

# When Promises are Broken

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## Abstract

Throughout our lives we encounter times of disappointment, either in ourselves or others, when something we expect to occur does not, or when something or someone we trust fails us. How do we pick up the pieces?

### First Reading:

#### **“For Broken Trust” by John O’Donohue**

Sometimes there is an invisible raven  
That will fly low to pierce the shell of trust  
When it has been brought near to ground.

When he strikes, he breaks the faith of years  
That had built quietly through the seasons  
In the rhythm of tried and tested experience.

With one strike, the shelter is down  
And the back yoke of truth turned false  
Would poison the garden of memory.

Now the heart’s dream turns to requiem,  
Offering itself a poultice of tears  
To cleanse from loss what cannot be lost.

Through all the raw and awkward days,  
Dignity will hold the heart to grace  
Lest it squander its dream on a ghost.

Often torn ground is ideal for seed  
That can take root disappointment deep enough  
To yield a harvest that cannot wither:

A deeper light to anoint the eyes,  
Passion that opens wings in the heart,  
A subtle radiance of countenance:  
The soul ready for its true other.

### Second Reading:

#### **“The Holes of a Flute” from *As Far as the Heart Can See: Stories to Illuminate the Soul* by Mark Nepo**

For much of her life, a beautiful woman with many gifts had tried love after love, only to be hurt several times. At last, her enthusiasm for love had been darkened and she could only feel her many wounds. This made her move through the days with a great weight.

One day, toward the end of the summer, she came across a sage. He seemed to appear out of nowhere. Though he seemed equally eaten up by life, he had a glow and a smile that she couldn’t understand. In fact, his radiance was painful as it only accentuated her inability to glow or smile. She tried to walk away from him but somehow circled back.

He looked up and greeted her. She said nothing. They stared at each other, and in their stare, the sage could see how pained she was. He said, “Why don’t we sit for a while?” And the beautiful woman with as many gifts as wounds collapsed more than sat. They shared some bread and water. And having eaten together, the sage began, “It is a simple fact that a flute can make no music if it has no holes.”

She muttered back, “Why are you talking to me

about flutes?”

The sage continued, “Each being on earth is such a flute, and each of us releases our song when Spirit passes through the holes carved by our experience.”

The beautiful wounded woman dropped her shoulders, “I’m tired of experience.”

The sage chuckled, “Like it or not, this is one of the purposes of suffering.”

She took his hand violently and placed it on her heart, “Here! Can you feel my suffering?!”

The old man’s smile softened and his radiance grew brighter, “Oh, my child. You came to me for this. Let me assure you that since no two flutes have the same holes, no two flutes make the same music.”

She began to tremble.

He moved closer in his radiance, “And no two beings sing the same song, for the holes in each life produce their own unrepeatable melody.” She held his ancient hand to her heart and began to cry.

He tried to console her, “You are unrepeatable.”

It seemed that tears were streaming from all her wounds.

He held her face, “All of this to say, there is a great ongoing choice that awaits us each and every day: Whether we go around carving holes in others because we’ve been so painfully carved, or whether we let Spirit play its song through our tender experience, enabling us to listen to the miraculous music coming through others.”

She looked to him through her tears. She could now receive his gentleness. He simply shrugged in humility and looked skyward to the mysteries, “My child, we carve and cry when it is we who are carved in order that we may sing.”

She rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she looked again, he was gone.

“Every year, around the scalp of the planet,” writes Mark Nepo, “the caribou run the same path of migration along the edge of the Arctic Circle. They are born with some innate sense that calls them to this path. And every year, along the way, packs of coyote wait to feed on the caribou. And every year, despite the danger, the caribou return and make their way... The caribou tell us that, though there are risks and dangers that wait in the world, we truly have no choice but to live out what we are born with, to find and work our path. These elegant animals bespeak a force deeper than courage, and, though some would call the caribou stupid, the mystery of their migration reveals to us the quiet, irrepressible emergence of living over hiding, of being over thinking, of participating over observing, of thriving over surviving.”<sup>1</sup> Thriving over surviving... some days its hard to get to that place, to pull out from under the weight of loss or disappointment, of wanting things different than they are, of wishing things didn’t happen as they did.

