

Broken

Have you ever come to a place in your life where everything is broken? Not only that, but broken by you? Where you have said and done things that have caused so much hurt that a relationship is beyond repair? Or you've made mistakes or lived in ways that caused great suffering, and you didn't even know it? And then when you found out, you felt so much shame and despair that you didn't know how you could go on?

When I was very young I married an also very young man who seemed like home to me. Everything about him felt familiar and comfortable. I thought we would be happy forever. But we weren't. After about six months he suddenly became miserable, which made me miserable. So did I seek counseling? No. Did we try to get help? No. Not right away. What I did, after about six years and two beautiful children, was fall in love with someone else. Do you think that helped anything?

No, it did not. And after that extremely short and excruciatingly painful love affair ended, everything was broken. Shards of trust, of love, of hope lay everywhere, so that every step caused terrible wounds. I could not see how to leave the marriage and I could not see how to stay in it, so finally I did seek counseling.

Little by little, insights began to emerge. My children's father was addicted to alcohol. He lived with severe depression. He was abusive, because he knew no other way to be. The reason he had seemed like home to me was because that was exactly how my father was. I was codependent. The fact that I was unhappy in my marriage was actually a sign of health. If I wanted to pursue real health, I had to get treatment. I had to do things differently.

I started a 12-step program for codependence. Anyone who has done 12-step work knows that recovery depends on openly acknowledging we have a problem. We do a fearless and searching moral inventory of ourselves. We tell at least one other person all the harm we have done. We make amends where possible, and we commit to continuous growth and learning from our mistakes.

I also went looking for a church. I was filled with spiritual longing and I needed to be with others in community. But—I was also so filled with shame and guilt that I could not imagine a church that would accept me. I had gone to a Catholic high school where I had been taught the doctrine of original sin, which meant I believed as a teen that I was inherently bad, rotten at the center. The way to get clean was to be like Jesus: suffer and forgive, suffer and forgive. While I had rejected the church and that doctrine as a young adult, the pattern was so deeply inscribed in my soul that I continued to live it in my marriage. I did not know if there was any church where I could become healthy.

This was the situation when I walked into a Unitarian Universalist church for the first time. I felt utterly broken. I went inside and sat down in the back. Then, I picked up a hymnal, read the seven principles, and began to weep.

I knew exactly what that first principle meant. This was a religion that said even I had worth and dignity. I knew I was home.

At first, each Sunday I sat in the back and cried. Then I started participating around the edges. Finally, I joined a women's group, in which we told each other our real stories. When it was my turn, I hesitated, but other women had shared deeply and their stories were riveting. Every single one of those women had at some point in her life done something she deeply regretted. But no one had been judged; no one had been rejected.

So I told my truth. And instead of turning away from me in disgust, the women leaned in and listened, murmuring softly, patting my arm when I cried, nodding in recognition of what they heard. It was the first place I had ever been where I could be my whole real self and be truly loved. My community looked into my face and saw who I really was. They saw the light in me, and reflected it back tenfold.

As they did, I began to heal. I thought I would even be able to stay in my marriage and make it work. But there came a time when life with my children's father became too frightening, and I had to leave. I was broken again. Again there were shards everywhere, and this time my children were in pieces, too.

But here my 12-step work and my religious life came together. As I did my moral inventory, I realized that I was a perfectionist, and that this was not a good thing. Perfectionism is part of being codependent. A codependent child grows up believing that in order to be loved, she or he must be perfect. I had been trying to stay in an unhealthy marriage because I could not bear failure. I had been hiding the truth about my marriage from my family because I could not bear for them to know I had made a mistake.

But now, because I was held in the loving care of my religious community, I could let go of that. Because I was sharing deeply with other women and seeing the truth of their lives, I was beginning to understand that there is no such thing as perfect. There is no perfect marriage, no perfect love, no perfect children, no perfect friendship, not even a perfect church or a perfect sermon! There is no such thing as perfect. What a relief it was to figure that out! Because it meant that I did not have to be afraid anymore.

I did not have to fear that if I wasn't perfect, I would not be loved.

Once I saw that, I was able to start putting the pieces of my life and my heart together in a whole new shape. With scars, with fault lines, with some pieces missing, but also with new pieces from my community. My heart was larger, less brittle, more resilient. And the thing is, I am not the only woman in my group who needed this kind of help. All of us have gone through something—or done something—awful and needed each other to get through it. Because that's the way life is; all of us get broken in one way or another. All of us. As Reverend William Sloane Coffin once said, "I'm not ok, you're not ok, and that's ok!"

But our brokenness is not a permanent state unless we choose to keep it so. As 12-step programs and most religions in the world understand, being able to admit that sometimes we

miss the mark and cause harm is absolutely essential for our health and for the health of our communities. It is how we begin the process of healing. If there is enough love in our communities, we can make mistakes and feel badly and learn from them and make restitution and seek forgiveness—and then change and grow into a new state of wholeness.

This is in the work of religious community. This is what it requires of us: that we bring our whole imperfect selves to it. That we be willing to tell the truth about how we are broken. That we be willing to repair what we damage. That we be willing to forgive and be forgiven. That we be open to transformation. All of it is messy, imperfect, and absolutely beautiful.



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Before becoming a minister, Rev. Leisa Huyck was an ecologist who worked in sustainable agriculture research and education for 20 years. She is called to help bring about the spiritual transformation our culture needs in order to live on our beautiful, blue-green planet sustainably, with love and justice for all.

Rev. Leisa attended Starr King School for the Ministry and has served congregations in Portland, Oregon and Traverse City, MI. She is now developing an entrepreneurial community ministry in Grass Valley, CA. Its mission is to heal the interdependent web of all being at every level, from individual hearts, to relationships within families and communities, to society's relationship with the whole community of life.