

A Unitarian Universalist View of Brokenness (As published in the March 16, 2013 St. Catharines Standard)

*For today's column, I'm pleased to submit a presentation by James Glassford, a member of the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara and frequent leader of our study group "**Building your own Theology**".*

Today our world and all the awful happenings in it appear to many of us as a broken world. What with violent changes in our weather patterns resulting in human deaths and financial disasters, terrorist acts of murder and mayhem, wars, ethnic cleansing, the murders of innocent children and their teachers, our world is far from being Utopia.

As Unitarian Universalists (UUs), our first response to brokenness is often to try to fix it. We are people who believe in solutions. We think that if we work hard enough, think creatively enough, band together with enough well meaning people, we can heal this broken world, but we are also keenly aware that not all broken things can be fixed.

One of the important things our faith teaches us is to use our minds because we believe in rationality and science and to have faith in people. We analyze and try to see what we can do. UUs are also realists and will accept what has happened without issuing blame on supernatural causes. We try to see, try to find some good about the brokenness and any possible effects that can be brought about from this brokenness.

When UUs are talking about brokenness in people, we allow the brokenness to be seen in new ways when we accept that others are not perfect but we love them anyway, and when we cease to view brokenness as ugly and unacceptable, healing becomes possible. UUs have found that stories and myths are important teaching tools. Let me give one example of a story that teaches us another way of looking at brokenness.

An elderly woman had to haul water to her home from the stream down the hill. Every day she would take up two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which was carried across her neck. But one of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was perfectly whole. So each time the woman trudged up the hill from the stream to her house the perfect pot delivered a full portion of water, but the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water. Of course the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection and felt miserable that it could only do half of what it had been created to do. Finally, the cracked pot spoke to the woman by the stream, "I am so sorry that I have failed you all this time."

The old woman smiled, "Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path but not on the other pot's side? Every day as I walk up the hill, the water that dribbles through your crack nourishes the wildflowers along the way. Perhaps you are flawed as a water jug but you are a perfect watering can, and because of you I am able to enjoy all these beautiful flowers on my daily walk to and from the stream."

What we all need to be is not flawless, but rather carried by a love that recognizes how our flaws can be part of a larger wholeness. Our Universalist heritage guides us toward an understanding of God or Spirit as a kind of Love that can find the wholeness in our cracked selves. Our humanist and Unitarian heritage points us toward an understanding of community as a place where we create a wholeness that is greater than any one member of the group. Although UUs hold many different views of life, we share a belief that our differences are gifts not failings. Francis David said back in the 1500s

that “We need not think alike to love alike.” Modern day UUs are likely to add that we also need not look alike, sound alike, have the same abilities or the same backgrounds in order to love alike.

James Glassford
Unitarian Congregation of Niagara