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# *The* Broken-Open Heart

## LIVING WITH FAITH AND HOPE IN THE TRAGIC GAP

*by Parker J. Palmer*

*Just heard an NPR interview with Basim, an Iraqi who worked as an interpreter for American troops. He took the job believing that the Americans represented hope for his country. But when Abu Ghraib showed Iraqis that Americans could be as brutal as Saddam's police, Basim's efforts to bridge the two cultures brought death threats against him and his family and they were forced to flee their homeland. "Was it naïve to believe that you could stand in the middle like that?", the interviewer asked. Without hesitation Basim answered, "No. It wasn't at all." If reconciliation is going to happen, he said (now I paraphrase), there must be people who are willing to live in the tragic gap and help the two sides understand each other. I'm deeply moved by Basim's witness—and I wonder about my own…*

—From my journal, July 5, 2008

## BECOMING CIVILIZED

ON THE LONG LIST of hopes that have driven our ancient and unfinished project called "becoming civilized," overcoming the tyranny of the primitive brain is surely at or near the top. No one who aspires to become fully human can let the primitive brain have its way, least of all Christians who aspire to a gospel way of life.

When the primitive brain dominates, Christianity goes over to the dark side. Churches self-destruct over doctrinal differences, forgetting that their first calling is to love one

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another. Parishioners flock to preachers who see the anti-Christ in people who do not believe as they do. Christian voters support politicians who use God's name to justify ignoble and often violent agendas. When the primitive brain is in charge, humility, compassion, forgiveness, and the vision of a beloved community do not stand a chance.

*Can suffering become life-giving rather than death-dealing?*

The primitive brain contains the hardwiring for the infamous "fight or flight" reflex that helps other species survive but can diminish, even destroy, human beings. The moment we sense danger, real or imagined, that hardwiring induces a state of tension that we want to resolve *right now*, either by eliminating its source or by removing ourselves from its reach. That's a good thing when you are about to be attacked by a tiger or hit by a bus. It is a very bad thing when you are dealing with an attitudinal teenager, an idea that threatens some taken-for-granted belief, the challenge of racial or religious "otherness," or a local or global conflict that would best be resolved non-violently.

Unfortunately, the fight or flight reflex runs so deep that resisting it is like trying to keep your foot from jumping when the doctor taps your patellar tendon. But against all odds, resisting it has been key to the project called civilization ever since we climbed down from the trees. Learning how to hold life's tensions in the responsive heart instead of the reactive primitive brain is key to personal, social, and cultural creativity: rightly held, those tensions can open us to new thoughts, relationships, and possibilities that disappear when we try to flee from or destroy their source.

If we had not sought ways to hold tension creatively, our species would have long since wasted away in caves or been done in by war. If "caves" and "war" sound like words from today's headlines, it is only because they are. Despite millennia of cultural inventiveness, we have not yet vanquished "the enemy within."

What are some of the cultural inventions meant to help us hold tension in a life-giving, not death-dealing way? Language itself is among the first of them, because it allows us to respond to tension with words instead of actions. Even if the first "word" is a reflexive shout at the moment tension hits, the words that follow can be inquisitive and exploratory, as in

"Hey! What's going on here?" Language leads to the possibility of understanding, and thus to a true resolution of tension, something that is never achieved by fighting or fleeing, which merely leave more tension in their wake.

The arts are a civilizing institution that can help us learn to hold tension in a way that leads to life, not death. A good painting, a good drama, a good novel, and a good musical composition share at least one trait: they are animated by the tension between their elements, a tension that not only attracts the eye, the ear, and the mind, but draws us into the experience art offers, the reality it has to share. Entering into the tension of great art, and allowing that tension to pull our hearts and minds open, is a time-honored way of becoming more human.

