

“Beauty in the Broken”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading

“[Good Bones](#)” by Maggie Smith

“I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
...chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.”

Sermon

I don't consider myself much of an artist.

And so, I sat with some trepidation but also excitement in an afternoon art class several years ago.

The technique we would be learning was mosaics.

We were each given a small wooden board, about 6 by 8 inches, on which to create our mosaic.

Laid out in front of us were the supplies we would need - broken pieces of tile and glass, small rocks, and some grout and glue to hold it all together.

What I created was pretty abstract and influenced by the colors and landscapes of the southwest as I was living in New Mexico at the time.

As my piece came together, I was struck by how each of those broken pieces could be brought together to make something genuinely beautiful.

We are perpetually dealing with the flaws, the cracks, the brokenness of life.

We know well our own imperfections and the imperfections of others.

Our quickness to anger or difficulty forgiving.

Our fragility with criticism.

Our prejudices.

We also know well our woundedness.

The ways that we have been wronged, harmed, let down.
Our brokenness can often be a reality we may try to shield from ourselves, or to shield from others. (Maggie Smith speaks of this in her poem - she's trying to sell her children the world, as terrible as it is.)
Yet, that brokenness is still there.

The news of our day attests to the fact that these are broken, desperate times we are living in.
They are desperate for the woman and child separated at the border - mother taken into custody by Homeland Security and child placed in a shelter or a federally contracted foster home.
These times are desperate for the homeless family living in their car, both parents working but still not making enough to pay for permanent and stable housing.
These times are desperate for our children who now must learn a curriculum of survival in case of gunfire in the halls and classrooms of their schools.

Maggie Smith's "tongue-in-cheek" poem speaks a painful truth.
Sometimes, the world can seem like a real "shithole" - to directly quote from her poem.
There is so much that is terrible. Unimaginable. Heart-wrenching.

"How can we do these things to one another?" we ask.
"How can this much destruction exist?"

In these times, we are also desperate for the beauty that will endure the brokenness.
We are desperate to take the broken pieces of our lives and to meld them back together into a transformed wholeness.

And, so we are, perpetually trying to find ways to accept our flaws, to bear life's imperfections, to mend what is broken.

Sometimes, when things seem broken beyond repair, we need to create beauty.

This has been the life work of Lily Yeh.¹
Lily immigrated to the United States in the 1960s to study art at the University of Pennsylvania. She was born and raised in China, the daughter of a general in the

¹ [The Barefoot Artist](https://www.barefootartistfilm.com/), <https://www.barefootartistfilm.com/>

Nationalist army during World War II. When the Communist Party took over, her family had to move around to avoid persecution and eventually ended up in Taiwan. After she emigrated to the United States, she experienced some false starts, both with her professional life and also in her personal life. She had begun her career as an artist but was not completely fulfilled. In 1986, Lily was asked by a friend of hers, Arthur Hall, who was living and working in North Philadelphia to help create a park in the abandoned lot next to his dance studio.

Here, Lily, says, she began to find her voice.

“Broken places are my canvasses. People’s stories are my pigments. And, people’s talents and imagination are the instruments.”

Lily dedicated 18 years to creating and leading the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia along with other artists and community members. She engaged local residents of all ages in infusing the neighborhood with colorful murals, whimsical mosaics, and community spaces. She helped to find the materials and tools they would need - shovels, brushes, paints, tiles, cement, salvaged building materials. And, then she gave them the space to create beauty in what might have seemed like barrenness and devastation.

Lily began to receive invitations to share her artistic vision of healing and community engagement to war-torn places all around the world. In 2004, Lily visited the Genocide Survivors Village in the Rugerero region of Rwanda. She saw there the mass grave that had been constructed for the remains of those murdered in the 1994 genocide. It was primarily a concrete slab over a pit in the ground covered by a plastic roof. The community asked her to help them create a memorial site which would include a proper chamber for the bones of their loved ones.

She says this of beauty: “Beauty is intimately engaged with darkness, with chaos, with destruction. You need to walk into the darkness and hold it in your arms.”²

And, so Lily entered this community walking into the darkness, opening up her arms. She worked alongside the members of the community - survivors of unimaginable violence and loss - to grieve and to memorialize their dead.

² The Barefoot Artist Official Trailer - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CKIAE-Fwx0>

The entire surface of the memorial needed to be tiled to keep it dry. And, so, people came to hammer the tiles into broken pieces and then to use those broken pieces to create the walls and floor of the memorial. In working together with the broken tiles, piece by piece, the community began to heal and to transform their suffering.³

All throughout these artistic endeavors, Lily was not only motivated by a desire to witness to and transform the brokenness she encountered in other people's lives. She was also motivated all along by a need to heal her own brokenness.

While Lily was raised with the unconditional love of her father, she learned of a long-held regret and deep sadness of his. Later in life, Lily says that his heart "went grey."

