

Constructively Broken

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"Crazy world. Cockeyed."¹

Mr. Savo, in *The Chosen*, by Chiam Potok

When I cracked open the door, my friend's fragmented face grimaced grotesquely like an image yawning out of a Picasso painting. I squinted out of one eye as the migraine ballooned inside my head, slurring my speech and creating a stained-glass world.

I saw fuzzy, disjointed hands reach out for the four dirty-faced kids huddled around my legs, including the youngest, whose over-filled diaper almost reached her knees.

"Just let me take them for a few hours so you can rest."

I was too heavy with grief and nausea to resist. I wanted to tell her I could take care of myself, but it was obvious that I couldn't. My stained maternity nightgown created a sad, floral tent over my swollen frame, and my tears splashed against it like rain as I shut the door and staggered over a minefield of toys back to the couch.

Only days before, the ultrasound tech had rubbed cool jelly over the mound of my stomach, pressing the wand harder and harder into my abdomen, the impassive expression on her face producing a marked contrast to the anxious movements of her arms. After a series of drawn-out hmmmms, she left the room and returned with another technician, who studied the static gray and white blobs on the screen.

The nurse practitioner offered me an overinflated smile and a smudged photocopy of a poem about how geese in flight support each other. She told me to call them if I passed anything larger than a baseball.

I didn't even cry. I just stuttered, "Wait. I think there's been a mistake."

1. Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 57.

She looked at me blankly and replied, “Yes. You might feel that way, but there isn’t a heartbeat.” I clutched the paper with the poem with one hand and my misshapen, unsuitable stomach with the other and stood still, not wanting to enter this distorted reality. Her smile became slightly lopsided, as if someone had let the air out of one side. The matronly woman’s white coat rustled as she patted my arm and shooed me into the waiting room, encouraging me again to read the poem about the geese and be sure to call her office if I noticed anything abnormal.

Everything about the next minutes and days and weeks was abnormal. I could have called the nurse practitioner again and again with the tick of each second, and yet I never did. I had entered a land that swept over me like a blank screen on which every letter, every syllable has been deleted. Each paragraph has been lost and yet looms large in the whiteness. There is only a cursor blinking expectantly at me, waiting for me to finally produce something viable. Something normal. The ever-powerful absent presence. The character that is never part of the story but is the catalyst to all of the action. The ghost of a person never present.

The word “miscarriage” makes the process of losing a baby sound like an intentional error on the part of the mother. The prefix “mis” comes from Old English, meaning “wrong, bad, or erroneous” or “to fail to achieve an intended outcome.”

In French, a miscarriage is a “fausse couche,” literally a false delivery, as if some pathologically affected woman prancing around in a beret had simply concocted the whole pregnancy thing on a lark, eating cheese and making outrageous claims about carrying around a human being inside her. But of course, these are the same people who refer to pregnancy as “la grossesse,” which, while not meaning something “gross,” does mean “the fatness.” There doesn’t seem to be a whole lot of *jouissance* or veracity in that either.

A few weeks after my friend had swooped in to rescue my children from my mid-miscarriage migraine, I forced myself to bring her homemade cookies and a handmade card. I was a hollow husk on her doorstep, but the grief that had taken over my insides would not be allowed to show on my face. I didn’t want to make that faux pas again.

My friend looked so relieved to see me dressed and upright and socially acceptable that she accepted the plate of perfectly round cookies and the painfully symmetrical card and blurted out, “I was happy to see you like that.”

I blinked quickly and swallowed back the urge to throw up on her cookies. It sounded like she had just said that she was happy to see me

flailing and floundering, enjoying the show as I was barely holding onto the edges of the burnt and smoldering walls of Tartarus, the flames licking at my varicose-veined legs and house slippers. Surely I must have misunderstood.

She continued, “Well, it’s just that in all the time I’ve known you, you have never seemed to have a bad day. You’re one of those people that seems like you have it all together, and it was just nice to know that you’re human. It was good to see you like that.” I could feel another migraine coming on, the blind spots nudging their way into my peripheral vision.

