

THE JAPANESE ART OF SHOWING US THE STRENGTH AND BEAUTY IN HEALING AND REPAIR

*'The world breaks everyone and afterwards,
some are strong at the broken places.'*

Hemingway wrote this in his seminal work *A Farewell to Arms* but it feels relevant to revisit it at this time of collective crisis and, as so often happens, circumstances and tragedy evolve over decades, but human nature stays relatively static. I was determined to avoid my first Blog of 2021 slipping into a list of cheery and optimistic hopes for the coming year. It struck me that we can't just turn our backs on the experiences we have just endured.

All the graphs and statistics in the world won't obliterate the fears and anxieties that faced us, and we may well be able to see some light at the end of the much discussed tunnel, but this could be quite a long tunnel to endure for a while yet. At the end of this last confusing and difficult year, I became aware how often in therapy sessions, I was hearing words such as shattered, broken, spoiled and scarred as clients sought to describe the bewildering reactions they were having to the unexpected and bruising experiences of 2020. We can't Hoover up these experiences and just lock them away, or sweep them under the tired old rug that often gets highlighted in therapy.

We've all still got a long way to go, and I'm keen to look at these reactions from my clients and try to see a way to reframe them. Humanity doesn't alter hugely. Our experiences may feel new, but biologically our brains haven't evolved much in 10,000 years. Of course, the outside world has undergone immense and radical change, but we as humans mostly still process things in well worn patterns.

When in doubt, I often look at the creative arts. By turning to the world of art, we can begin to see some timeless metaphors for mending. Listening to the descriptions of these feelings of inner fracture can open up some creative ways to redefine us. This pandemic highlighted how fragile we, as humans, were shown to be when under the threat of an unexpected, unseen enemy.

I'm using as a metaphor Kintsugi. This is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the cracked areas of breakage with lacquer, dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver or platinum. As a philosophy it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to be disguised or hidden (see picture above).

We have been subjected to pressure and loss in recent months. We live our lives now under rules that would have been unthinkable only 12 months ago.

Dr Rachel O'Neil is quoted as saying:

'Embracing the imperfect means that we celebrate our strengths. This shift of mindset, from striving for an impossible ideal to embracing these strengths, leads to a more positive and strength-orientated mindset. I'm keen not to calm or avoid challenging our seemingly destructive life experiences. Rather we can see them as a way to rebuild our lives and to do this restructuring in a way that allows us to overcome and reframe these experiences and realise we are stronger because of the cracks and fissures of recent times.'

Looking at some of the exquisite pieces of Kintsugi it becomes clear how much more beautiful and interesting a broken plate or bowl becomes, once its individually is accentuated.

This art form began in the 15th century when, according to legend, a well known Shogun broke a favourite tea bowl and sent it to be repaired in China. The customary mending technique was to staple the pieces, but he found this too ugly and a local craftsman decided to try and fill the cracks with gold-en lacquer.

The Shogun was artful enough to understand the character and beauty this added to his bowl, which subsequently became his favourite, and of course it was still functioning perfectly.

This resolution came from *mottainai*: a feeling of regret and sorrow when something is wasted and *mushi*: the necessity of accepting change. The nature of cracking is that it often echoes natural life forms, organic shapes, trees or rivers. This just adds to an item's value and, most of all, its individuality.

2020 has exposed vulnerabilities in us, our closest friends and family, our colleagues and leaders. There seems an inherent need in us to appear to be doing as well as we can, to live up to expectations of self and be seen to be the best versions of ourselves at all times.

I often hear clients talking about a distaste for appearing needy when they are actually disparaging the idea of appearing vulnerable. Without accepting these vulnerabilities in ourselves and others, we can never have authentic relationships. The idea of finding strength in imperfection goes against societal norms, but it is essential for us to accept and hopefully rebuild ourselves with strength and understanding.

Revisiting Hemingway's quote, it's all about being stronger because of the broken places and difficult experiences we all suffer at times.

Understanding that surviving blows, disappointments and losses can highlight the idea that shame and flaws are parts of us to be understood and worked with, not hidden or imperfectly mended. We all crack, chip and even break in places, but let's see these blows as parts of our individuality and not try to disguise them, they make us who we are. The *Kintsugi* pieces are more beautiful, more valuable and special for the care and treatment given to them. The fault lines are strong and precious. Let's look at ourselves this way. Life events in 2021 will have challenges. Vulnerability and battle scars are to be celebrated with confidence. Our fault lines are what Hemingway describes as our strength and, knowing this, plus accepting it in others, will make us individual and resilient. There's value in recognising and mending damaged pieces.

There's gold in breakage and beauty in difference.

If you would like to contact me to discuss problems in your relationship or marriage, please to send me an email to: info@christinafrasercounselling.co.uk or you can call me on 07910-235848.

Christina Fraser

Image credit: [anastasiadis @instagram](#)