This sadness was rooted in part in the contradictions between her father's nature and his vocation as an army general. According to Lily, her father was an unlikely figure to be a general. His loving nature towards the soldiers in his command earned him the nickname "Grandma Yeh." So, her father had a warm, compassionate heart that was not entirely suited to war.

Another part of his story is that at a young age, he had been set up in an arranged marriage. With this first wife, he had three children. But, as he rose in the ranks of the army, he began to meet people in the upper echelons of society and fell in love with a young woman of a much more advantaged class. He divorced his first wife and started a new life with this young woman, who would become Lily's mother.

Lily learned from her father's diary that this abandonment of his first family stayed with him as a source of deep pain.

She says: "I came from a broken place. Life breaks all of us."

Lily documents the process of searching for the family of her father's first marriage - her half-siblings and other relatives. Together, they told stories about their father and traveled to sites throughout China of significance to the early part of his life.

It was through encountering this deep place of sorrow in her own life and salvaging the joy that could be found in connection that Lily was able to offer herself as an artist that could help others in encountering their own places of deep sorrow and salvage the beauty of life that persists.

³ <http://barefootartists.org/the-rwanda-healing-project/genocide-memorial-park/>

The lifelong knot in her heart became untied. The wound of her past, finally dressed, began to heal.

Lily Yeh's story has much to teach us.

The beauty that has been created in her community projects whether in Rwanda, China, or North Philadelphia has been born from places of pain and struggle.

This beauty has emerged from facing the truth about death, abandonment, and despair. And also the truth about survival, resistance, and the strength of the human spirit. Beauty emerges out of this collective process of choosing to witness and to create.

Lily was only able to fully realize her calling as she sought to reconcile the broken places in her own life, as she faced the truth of the seed of deep pain that had been buried for so long.

Our own capacity to appreciate and create beauty must start with our willingness to witness to the brokenness in our lives.

There is certainly plenty of brokenness out there to contend with, but we have to start with our own cracks. Those places where we are feeling pain, discontent, hurt, neglect. These cracked places are the points at which we can connect with others and that our edges can come together if we are willing to name them for that they are, if we are willing to own our own pain and brokenness.

Another thing that strikes me from Lily Yeh's story is how long she carried the weight of her father's sadness and heartache.

And also how long the people in the village in Rugerero, Rwanda lived with the bones of their loved ones buried beneath a concrete slab and plastic roof.

Just enduring such pain can add to the original source of suffering.

And, yet when that pain is brought into the light, as it is allowed to breathe and have life, that pain can transform.

In her poem, Maggie Smith writes: "Any decent realtor...chirps on about good bones: This place could be beautiful, right? You could make this place beautiful."

I believe that our task is to be the people that make this place beautiful.

To be the people who can see all that is terrible and who still live with the faithfulness that beauty endures and that our agency and creativity can be used to generate beauty.

Here's another story of bringing beauty to the broken.

It's the story of an organization called "Radical Joy in Hard Times" which was founded by Trebbe Johnson in the early 2000s.⁴

It began with a conversation she had with David Powless, an Oneida man and an engineer who had received a National Science Foundation grant to recycle steel waste. He told her how he had gone to a place in California where there was an enormous mound of discarded steel. He climbed on top with his buckets to get samples, and when he reached the top he said, "I will conquer you!" But then he realized that was the wrong approach. The steel scrap was orphaned from the circle of life and his job wasn't to conquer it but to bring it back into the circle of life.

This struck a chord with Johnson.

Radical Joy for Hard Times was born out of a desire to give back to the world we love that has become broken or wounded. To give back our attention, compassion, and beauty.

The community that is Radical Joy for Hard Times developed a ritual called Earth Exchange.

This is a five step process.

The first step is to go to a wounded place. A place that has been neglected or polluted - a place whose natural beauty has been broken in some way.

Then, ritual calls for sharing stories of what this place means to you and getting to know the place as it is now.

You're then to share with others what you discovered.

And, finally, to make a simple gift of beauty.

Leaves and flowers petals in the shape of a bird or any other symbol made from what is found in that place.

Johnson likens this work to the work of the Norns, the three women who stand at the Well of Destiny in the upper level of the Norse World Tree.

They weave the fate of humanity, and they also constantly tend to the tree even though it is under constant attack.

Like the Norns, Johnson says, we can't prevent all the brokenness in the world, but we can engage in repairing acts of creativity and beauty.

⁴ <http://www.dailygood.org/story/476/radical-joy-for-hard-times-richard-whittaker/>

These repairing acts, these acts of mending are themselves acts of beauty.

We repair what is broken when we share our deep heartache with another and ask them to witness to our pain.

We mend what is broken when we offer compassion and presence to the hurt of another.

We repair the cracks of our heart when we serve others with our open hands and our willing spirits, when we resist the destruction and devastation enacted by forces of power.

As we mend, we bear witness to the beauty that survives even the most devastating of circumstances.

We hold the truth of our brokenness while also seeing that this house has good bones.

We hold the truth that, yes, we can still make this place beautiful.

So may it be.