My relatively sheltered and private life was now a gaping and crooked chasm of feminine vulnerability. I had lost control of everything—my body, my baby, and my ability to appear controlled at all costs. My miscarriage had transformed me into a Lady Macbeth in a housedress, shrieking:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty!²

I didn’t want to want the world to see my error, my mistake, my miscarriage, my false delivery, because I felt that it was a glaring representation of my own mortality, my own imperfection on display. But this broken body of mine wasn’t giving me any choice. I was my own cubist painting on display.

That broken summer, the baby-weight without the baby forced me to see that I couldn’t control my need for heavenly help, turning it on and off like a miraculous faucet of forgiveness. I hadn’t done anything that could be considered a sin, and yet I needed to acknowledge my own weaknesses in order to find healing.

I came to see repentance as not just an eraser, but as something more, as a way of changing the way I saw my broken world. The LDS Bible Dictionary’s definition of repentance actually focuses on our focus, implying that how we perceive ourselves might just be as vital as our actions: “The Greek word of which this is the translation denotes a change of mind, i.e., a fresh view about God, about oneself, and about the world. . . . Without this there can be no progress in the things of the soul’s salvation.” When I glimpsed in the mirror and saw someone who was only a

2. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 1, scene 5, lines 38–43.

shadow of who I had been before, sometimes it didn't seem like it was all negative.

In an almost surprising way, I started to claim ownership of my own brokenness even as I began to heal from my miscarriage. I started to apply the word “repentance” to my own transformation from broken to healed, and I even began to savor the wide chasm between those two adjectives. President Kimball said it this way: “When most of us think of repentance we tend to narrow our vision and view it as good only for our husbands, our wives, our parents, our children, our neighbors, our friends, the world—anyone and everyone except ourselves. Similarly there is a prevalent, perhaps subconscious, feeling that the Lord designed repentance only for those who commit murder or adultery or theft or other heinous crimes. . . . *Repentance is for every soul who has not yet reached perfection.*”³

Everywhere I looked, I started to claim an almost maternal affection for broken things, for missteps and mistakes and misunderstandings. Even our car couldn't escape my hungry gaze. Our Suburban already looked like it had played the part of the LDS Family Vehicle in several clean and swear-free Mormon home movies. It had been used and abused on family vacations and family ski trips before it had hit Craig's List, and we were happy to get its worn-out carcass because we had outgrown our minivan and the hunk of white bread on wheels was all we could afford.

After running it ragged for a year or two filled with carpools and the remnants of Happy Meals, several concerned travelers anxiously waved their well-manicured nails at me and motioned for me to look at my license plate. I parked the car and noticed that one of the bolts holding our license plate in place had fallen out. Not long after that, I was put on bedrest for another anxiety-filled pregnancy and hardly left the house. I forgot all about the missing bolt and the crooked license plate and concentrated on coaxing my baby to grow despite my inability to keep any food down.

When my colicky little fellow arrived months later, his continuous screams kept my mind on him and off of the license plate until one day several service-oriented people in several different parking lots told me that my license plate was going to fall off. I looked at the license plate,

3. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 33, italics added.

which was about three inches lower on one side than the other. The right side looked like it was going on a joy-ride while the left side was being held down by not only a bolt, but surely some sort of compensatory discipline. I was tired and had a sick baby at home, and I couldn't stop thinking, "No. It's not going to fall off. It's been that way for a year. It's crooked, but it's secure."

The insistence of strangers that my leaning license plate bothered them reminded me of a dear friend's daughter. One evening when she was supposed to be at Mutual, Hannah had met a boy by the train tracks, and he had raped her. My friend didn't find out until nearly three years later, when her daughter was discovered in the high school bathroom passed out from the blood she had lost because of self-harm. She was expelled from the high school and in turn from the group of socially acceptable girls in her ward. The whispers followed her in the gray-carpeted hallways of the church building and into the Young Women's room until finally if she came to church at all, she huddled close to her mom as she played the piano in Primary.

"Mom. I just don't fit in their frame. I'm outside of the frame, and so I don't belong."

My friend and I cried together as she told me about her daughter. The next time someone dutifully reported to me the unacceptable state of my license plate, I thought of Hannah. Hannah's life had been broken into shards, but she was an innocent victim. She was forced into the world of the other and could never be what those girls in our small town would consider normal. Like my license plate, Hannah was viewed as something that needed to be straightened out and fixed—an uncomfortably off-kilter symbol in an otherwise symmetrical world.

