own way to acknowledge that we, like everybody else, have been broken. It may be in a journal, it may be with a trusted friend, a therapist or a minister. It may be silently, in prayer to God. But somehow we must do it, in a way that tells us we are held in love, that we are not alone in feeling that way. Perhaps, some weeks, when we say the prayers for the people, you could slip in your own name. And every week, when I end our prayer with "those names that are not spoken", know that I am including people sitting in our sanctuary. All the people sitting in the sanctuary.

It's only in accepting ourselves and the the pain that goes along with this human existence that we can be truly and wholly alive. Ironically, it's only through accepting our brokenness that we can come to any kind of wholeness. It's often through our brokenness that we discover the soul. We find that there is something essential in each of us that is connected to everything else. Rumi says, "There is a moving palace that floats in the air with balconies and clear water flowing through. There is a river moving in you, a joy." Amen.