Education is another ancient institution designed to help us hold tension creatively. A good education teaches us to respect that which is "other" than our experience, our thoughts, our certainties, our world. A good education helps us embrace complexity, find comfort in ambiguity, entertain contradictory ideas, grasp both poles of a paradox. It challenges the primacy of the primitive brain, drawing on the larger capacities of the human self to hold the multiple tensions of thought, and life, in ways that invoke the better angels of our nature.

And then there is religion…

## RELIGION AND THE BROKEN HEART

WHEN THE PRIMITIVE BRAIN takes charge we are in thrall to the fallen angels, and the outcome is altogether predictable: we contribute to the dynamic of violence that constantly threatens life itself. Why do we persist in trying to "solve" problems with violence, despite the fact that violence threatens our survival? That question has several valid answers. But the one I want to pursue here has yet to get its due and takes us directly to a key function of the spiritual life: *violence arises when we do not know what else to do with our suffering*.

Think back, for example, to the murderous and heart-breaking events of September 11, 2001, that created such widespread tension and suffering. America was attacked, we suffered, the primitive brain kicked in, and "fight or flight"

was elevated from the nether regions of the brain stem to policy options in the White House and the Congress.

As nation-states usually do when they have superior firepower, our government chose to fight (although largely against the wrong enemy in this misbegotten case). Now, eight years later, the violence in our world has multiplied. We chose to fight despite the fact that an alternative path was available to us, a path of seeking justice rather than making war that might have allowed us to create rather than destroy. In the process, we squandered the life-giving sense of global community that began to emerge in the weeks following September 11 as people of many lands empathized with our suffering, including, amazingly, people whose suffering we helped cause.

Can suffering become life-giving rather than death-dealing? Could America's suffering in the wake of September 11 have yielded outcomes other than violence multiplied? We don't need to become dewy-eyed dreamers to answer that question with a "yes." The experience of our own lives proves it.

Who among us has not suffered the loss of someone precious to our hearts, a loss so heartbreaking that we wondered how we could go on living? Who among us has not been tempted to shut down in the wake of such a loss, to turn toward bitterness, cynicism, and anger, perhaps even going there for a while? And how many of us have sought formal or informal spiritual practices—from meditation to walks in the woods—to transform a wounded, shut-down heart into something more trusting, more capacious, a heart that dispels the darkness and opens to new light and life?

THE ALCHEMY that can transform suffering into new life is at the heart of every religious tradition I know anything about, including my own Christian tradition. Of course, Christianity, like every religion, has shadow as well as light: it has sometimes fueled the fight or flight response. Religion has always provided powerful rationales both for fleeing from the problems of "this sinful world" and for trying to blow "the enemy" to kingdom come. But the great traditions at their best aim at helping us hold tension and the suffering it brings in ways that enhance spiritual creativity and build the beloved community. They do so by focusing on the inevitable experience of heartbreak.

There is no way to be human without having one's heart broken. But there are at least two ways for the heart to break—using "heart" in its root meaning, not merely the seat of the emotions but the core of our sense of self.

*There is no way to be human without having one's heart broken*

The heart can be broken into a thousand shards, sharp-edged fragments that sometimes become shrapnel aimed at the source of our pain. Every day, untold numbers of people try without success to "pick up the pieces," some of them taking grim satisfaction in the way the heart's explosion has injured their enemies. Here the broken heart is an unresolved wound that we carry with us for a long time, sometimes tucking it away and feeding it as a hidden wound, sometimes trying to "resolve it" by inflicting the same wound on others.

But there is another way to visualize what a broken heart might mean. Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart "broken open" into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one's own and the world's pain and joy. This, too, happens every day. We know that heartbreak can become a source of compassion and grace because we have seen it happen with our own eyes as people enlarge their capacity for empathy and their ability to attend to the suffering of others.

