

Patching Chindis: *On Brokenness*

Beacon UU Congregation

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Sudha Vishwakarma sits behind her sewing machine at the Umang Training Center in Mumbai, India. Umang works with local women like Sudha who are not able to find dignified jobs elsewhere and typically find themselves in poverty, forced marriages, or both.

Most women have no sewing skills when they join Umang and begin by learning basic techniques on motorized machines. The training center is sponsored by the Marketplace Cooperative, which has developed a chindi scrap collection system to use fabric that would otherwise be wasted.

Sudha's goal is to be an excellent tailor, but in her words, "I need time." She practices by patching chindis so that she may master sewing a straight line and move on to more complex projects.

These more complex projects include the very lovely clothing that Marketplace sells in the US through their catalog. Yet, as much as I was taken by the clothes, it was the women profiled in the catalog who compelled and touched me.

Sudha's co-worker, Chinti Devi, for instance, tells her story of poverty and worry before her training. She says, "I identify with the value of joy. I am just learning to smile again." Hasini Ansari, now a manager, beams with pride that her son will go to dental school. Not that long ago, she was dependent on her husband, a taxi driver, who became ill. Marketplace has given her confidence, hope, and a new identity.

Although I do look for sermon material just about everywhere, I believe this is the first time I've been inspired by a clothing catalog. Yet, when I read these stories, I knew there was something to say about brokenness, how we patch together the chindis of our lives when we are torn, and how we might learn to courageously sew as straight a line as possible in the healing journey.

As I began my research for this sermon, I started with the word "Chindi" itself and hit the jackpot.

I learned that in Navajo culture, a "Chindi" is a feared figure - a "ghost," something "left over." I'd argue that the wound of becoming broken could live in us like a ghost. That remnant or scrap is something we can stitch into our lives or it can remain something we fear.

As we've already discovered, Chindi in the Hindi language is literally a scrap - of fabric or paper...so, in the same vein...a ghost of something that was once whole and is now fragmented or broken.

In the West, we preference wholeness and perfection and positive psychology over the wisdom of embracing, or minimally, *acknowledging* our

brokenness and shadow. We may despise our brokenness and avoid its intense pathos and pain. We might be bewildered by how to hold our torn pieces tenderly and feel empathy for our human frailty.

The skills for this type of self-compassion are sorely thin in our culture. Pain is drenched in alcohol and drugs or sugar or distractions or projections or blame or avoidance or the pain becomes internalized as self-loathing and even, physical disease. Fear is to be shunned rather than befriended. I believe this, among other things, is why we are in such a mess right now in our wounded world. Brokenness has been converted to bitterness and our fear has become toxic.

If we look to the East, we find a different attitude. In Buddhism, the first Noble truth reminds us that suffering (or dukkha) is inherent in the human condition, and grasping at some other reality is what leads to even more suffering.

The great Buddhist teacher, Joan Halifax Roshi, tells the story of two friends in her new book, “Standing at the Edge – Finding Freedom Where Fear and Courage Meet.” One of the friends was a skillful psychologist, who had caved into futility after years of practice. He had become overwhelmed by his patient’s experiences of suffering and was, in his words, “dried up” and felt like he was flat and grey inside.”

Halifax explains that his story exemplifies the negative outcomes of the combination of what she calls “the Edge States;” ‘what happens when altruism goes toxic, empathy leads to empathic distress, respect collapses under the weight of futility and engagement leads to burnout. Suffering had crept up on the man and his compassion for himself and others had begun to die.’”

Halifax’s other friend, a young Nepali woman named Pasang Lhama Sherpa Akita, took another route, literally and metaphorically.

She is one of her country’s greatest woman climbers who was on her way to Everest base camp when a devastating earthquake hit the region in April 2015. Her home in Kathmandu was destroyed but she survived and realized she must help those in trouble, even at her own great risk. She and her husband organized hundreds of villagers to make new trails, gather medicine and supplies, move the wounded, and create new shelters.

Halifax concludes: “My psychologist friend went over the edge and never found his way back. My Nepali friend stood on the best edge of her humanity.” How is it that some people don’t get beaten down by the world but are animated by the deep desire to endure when they are broken open?

