Already Broken, Already Whole
A sermon by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge
October 25, 2009

This past January 4th, the first Sunday of the new year, we gathered in this sanctuary for a Service of Remembrance.

We remembered the spirits of friends and family taken from us by death. From our souls to theirs, we wrote messages to them, words of sorrow and joy, comfort and curiosity, repentance and forgiveness, words of farewell. And then we burned the messages in a cauldron, the smoke commingling with the air, the messages sent into the ether. We sang “Spirit of Life” in English and in Spanish. And then, to celebrate the eternal circle of life and death, we named aloud and rejoiced in all the babies born to us and to those dear to us during the past year.

There was no sermon. There was no need for one.

We closed with the words of Howard Thurman, the great African-American preacher, theologian, and spiritual adviser to Martin Luther King, Jr.:

Into the challenge of our anguish
We throw the strength of all our hope:
We match the darts of our despair
with the treasure of our dreams;
Upon the current of our hearts
We float the burdens of the years;
We challenge the mind of death
with our love of life.
Such to us is the Time of Recollection,
The Season of Remembrance.

As a worship leader, I often find myself at a short distance from worship itself. I have to make sure the candles are lit and extinguished, the hymns announced, the offering collected. The stage manager can’t fully appreciate the drama.

But I am moved by the Service of Remembrance.

Honoring so many precious souls departed and arriving, looking into the eyes of their friends and family, I am brought face to face with the terrible paradox of human existence: that everything we love dies and everything that dies is reborn.

Our youth-obsessed culture recoils from death, frantically warding it off with skin creams and pills and injections and surgery.

The Buddhist tradition embraces death, not morbidly but as a teacher. Buddhists meditate on the vision of their own corpses decaying, crumbling, returning to earth. This practice leaves me not depressed but refreshed, full of joy and gratitude for the gift of life and greater equanimity about its transience.

The Buddhist monk Ajahn Chah once held up a glass of drinking water before his students. “You see this goblet?” he asked. “For me, this glass is already broken. I enjoy it; I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put this glass on
a shelf and the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes against the table and it falls to
the ground and shatters, I say ‘Of course.’ When I understand that this glass is already
broken, every moment with it is precious.”

Already broken.

It is the nature of things to break: bodies, minds, hopes, careers, relationships,
institutions, fortunes, empires, civilizations.

One day this beautiful old church will fall, replaced by what? A new church?
Condominiums? A prison? Rubble and weeds surrendering to shrubs and forest?
Even the forest is not promised.
The earth, too, is already broken. Should life on our planet survive human assaults,
hundreds of millions of years from now all will perish as the earth is consumed by our
own dying sun.

Like Ajahn Chah contemplating his drinking glass, I find this realization not
discouraging, but liberating. How precious is the present moment! How filled with
opportunity and vocation and grace!

In precisely the moment of realization that we are already broken comes the flash of
understanding that we are already whole.

Most of us most of the time do not dwell in this awareness. We sleepwalk through
life in what Buddhist psychologist Tara Brach calls “the trance of unworthiness.” We are
convinced there is something fundamentally wrong with us and the task of our lives is to
fix it. Whatever we do, it’s never enough. Whatever image we display to the world,
most of us really don’t like ourselves very much. And we love our neighbors as
ourselves—which is to say, not very well.

But I believe that every human soul is pure, radiant, undefiled, no matter what
challenges and failures we face or cause. We need not earn nor can we forfeit this
inherent goodness. It is our unalienable birthright. No blunder, no betrayal, no crime can
stain it.

Yes, we are already broken—each and every one of us—but we are also already
whole.

Sometimes we catch glimpses of this wholeness.

Thomas Merton saw it one day at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville,
Kentucky, in the faces of shoppers: “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization
that I loved all of those people . . . . [I]t was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their
hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin, nor desire, nor self-knowledge, can
reach the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only we could
all see each other that way all the time! There would be no more war, no more hatred, no
more cruelty, no more greed. I suppose that the big problem would be that we would all
fall down and worship each other.”

For many of us, ironically, it takes the extremity of despair and vulnerability to bring
this realization home.

A woman, a heroin addict, was dying of AIDS. A priest was summoned. He tried to
comfort her, but to no avail.

“I’m lost, she cried. “I’ve ruined my life and every life around me. I’m going to hell,
and there is no hope for me.”

Then the priest noticed a framed picture on a dresser, a photograph of a pretty girl.
“Who’s this?” he asked.
The woman brightened. “That’s my daughter, the one beautiful thing in my life.”
“Would you help her if she was in trouble or made a mistake?” asked the priest.
“Would you forgive her? Would you still love her?”
“Of course I would!” cried the woman, “I’d do anything for her! Why do you ask such a question?”
“Because I want you to know,” said the priest, “that God has a picture of you on his dresser.”