Transforming heartbreak into new life is the aim of every religious tradition at its best, as witness this Hasidic tale. A disciple asks the rebbe, "Why does Torah tell us to 'place these words *upon* your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?" The rebbe answers, "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in."[1] The same point is made by the Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan: "God breaks the heart again and again and again until it stays open."[2]

In Christian tradition, the broken-open heart is virtually indistinguishable from the image of the cross. It was on the cross that God's heart was broken for the sake of humankind, broken open into a love that Christ's followers are called to

[1] I was told this hasidic tale by philosopher Jacob Needleman, an heir to the oral tradition, who kindly put it in writing for me so I could recount it correctly.

[2] Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2000), 419.

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emulate. In its simple physical form, the cross embodies the notion that tension can pull the heart open. Its cross-beams stretch out four ways, pulling against each other left and right, up and down. But those arms converge in a center, a heart, that can be pulled open by that stretching, by the tensions of life—a heart that can be opened so fully it can hold everything from despair to ecstasy. And that, of course, is how Jesus held his excruciating experience, as an opening into the heart of God.

At times, sadly, the cross has drawn believers toward the spiritual shadows of both masochism and sadism. Some Christians believe that if they are not suffering they cannot possibly be doing God's will. They have every right to hold this belief, though I can't imagine that it pleases a God who laughs as well as weeps. Some Christians believe that they have the right to inflict suffering on people who do not share their version of

God's will. That is a belief that no one has the right to hold, one that I have to believe runs counter to the will of a life-giving God.

If we Christians want to contribute to the healing of the world's wounds rather than to the next round of wounding—and we have a long history of doing both—much depends on how we understand and inhabit the cruciform way of life that is at the heart of our tradition.

## LIVING IN THE TRAGIC GAP

To live in this world, we must learn how to stand in the tragic gap with faith and hope. *By "the tragic gap" I mean the gap between what is and what could and should be*, the gap between the reality of a given situation and an alternative reality we know to be possible because we have experienced it.

That alternative reality is not a wish-dream or a fantasy, but a possibility we have seen with our own eyes. Here's an example. For eleven years, I lived in a Quaker community of some seventy people where there was a degree of mutual sharing, material and spiritual, that I have never experienced since, except among close friends. In most of the neighborhoods, workplaces, and voluntary associations I know anything about—including, too often, the church—people share very little. That's the reality, but I know it could be otherwise, because I have experienced an alternative reality populated by people as inclined toward hoarding as I am.

So I have a choice. I can hold the tension between reality and possibility in a life-giving way, standing in the gap and witnessing with my own life to another way of living, slowly and patiently calling myself and my part of the world toward something better. But if I cannot abide that tension, I will try to resolve it by collapsing into one pole or the other—the same quick "resolve the tension" reflex that creates the fight-or-flight response.

When I collapse into the reality of what is, I am likely to sink into corrosive cynicism: "Community is impossible, so I'm going to focus on getting my piece of the action and let the devil take the hindmost." When I collapse into pure possibility, I am likely to float off into irrelevant idealism: "Oh, how lovely it would be if…." Corrosive cynicism and irrelevant idealism may

sound as if they are poles apart, but they take us to the same place: out of the gap and out of the action, out of those places we might make a life-giving contribution if we knew how to hold the tension.

The gap is "tragic" not merely because it is sad but because (in the Greek, biblical, and Shakespearian sense of the word) it is inevitable, inexorable, inescapable. The form it takes changes over time, but there will always be a gap between what is and what could and should be. For example, when we achieve progress on racism, we can always see a new and better place where humanity could and should go. When we do not know how to live creatively in that infinite regress, we cannot live in a way that brings new life into the gap.

*Heartbreak can become a source of compassion and grace*

And how do we learn to live that way? What are the spiritual practices that can help us transcend the primitive brain and hold tension in our hearts, allowing it to break our hearts open rather than apart? The question is an important one for Christian communities, because those communities are the context in which some of this learning could and should be happening.