Thriving over striving... some days its just enough to rise out of bed, or take that step into a classroom, or come back to work, or greet one who has hurt you.

We’ve spent this month looking at covenant, at the ways of encouraging mutuality, that which supports our being and becoming, that which brings wholeness to our days. But what of the times when that wholeness is broken? What of the times when what we thought could be counted on change? What of the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, as Shakespeare once lamented?

This, too, is part of the mix. This, too, is part of all of our lives... of being human... the fragility of change, the shedding of illusions, the overreaching and the falling short.

And yet we have the capacity, within this impermanence, within this uneasiness, to thrive: what Buddhists might call whole-hearted living.

Timothea Goddard, a teacher and practitioner

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<sup>1</sup>Nepo, Mark. *The Book of Awakening*, October 19 entry: “Our Sense of Calling”.

of mindfulness, shared this phrase in a recent talk: “Life sucks, everything changes, don’t take it personally.”<sup>2</sup> This aphorism hearkens back to Buddha’s first words uttered in the beginning of his public teachings some sixteen centuries ago, that there is inevitably suffering or dissatisfaction in life, that there is a reason for this dis-ease, that there is a way to an end to this suffering and that a path can be found.

The liberating teaching of this message is, of course, that the suffering we feel is natural, that it is a way that we as human beings respond to our world, that it is a habit of mind that can be addressed, that it is a state of being that can be healed, or at least lived with in a whole-hearted way.

It is a strange tendency in human beings to think of pain and disappointment as unnatural, as something that we are not supposed to feel. We judge our pain as less than worthy and so resist its natural cycle in our responsiveness. We often assume that if we suffer, we have failed in some way. What helps us, however, is to befriend the pain, not to invite it, but to allow its presence in our life a place. That way it does not overwhelm us, nor does it dictate our days, nor does it create habits of being to avoid it, like addictions and denial and self-righteousness and victimology. When we understand that things will go wrong, or differently than we hoped and we stay with the process of that disappointment or adjustment, we welcome the flow of transformation and can be more present in our lives more of the time. Instead of bemoaning what we want that isn’t there, we have room to become acquainted to what is, in its fullness.

Pema Chodron, Tibetan Buddhist nun, offered an illustration that helped her understand whole-hearted living. A teacher Dzongzar Rinpoche telephoned a good friend of hers who was in the final stages of cancer. The first words he said were: “Don’t even think for a moment that you’re not going to die.”<sup>3</sup> This gave the friend

permission to live fully in the moment, letting go of any resistance to the reality, letting go of any energy that could take away from the precious moments left to live.

And all of us have precious moments left to live. All of us could let go of resistances to living fully, by meeting what is in our lives as best we can without judgment, without the illusion of no pain.

This does not mean dwelling on pain, or death, or change. It means allowing for that part of our lives to simply be one part of our lives and not overtake our experiences of love and joy and wonder and curiosity and connection.

Pema Chodron writes in her book *When Things Fall Apart* “things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don’t really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It’s just like that.” “The healing comes,” she writes, “from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.”<sup>4</sup> This is especially hard when we experience a broken promise, when we feel a covenant has been violated, when a deep bond unravels.

The death of hope is painful, it hollows out the gut and causes an unsteadiness, a lack of ground or direction and no sense of energy to make new choices. It is an uncomfortable limbo, even, sometimes a terror, when what we believed to be true is no longer so. This is part of our changing lives, we might say to ourselves, but it does not feel worth it at the time.

This is when we can let ourselves grieve. This is when we can ease ourselves into new truths. A gentleness is needed, and a faith in our own resources, which includes the help of others. Slogging through a disappointment can throw us off our game. And, oddly, that is an opportunity

<sup>2</sup>Goddard, Timothea. *emphThe Insights & Realizations That Develop Through Mindfulness*.

<sup>3</sup>Chodron, Pema. *Start Where You Are*, p. 142.