The comments about my license plate continued almost every day on virtually every errand I ran. The well-meaning clucks and the helpful fingers pointing. "Your license plate is going to fall off." I became so worn down by the comments that I decided to ask a friend who is a police officer if it was illegal for me to have only one bolt holding up my struggling license plate. He responded that technically it just needed to be stable and that the number of bolts didn't really matter. I decided to leave the bolt off. I did it for Hannah. It was just me and my free-wheeling license plate, cruising all three blocks of Main Street, causing a rowdy and slightly askew ruckus.

Dedicating the state of my license plate to Hannah gave me one line to add to my role as Preacher of the Parking Lot. No. It may be crooked, but it's stable and secure. I asked a police officer about it. "You

know,” I ruminated to the beleaguered woman holding weighty bags of produce and potato chips, “sometimes I think we’re too hard on people who are different or who don’t match the way we think people should be. My license plate reminds me that sometimes it’s okay to be crooked. It’s okay to be different. And sometimes it’s okay to be broken. Broken isn’t always bad.” I’d point to my car’s asymmetrical front end with maternal pride.

After being subjected to my license plate lecture, more than one of my innocent victims has thanked me, but most them look a little startled by my sudden seriousness. One of them was a less-active woman in my ward whom I was assigned to visit teach, but who refused to allow me into her home to give her monthly lessons. Sister Prince had been proudly absent from church for twenty years and wasn’t afraid to get persnickety about it, even if it meant yelling at her visiting teachers to get them to leave her alone. She didn’t recognize me as the woman who brought her children to the doorstep every month to help her bring treats and homemade bread. She didn’t remember that one snowy winter month, my daughter had lured her younger brother to the door and said, “It’s okay if she tries to be mean to us. He’s so cute that we can use him as bait!”

But the parking lot was my pulpit that day. I told Sister Prince my Parable of the Plate and my desire to help people accept and cherish broken things. She nodded and teared up a little, saying, “I wish everyone felt that way.” I thought, “I wish you really knew that I felt that way.” She never let me into her house, and she passed away the next year, never knowing that the visiting teacher thrusting unwelcome bits of home-made goodness through cracks in her door and the woman in the parking lot with the crooked license plate were the same person.

When I was in a singles ward at BYU, my cheerful visiting teachers and I were talking about the Relief Society president, a paragon of discipline and refinement who seemed to effortlessly dance through her daily to-do list, leaving her time for service and smiles each day. We were discussing how much we liked her and how perfect she seemed to be. Suddenly, my visiting teacher leaned in close, and whispered through her perfectly straight teeth, “It makes me want to throw dirt on her!”

Sometimes I worry that in my struggle to look perfect I miss the point of the journey toward perfection. If my miscarriage was a faux pas, then I never should have attempted to bring that “failed child” into the world. If celebrations of the mistakes and missteps of others are the only thing that lifts our heads from our personal pity parties, we probably can’t count that as progressive.

I'm not sure if I could mourn or comfort or cry with friends if I've never mourned or comforted or cried myself. If I have never been broken, how would I ever be fixed? My life only pretends to be full of instant, immediate solutions. If there is a gap between broken and fixed, impatience surfaces and I squirm with discomfort. But there is a certain beauty in broken things, even in miscarriages and crooked license plates.

I'd like to think that a stanza about my crooked license plate would fit right in with Gerard Manley Hopkins's lovely description of naturally freckled and beautifully imperfect wonders:

Glory be to God for dappled things—
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
 All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.⁴

If perfect is flawless and straight-backed and solemn, then I'm not sure I want it. I don't want to have a photoshopped existence, because some of my favorite parts have been slightly bent and out of focus—my frustration with the florist on my wedding day that my husband still teases me about; the scars shining out from my abdomen from two babies who tried to jump into the world feet first; my teenage son accidentally wearing his sister's skinny jeans to school and pulling it off (I still haven't told him); awkward conversations in a parking lot.

This essay by Sarah d'Evegnée won second place in the 2017 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest.

4. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Pied Beauty," in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 74.