

A D R I E N N E P O W E L L

## Broken

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to  
mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and  
end  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me  
new. (Donne)

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At thirteen years old, I came home from dance class crying. Nothing particularly trying had happened; I had gotten exactly the role I expected in our last show, I was starting to get used to pointe shoes, and I had been doing something I loved. But I could have been better. If I had worked harder to earn money, I could have danced last semester too, and then I wouldn't be behind in my pointe work. Then I could at least do a pirouette without stumbling. Then I might be worth something as a ballerina.

At fourteen years old, I was in the school talent show. The stage had never scared me, but the people did as soon as they

got up close. One of the other performers sat down next to me after finishing a spectacular violin solo, and I was too shy to compliment his work.

At sixteen years old, I had taken a nap after coming home from my only two classes in public school. I'd been up extra early for seminary, but I rolled out of bed in a panic. I hadn't meant to sleep so long. I grabbed a large snack before plopping down in front of the computer to start teaching myself trigonometry. I berated myself for my laziness. If I had more discipline, I would have my chemistry homework done by now. I would be accomplishing things with the time I had, making a difference in the world. Maybe if my life were harder, if I weren't so spoiled, then I would be stronger. Maybe I would have something of value to contribute. Right now, I felt about as valiant as oatmeal and strong as a slug. The sense of inadequacy that had been with me for as long as I could remember was starting to overwhelm me. Tears started to slide down my cheeks for the third time that week.

At nineteen years old, I turned in my mission papers. I was instantly hit with a wave of terror and panic like I had never experienced before. How could I talk to strangers every day? How could I leave my family and brand-new friends? How could I keep all the rules?

The irony of these fears was that I had spent years begging God for a mountain to climb, for something that would make me strong. I hoped that my mission would provide this mountain. Maybe I would go somewhere like Europe, where people didn't easily accept the gospel. Maybe I would go to Peru and deal with the challenges of a third world country. Or maybe Taiwan, where I would have to learn an especially difficult language like Mandarin. The last thing I expected was to read, "You are assigned to labor in the Salt Lake City East Mission."

I also didn't expect things to get harder throughout my mission. I thought that, as afraid as I was at first, I would get better

at talking to people. I thought I wouldn't have trouble with my companions; it had always been easy for me to get along with people before. I certainly didn't expect these challenges to escalate into a mental illness. I didn't think that such an unassuming place as Salt Lake would be enough to overturn everything I thought I was. I didn't expect my mission to break me.

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We are accustomed to thinking of brokenness as a bad thing. We don't want our dishes to break, because we want to use them and not have to clean up the mess of shards on the floor. We don't want our toys to break, because they stop working and we can't play with them anymore. We don't want our bones to break, because it is painful and limits our ability to move.

In contrast, I once used pieces of broken bottles—green and blue and brown and white—to make a beautiful life-sized mermaid mosaic. Likewise, my brothers used to scour the neighborhood every trash day for broken toys. They would then take these apart and use the electronics inside to build circuitry and computers that were often more impressive than the original toys. My family is still using a laptop that was once discarded because it was broken. I recently injured my arm, and it has made me much more aware of the technique and setup I use while playing the violin, teaching me to be more effective as a musician. I wonder if breaking is actually as bad as we make it out to be.

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In the experience on my mission, I had begun to feel like I was full of cracks and poorly glued seams. I was too fractured to truly function, but not broken enough to be effectively repaired.

Everything was spiraling downward, but somehow never bringing the relief that would have come with complete collapse. I knew there was no way up from where I was; my only hope was to completely shatter. But I was afraid of breaking, afraid of hurting more, afraid of being even weaker than I was. If things were ever to change, I knew it would take significant outside force: God would have to batter me, break, blow, or burn me to make me new.

God answers prayers. He even answers a desperate girl's repeated plea to be crushed and melted into something useful. He had been doing it throughout my entire mission without me even realizing it, but the moment I asked Him to break me, He answered in a way I couldn't miss.

It started with the vertigo. Out of the blue, the world started to wobble. It was mild at first, but as the weeks passed, it became more and more violent. With it came intense fatigue that left me feeling as limp as a ragdoll. Some days I was so exhausted from trying to keep my balance against the imagined wobbling that I couldn't get out of bed.