<sup>4</sup>Chodron, Pema. *When Things Fall Apart*, p. 8.

for deepening. For we are brought to the place of finding what it is that is steady within that can carry us through a changed circumstance, a damaged assurance.

A sense of betrayal can rise in many ways. Sometimes it's an outright broken promise. Sometimes it's a disillusionment from an expectation which may or may not have been justified. Sometimes it's a failure of endurance or courage or the end of a relationship. Sometimes it's simply a choice made that does not include us in a way we had come to depend on.

In any case, it's a lonely journey back into connection after the shock of betrayal. It is these times that either train us toward wholeheartedness or disable us in fear, even freeze us from growing and learning beyond the stuck place of distress. Both resistance and growth can be going on at the same time. If given steady attention, we can gentle ourselves into a more expansive understanding and a resilience in living that brings fullness of being back into our days.

It starts with trusting oneself and nourishing oneself. It is in remembering that there is a core of being within us of dignity and worth and that we have a birthright of belonging to this life that cannot be denied. The journey toward equilibrium is helped by realizing our own trustworthiness in our own connections to nature, to kindness, to those we love, to life itself. We have our breath, which is an ever abiding reality of our shared being and of our belonging. We are creatures that can give and receive, creatures who are uniquely alive for a short period of time. As the wise one in this morning's story relayed: "You are unrepeatable."

Another tool is to remember that, although we seem to prefer that things stay the same on average, we are built for change. On a cellular level, we morph in and out of systems of being. In seven years, it is said, all of our cells have regenerated. We know how to grow on a cellular level and we know how to adapt to changed circumstances. That is little comfort on the first shock

of unwelcomed change, but it is a fact that we have resilience within and creative understandings about us to weather the chaos into new ways of being and abiding.

John O'Donohue, poet and theologian, reminded us this morning that "Often torn ground is ideal for seed that can take root disappointment deep enough to yield a harvest that cannot wither."<sup>5</sup> Another bit of wisdom he has shared is the encouragement to create a canon of beauty for oneself, to have a store of images, memories and reminders that can be recalled to lift us in difficult times. This is not to cover up the grief, the broken heart, the disappointment, but to remind ourselves that there are many realities occurring at the same time—many depths of being. That we can hurt and still know beauty. That our trust can be bruised but still we can be kind. That grieving does not erase laughter. That the one two punch of anguish and anger can exist even when we find loving company in others.

And remember the resources available in communities that hold you, in prayer that comforts you, in meditation that calms you, in movement that soothes you, in counseling that upholds you, in writings and music and art that speak to you.

This challenge of heart teaches us how to navigate not getting what we want. This blow to our sensibilities can help us enter the unknown and find new avenues of connection, new ways to relate, even to the one who has hurt us or whom we've hurt. More likely than not, we've been in both places... More likely than not, there are others who have a kinship to what we've experienced. We are not alone.

Do not allow yourself to believe that you are broken beyond repair. This is a state of mind, not the full reality. There are resources within you beyond your making—ways of being that can transcend your pain. The journey for connection remains a worthy endeavor. Even though bruised and perhaps shy to begin, find your mutuality, know yourself worthy of it. In fact, mutuality is the energy that holds the world's well-

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<sup>5</sup>O'Donohue, John. *To Bless The Space Between Us*, "For Broken Trust".

ness.

Back to Mark Nepo's illustration of the caribou, "In regions near the Arctic," he writes, "the caribou are not just seen as animals living out instinct at all cost. Rather, it is believed that their endless run, no matter what stands in their way, is what keeps the Earth turning. And somewhere, beneath all hesitation and despair, it is our endless call to being, in each of us and all of us together, that keeps the fire at the center of the Earth burning."<sup>6</sup> May you know your

call to being, your inner truth and indisputable belonging to this life. May the times of brokenness in your days be met with a remembrance of your strength and ability to love not only the miracle of your being but the gift you are to its becoming. Nothing stays the same except your inborn worth. As we slog through our imperfections may we enter our days whole-heartedly and learn, and learn, and learn.

So may it be. Amen. ■

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<sup>6</sup>Nepo, Mark. *The Book of Awakening*, October 19 entry: "Our Sense of Calling".