Of course, the preaching and teaching ministries are important in helping church members understand the importance of learning to hold tension. But if a congregation does not embody this practice in its own life, its own "hidden curriculum," there is not a sermon or a lesson plan on the planet that can change the dance. A congregation whose members bury their differences and divisions for fear that surfacing them will blow the "community" apart is neither a true community nor a place where people can learn a cruciform way of life. We don't learn to love from being talked at but from being around love in action. We don't learn to hold tension in ways that open the heart by reading essays but by being around others who keep learning how to do it and invite us to try it for ourselves.

One example of that "hidden curriculum" is the way congregations make decisions. Too often, that way is majority rule, a process designed to resolve tension as quickly as possible, kowtowing to the instincts of the primitive brain. An issue is put before the group, differences of opinion emerge, tension deepens, and someone "calls for the vote" to put us out of our misery. But the misery rarely ends with the vote because the

process is essentially adversarial, which is how the primitive brain wants it. When fifty-one percent can tell forty-nine percent where to get off, the latter may try to subvert the majority will for months, years, decades, or generations to come. Just look at your own church or the one down the street!

Making decisions by consensus instills different "habits of the heart." Here, a decision cannot be made until no one in the room feels a need to oppose it (a different and more reachable norm than requiring everyone to feel positive about it). Here, the rules compel us to listen to one another in a collaborative, not adversarial manner, seeking what we might affirm in "the opposition's" viewpoint—because if we don't, we will stay stuck. As we listen with new ears, we not only learn to hold the tension of opposites, we also learn that doing so can open us, individually and collectively, to a new and better way of resolving the issue at hand.

The principle that congregational practices should embody tension-holding can be applied to other areas, of course, such as how congregations educate children and adults. Dropping information into people's heads will not do the trick, nor will telling them what to think and believe. But disciplined forms of dialogical teaching and learning, in which people are required to listen to differences, hold ambiguity, and learn how to engage in creative disagreement challenge the dominance of the primitive brain and help us learn to hold tension in the capacious mind and heart.

HAND-IN-HAND with the transformation of congregational practices go transformed individuals, clergy and lay, who have spiritual disciplines that help them stand in the tragic gap with faith and hope. Those disciplines have been the subject of countless books and articles. They are as varied as people themselves: everyone has his or her own way of turning this "vale of tears" into a "vale of soul-making," to quote the poet John Keats.[3] But I believe that underneath that variety, there are three things we all must learn to do if what Keats called our "world of pains and troubles" is to become a school of the Spirit, the heart, the soul.

First, in a culture where the answer to the question "How are you?" is supposed to be "Just fine" even when we are not,

[3] *John Keats: Selected Letters,* ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 232.

we must learn to *acknowledge and name our suffering honestly and openly* to ourselves and to others. This is called "becoming vulnerable"—a hard thing to do in a culture that does not respect the shadow, where even among friends we are at constant risk of someone trying to "fix us up," an act that drives the suffering soul back into hiding no matter how well-intended. We need to find a trustworthy friend or two who knows what it means simply to receive and bear witness to our pain. As we cultivate such relationships, we will find ourselves rewarded with a comforting, "Welcome to the human race."

Second, once we have named and claimed our suffering, we must *move directly to the heart of it*, allowing ourselves to feel the pain fully, rather than doing what our culture teaches—numbing it with anesthetics, fleeing from it with distractions, or fighting it off by blaming and attacking the external source. The only way to transform suffering into something life-giving is to enter into it so deeply that we learn what it has to teach us and come out on the other side.

Third, if we are to learn from our suffering, we must create a micro-climate of quietude around ourselves, *allowing the turmoil to settle and an inner quietude to emerge*, so "that of God within us" can help us find our way through. Nurtured by silence, we can stop taking our leads from the voices of ego and world and start listening instead to the still, small voice of all that is Holy.

None of this can be done on the cheap. It requires what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "costly grace."[4] But if we are willing to pay the cost, that grace will be given and we will purchase the pearl of great price—a chance to participate in God's continuing creation of the beloved community.

[4]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition*, vol. 4, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001), 43.

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