

## To Love the Broken World

February 12, 2017

### Readings

#### **The Thing Is**, by Ellen Bass

to love life, to love it even  
when you have no stomach for it  
and everything you've held dear  
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,  
your throat filled with the silt of it.  
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat  
thickening the air, heavy as water  
more fit for gills than lungs;  
when grief weights you like your own flesh  
only more of it, an obesity of grief,  
you think, How can a body withstand this?  
Then you hold life like a face  
between your palms, a plain face,  
no charming smile, no violet eyes,  
and you say yes, I will take you  
I will love you, again.

## **Good Bones**, by Maggie Smith

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.  
Life is short, and I've shortened mine  
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,  
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways  
I'll keep from my children. The world is at least  
fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative  
estimate, though I keep this from my children.  
For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.  
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,  
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world  
is at least half terrible, and for every kind  
stranger, there is one who would break you,  
though I keep this from my children. I am trying  
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,  
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on  
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,  
right? You could make this place beautiful.

## Sermon: To Love the Broken World

Allison Claire

To live in a broken world, with a heart that is open and engaged, is to have your heart broken. There is no avoiding it.

The world *is* broken. Human beings have broken it. We have broken the bonds of our common humanity. We have broken the social fabric. We have broken our connections to the interdependent web of life. The natural world, unlike the human world, is not intrinsically broken; it's inherently connected — but human beings are breaking that, too. And if we let ourselves look at what we've done, let ourselves really see and feel it, we experience the brokenness in our own hearts.

The poem Good Bones was written last summer. It was published in the online literary journal Waxwing, which happened to come out three days after a gunman killed 49 people at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. A reader, who was moved by the poem in light of the shooting, posted a screenshot of the text on Facebook, and it went viral. By August the poem was being promoted by celebrities, and had been viewed close to a million times. It has since been interpreted by a dance troupe in India, turned into a musical score for the voice and harp, and been translated into more than a dozen languages, including Spanish, Italian, French, Korean, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam.

Since last summer, readership of Good Bones has fluctuated with world events. There were spikes in online views, and in re-postings of the poem on social media, following other acts of violence, and there was a big surge after the presidential election. And this wasn't the only poem to blaze across the inter-web

as our country turned in a new and, to many, frightening direction. According to the Academy of American Poets, the works most shared online during November 10 and 11, 2016, included Good Bones, Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," and W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939." What drew so many to share these poems, in particular?

These are not comforting poems. At least not in any immediate or easy way. In each of them, and in the Ellen Bass poem that Megan read, the poet looks directly into the brokenness of the world or the magnitude of her own broken-heartedness. These poets do not try to make *sense* of brokenness, as if that might make the pain manageable. They don't rush to fix it, or put a different spin on it to make it seem less horrific and more tolerable. They do not avert their gaze, or try to focus on something beautiful instead, as if positive thinking could change how terrible — "at least half terrible," in Maggie Smith's words — the world is. No, these poets look right at the brokenness humans have created, acknowledge it, *feel* it, and choose *in the face of it* . . . to love.

Wow.

Ellen Bass confronts the magnitude of her grief for the world, asks "How can a body withstand this?" — a question that the poem never directly answers — and then in the very next line, even so, takes life tenderly between her palms like a face, and says "yes, I will take you. I will love you, again." Maggie Smith opens herself to the literal truth of violence, the broken bodies of birds and children, and still wants to raise *her* children to love the world. W.H. Auden confronted the rise of fascism in Europe and said — not just "we must resist," although resistance was also necessary — but, "We must love one another or die." In times of crisis

and fear, people to turn to poems like these that tell hard truths rather than offering quick comfort. We are drawn to voices that challenge us to neither turn away from terrible truths nor to close our hearts.

But how to love, with these broken hearts of ours? And how to love a world that is so broken?

Maggie Smith hints at one strategy, by inviting us to see the world as a house in need of an Extreme Home Makeover — the fixer-upper with Good Bones. If the house, even a real dump, is well-framed and has a solid foundation, it ***could be made beautiful***. When I first read this poem, that image struck me because I had recently been using the same metaphor in my own inner work. In the aftermath of brokenness in my personal life, including the end of a marriage, I had undertaken the hard work of sorting through the wreckage so that I could rebuild. So I imagined my life as a house, with some broken windows and warped floor boards, and lots of dry rot that had been hidden under a coat of paint, but with good bones. Structurally sound, that is. Worth saving and making strong — making beautiful.

Before rebuilding came the sorting, looking at my own character traits, behaviors, and habitual thought patterns, and figuring out which of them needed to be thrown on the scrap heap, which were salvageable or could be re-purposed, and which were treasures to be recovered. Broken glass, cracked brick, rotten boards over there, but a solid door, a lovely bit of stained glass, intact cabinetry over here. Next I needed to review the old floor plan, see if any boundaries needed resetting, so to speak. (There were a few!) Most importantly, before beginning the process of rebuilding, I had to specifically identify and name the

good bones of my house, claim them as my framework for re-construction. I took time to reflect deeply on the questions: What is my foundation? What are the central timbers, the weight bearing walls of my own life?