We call crying “breaking down.” The bereaved father tried to speak, the newspaper reports, but he “broke down.”

Crying is not “breaking down.” It is most often a way of healing, returning to wholeness—coming together, not falling apart. Perhaps breaking down is a necessary antecedent to breaking through.

It was for me.

Twenty years ago, the woman with whom I expected to share the rest of my life abruptly broke up with me. I plunged into a vortex of grief, despair, and self-loathing. One night, overcome by distress akin to nausea, I fell to the floor of my new apartment and lay there just wailing.

Eventually I noticed that the floor was hard and uncomfortable and I got up.
That agony was the beginning of my spiritual recovery, my search for a peace that did not depend upon the approval of others—a journey to meditation and contemplation and ministry.

What is that breaks?
Most often, it’s our illusions—the illusion of success, the illusion of self-sufficiency, the illusion of separateness. When illusion shatters, what remains is insight.
When something shatters, where does it go?
We say it falls down, but that’s a trick of perspective. It’s actually being drawn toward the center of the earth by the force of gravity. It’s returning to its source.

Maybe that’s true of all of us. Maybe we’re all flotsam on a great cosmic current carrying us home—the Big Bang itself a mere exhalation of God, which in an eon or two will reverse itself and draw everything back into one, multiplicity returned to unity, and the process will begin again with another vast explosive outbreath.

Philip Simmons knew about falling.
A Unitarian Universalist in New Hampshire, Simmons was diagnosed at age 35 with ALS—Lou Gehrig’s disease. As his body wasted away, he wrote a beautiful and graceful book he titled *Learning to Fall*. “When we learn to fall,” he wrote, “we learn that only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious—our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves—can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom. In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them.”

Philip Simmons died on July 27, 2002, at the age of 45.
Already broken. Already whole.

Heinz Pagels, a quantum physicist and mountain climber, knew about falling.
He wrote, “Lately I dreamed I was clutching the face of a rock, but it would not hold. Gravel gave way. I grasped for a shrub, but it pulled loose, and in cold terror I fell into the abyss. Suddenly I realized that my fall was relative; there was no bottom and no end. A feeling of pleasure overcame me. I realized that what I embody, the principle of life, cannot be destroyed. It is written into the cosmic code, the order of the universe. As I
continued to fall in the dark void, embraced by the vault of the heavens, I sang to the beauty of the stars and made my peace with the darkness.”

On July 23, 1988, Heinz Pagels was killed in a mountaineering accident. Already broken. Already whole.

When Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, was a parish minister, a parishioner named Bill was dying of a brain tumor. Bill knew about falling.

“I was in the Korean War,” he told her. “They made me a sergeant and gave me a group of men to command. They were good guys. I loved them. Every one. Especially Sam, my best buddy. We made it through some tough spots in that forest.

“One day, a message came down from my commanding officer, ordering us to make an ambush the next day. I knew it was madness. It was a suicide mission.

“I argued with him. I went so far as to tell him that if he gave the order, I would refuse. He told me I was betraying my duty—that if I wasn’t going to carry out the command, I wasn’t an American, I wasn’t a soldier, I wasn’t a man. I felt ashamed of myself for questioning him. The next day, I gave the order. We went in. It was bad. Most of my men were killed.

“Sam died in my arms.

“After that, I just fell apart. I broke down. They sent me home. I had failed in every way. I had questioned my superior officer. I had faltered in my duty. And when my men were killed, I couldn’t take the pain. . . . I began to drink. My family fell apart. My wife . . . took [the kids] and left. I drank for the next twenty years.

“And then I met Marge. She told me I was worth something, but I was drinking myself to death. She knew—she’d been there. She took me to Alcoholics Anonymous. I stopped drinking. I began to feel all the things I’d buried and think all the things I couldn’t bear to think. The people in those meetings listened to me. They didn’t judge me; they didn’t even blink. They just listened. Then I really began to come to my senses.

“I saw the truth: I was right to have questioned my commanding officer. When I fell apart when my buddies died, I was right to cry.”

Bill pointed to his heart. “This is my manhood,” he said. “That I can feel. That I care. That I had the courage to question. That I can love. That I can grieve. That I hate war.

“I’m not afraid to die now, because I know what love is.”

Already broken. Already whole.

Leonard Cohen, the brilliant, depression-plagued poet and songwriter, sings it:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in.

Already broken. Already whole.
Amen and Blessed Be.