Then there was the anxiety. It had been building since I first submitted my papers, and it had come and gone in waves throughout my mission. This time, however, it came with a fury that resulted in three panic attacks in a week. Every day was a battle for survival against my emotions. Every day I wondered if I could make it to that night. The fear of talking to people was ever-present, beating on me each time I left the apartment, and with no prospect of subsiding. Every person I passed by on the street only added to my prolonged list of failures.

I came home from my mission a completely different person than I was when I left, and I doubted it was a good thing. For the first month, I went to bed early, slept late, and took long naps every day. I was too spent to do much else. Even after that, the vertigo and fatigue persisted, requiring excessive amounts of food and rest every day. I started school and fought

to keep my head from spinning and the floor from wobbling as I tried to make sense of simple homework assignments. I snacked through classes and spent entire days in bed.

Slowly, I became a hermit. For the first few months after my mission I avoided interacting with people as much as possible. I disappeared from church the moment meetings were out in order to dodge the members who would try to talk to me. I had a panic attack after a boy asked me on a date. Decisions as simple as where to sit in Relief Society became matters of great distress.

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I think breaking might be similar to the end of a war. Even if you've lost, even if your men are dead and your cities are flattened and you don't know how or if you'll ever rebuild, the fighting is over. And with that, somehow there is relief.

Or maybe breaking is like being an old house. You don't get repaired until you really fall apart. My dad is an architect, landlord, and contractor who often buys rundown buildings and renovates them. They are rotting and full of cracks and leaks and horrid smells. The floors are peeling, the windows are smashed, and the locks on the doors don't work. He usually has to completely gut the places before he can make them beautiful, before he builds new doors and stains the floors and plasters the walls and adds brick and lights and paint and gardens, before the buildings take your breath when you step inside.

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Six months after coming home, I looked at the pile of rubble surrounding who I was and realized I was broken. The walls and ceiling of the dilapidated building I'd been had finally collapsed, and I had slowly crumbled in the middle of it all. What a relief it was to be able to lie in the ashes and debris of who I

had once been and for once not have to try to be strong. I was weak, I was broken, and I was content.

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Brokenness allows healing. When a dish cracks, it's hard to fix. As long as it is cracked, it has a built-in weak spot that may let water or soup through. When the dish shatters, however, it is no longer trying to stay together and be a dish. And then a whole new realm of possibilities is opened. If the dish was glass, it can be turned into a mosaic, like the one I made. Or pieces of it could wash into the river and be rubbed smooth and polished and found by a girl who just wants something comforting to rub in her pocket. Or perhaps it could be recycled, melted down and made into something new: a vase, a Christmas ornament, part of a chandelier.

I think the last possibility may be similar to what God does with us. We watch ourselves crack and break and assume we are failures because we think we are supposed to be dishes. God, however, sees something more than flawed plates and cups. He lets us shatter because then we are forced to stop trying to be dishes. Then we start to catch a glimpse of the beautiful potential He sees in us, a chandelier worthy of His palace.

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Piece by piece, in the months that followed my mission, God started to rebuild me. By summer, the vertigo had relaxed until I was stable more frequently than dizzy. I still struggle with it, I still get frustrated every time my body won't let me do things that used to be easy, but I also see miracles. I have had weeks where I couldn't get out of bed, but then I suddenly felt better on the day I had a test or a project due. I've lacked energy to wash my dishes, but I somehow get the strength to minister to friends who are struggling.

My relationship-building skills have improved as well. God has introduced me to people who have reached out and helped me feel safe and loved. Gradually, I've started to let them into my life. As even more time has passed, I've actually started feeling a desire to reach out and meet new people; the situations I once fled have begun to sound like fun.

With the increased physical health and concentrated effort on my part has come better emotional stability. I have slowly become better able to cope with challenges, learning to face them calmly rather than instantly reverting to panic. Even when I do have anxiety attacks, they don't scare me quite so much anymore.

The best part, however, is that as God has been piecing me back together, He's been slipping in little bits of Himself. He's slipped in little bits of His love, His perspective, His ideas about me. He's been dropping hints about how maybe I am strong, maybe He is pleased with me, maybe I do matter to the people around me. He's been sending those messages for my whole life, but I never knew how to hear them or let them stick until He broke me. Now, the broken me is being remade into something new. I still struggle with all of those things, but for the first time in my life, I'm starting to like myself. For the first time in my life, I feel thoroughly challenged. And for the first time in my life, I'm starting to feel whole.

#### Works Cited

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