Maggie Smith's poem challenged me to ask the same questions about the world: what are the good bones here, that suggest we might yet make this dump beautiful — or at least inhabitable? Here's my partial list, which I offer in the spirit of brainstorming:

Facts about the World that suggest we could make this thing work:

- The light always returns. (Think about it. The light. *A/ways*. Returns.)
- Evolution continues. No matter what we do.
- Stars are born.
- Babies are born.
- Human beings see in color! And the world is full of colors!
- Human beings, throughout history and in every culture, make music. Music and poetry exist, and persist.
- There arises in each human generation a passion for justice — and it is contagious.

- Movements for freedom and for justice do not always succeed, but they always reemerge. The human longing for justice cannot, apparently, be extinguished.
- Throughout human history, and in every culture, people seek connection and community, even – especially – in the most adverse circumstances. In good times and in times of crisis, people come together in churches and fellowships, mosques and synagogues, sanghas, sweat lodges, community centers. The Dream of Beloved Community arises, and persists.
- Prophetic voices emerge in every generation, calling upon us to face the truth even when it is not beautiful. As Nadine Gordimer has written, the truth is not always beautiful, but the hunger for it is. And that hunger cannot, it appears, be extinguished.

These are things I can love about the world, things which can get me out of bed in the morning. And the thing is, the important thing is, *none of these wondrous truths about the world are cancelled out by the fifty percent that's terrible*. Now I don't know whether the world is more or less than half terrible, as if that could be quantified — and thank goodness, this is *not* math. The ugliness and the beauty of the world aren't positive and negative numbers that cancel each other out. The brokenness is real -- and our truth and justice-seeking instincts are real, planet Earth's forces of creation are real. We are called to live in the full knowledge that all of it is true. And when I look at the stars, or at the plant growing up through the concrete, or the faces of the people gathered to speak truth to power, I think: *We could* make this world of ours beautiful.

There are of course significant differences between identifying the brokenness and the Good Bones of my personal life and those of the wider world. When I'm putting my own personal house in order, a lot of what belongs on the scrap heap is within my control. My own behaviors, my habitual reactions and thoughts, these I can mark for demolition if they don't serve me — or at least schedule for regular preventative maintenance. But when I look at the brokenness of the world — the violence and the fear, the inequality and the abuses of power — much of it is not within my control, at least not directly. And the brokenness is so deep, so vast — and I am so small, my heart so fragile.

The poets look right at it — but there are days I can't bear to. Is that true for you too? There are days when I need to cradle my broken heart and just rock in a dark corner. And that's OK, sometimes that is absolutely necessary. Self-care is crucial if I am going to keep trying to love the world, and I am the one responsible for tending to my own broken heart. Just as you are the one responsible for tending to your broken heart. No one else will do it for you.

There are many ways I tend to my heart: walks by the river or in the woods, meditation, singing, coming here to be with you on Sunday mornings. Soon UUSS will launch a Resilience Circle to offer yet another way.

But here's the thing: I do not have to wait until my heart is entirely mended to re-engage with the world, and take up the work of making it whole. Just like injured bodies need physical therapy rather than permanent immobility to heal, hearts need to keep loving in order to heal. My responsibility to myself, and to the world, is to hold the pieces of my own broken heart with tremendous care and tenderness, to protect it on days when it needs a break, but then to return to face



the world, and to love as best I can, even when that is imperfectly, and even when it hurts.

I cannot do this alone. I am too small, and it is too hard. But I can do it with all of you. I need to keep looking up at the stars, to be reminded that there are powers of creation beyond the reach of human destruction. I need to keep reading poetry and listening to music, to be reminded of all that is magnificent in the human spirit. And I need to take my place in the choir, both literally and figuratively. Standing with you, I really can be like the tree planted by the water, able to withstand the winds of affliction. Walking with you, even if we don't really know where we are going or how we will get there, I know that we will arrive where we need to be. Joining with you to welcome refugees, feed and house the homeless, work for racial and economic justice, I experience yet again that not only is love the best fuel for action (it's a lot more sustainable and less toxic than anger!), but that action is *a way to love the world*. Whether we are talking about interpersonal relationships or our relationship to the world, love isn't just a feeling. It's about how we choose to act. And we love the world, in the words of one of my favorite hymns, by working to transform it by our care.

The poet said: "You could make this place beautiful." I say, "*We* could make this place beautiful." *We*. Could make ***this place***. Beautiful. Maybe not forever rid of all that is terrible, but beautiful nonetheless — beautiful because beloved.

Blessed be.