The Roshi’s answer? Maintaining a connection to our compassionate hearts so that we can pull ourselves back from the edge. In her words, “we discover that the “alchemy of suffering and compassion brings forth the gold of our character, the gold of our hearts.”

This last quote is a reference to the Japanese practice called *kintsukuroi*, meaning “golden repair.” Kintsukuroi is the art of repairing broken pottery with powdered gold or platinum mixed with lacquer, so that the repair reflects the history of breakage. The “repaired” object mirrors the fragility, imperfection, and beauty of life—and also its strength.

What can we learn from the practice of Kintsukuroi in our flesh and blood lives? As Halifax explains, “the “golden repair” is not a hidden repair. It shows clearly the cracked and broken nature of our lives. It combines ordinary stuff and precious metals to repair the crack but not hide it.

This, I believe, is how transformation happens and integrity opens—not by rejecting suffering but by incorporating the suffering into a stronger material, the material of goodness, so that the broken parts of our nature, our society, and our world can meet in the gold of wholeness.” The object (now an exquisite work of art) returns to wholeness, to integrity,” but just like us – it is never not broken again. And this is celebrated and deemed precious, not mourned or regretted.

So, I ask: Are you wasting your torn chindis? Do your wounds linger within like a haunting ghost? How goes it with your broken pieces? Can you imagine adorning them with gold, considering them precious, and treating them with compassion and tenderness?

The Hindus have taken this idea to a whole other level by including Akhilandeshvari, the never-not-broken goddess among their pantheon of 1000s of deities. We are chanting Kirtan to at least one of them, Rama, in our service.

When I discovered her, I loved the connection to the women learning to patch chindis in the Umang Training center, so I went looking for an altar statue online. Here she is up on the pulpit with me this morning. She is not a well-known goddess but she is now, officially, my favorite. We’re a pair of never-not-broken goddesses – BFFs forever!

And we can learn from her and how she is depicted. She has a serene smile, carries a trident, and rides her crocodile through the rivers of life. The crocodile assists her with her prey and her trident represents her power to help us move through the challenges we face. In *Sutra Journal*, the writer Laura Amazzone notes, “Akhilandeshvari, helps us find the light of our essence through the cracks from the chaos.”

It’s been said that our wounds are where the light can come in. Do you believe this is true? Are you willing to know yourself in pieces? Can you leave the cracks exposed long enough for light to penetrate and comfort you and teach you what your brokenness yearns to share?

Like most of the Hindu deities, Akhilandeshvari has a shadow side, a destructive dimension, too. Her earrings represent wrathful energy and she only wears them in daylight. At night, her full powers are unleashed. She is a force. “No one can remove the destruction and the mysterious qualities of the night or the Universal brokenness she contains.”

In essence, she advises us (and I agree with her wholeheartedly):

“Look at what is broken in you and you will understand what is broken in the world. Look at how you might be contributing to these conflicts in your avoidance, your destructive tendencies, your addictions and denial, in your fear of the crocodile’s jaw.”

This formidable goddess wants us to be reminded of the power found in our brokenness, in the loss, in the fear, in the anguish...and also, in the healing. It may

seem counter-intuitive, but she also reminds us that sadness, despair and grief are some of our strongest medicines in the splintered aftermath of any heartbreak. Yes, her teaching can feel brutal to our egos, but she truly has our best interests at heart...and so do I.

I believe that our shared brokenness connects us more than it divides us. Like the cracked clay water jug in the Indian folk tale that deems itself a failure, our shared brokenness also waters the flowers by the side of the road, whether we realize it or not.

And, just like hopeful Sudha Vishwakarma, toiling behind her sewing machine in Mumbai, and just like each of you, I am holding my frayed chindis tenderly in my hand and learning day-by-day to patch them back together into some semblance of “golden repair,” as close to wholeness as a human can realistically expect.

The stitches may be uneven and stray off a straight line, but I persist, I endure, I practice. My heart aches, my ego bears the brunt. I ride with you on an imaginary crocodile across the waterways of pain and joy and fear and grief and healing, as we wait together for the light to filter through the shadow. And, it will.

We are never-not-broken, and blessed be, we are beautiful.

So, I say to you: “Jai Bhagwan – *The divine in me recognizes and honors the divine in you.*”

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