

Becoming the Beloved

truth to put into words: the truth of our common brokenness. We are chosen and blessed. When we have truly owned this, have said "Yes" to it, then we can face our own and others' brokenness with open eyes. Let's do that now.

III

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The moment has come to talk about our brokenness. You are a broken man. I am a broken man, and all the people we know or know about are broken. Our brokenness is so visible and tangible, so concrete and specific, that it is often difficult to believe that there is much to think, speak or write about other than our brokenness.

From the moment we met, we spoke about our brokenness. You wanted something about me for the Connecticut section of the *New York Times*. I told you about my writing as a means of dealing with my loneliness, my sense of isolation, my many fears and my general sense of insecurity. When the discussion shifted to you, you spoke of your discontent with your job, your frustration at not having enough time or money to write your own novel and your general confusion as to the course of your life. In the

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year that followed our first encounter, we became increasingly open to each other about our suffering and pain. In fact, the sharing of our deep struggles became a sign of our friendship.

You had to live through a painful separation and divorce and I through a long period of depression. You had many disappointments in your work and kept wondering about your true calling in life, while I kept being overwhelmed by the many demands made on my time and energy that often lead me to exhaustion and despair.

Whenever we met again, we became more aware of the brokenness of our lives. There is nothing abnormal about this. When people come together they easily focus on their brokenness. The most-celebrated musical composition, the most-noted painting and sculpture and the most-read books are often direct expressions of the human awareness of brokenness. This awareness is never far beneath the surface of our existence because we all know that none of us will escape death — the most radical manifestation of brokenness.

The leaders and prophets of Israel, who were clearly chosen and blessed, all lived very broken lives. And we, the Beloved Sons and Daughters of God, cannot escape our brokenness either.

There are many things I would like to say to you about our brokenness. But where to begin?

Perhaps the simplest beginning would be to say

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that our brokenness reveals something about who we are. Our sufferings and pains are not simply bothersome interruptions of our lives; rather, they touch us in our uniqueness and our most intimate individuality. The way I am broken tells you something unique about me. The way you are broken tells me something unique about you. That is the reason for my feeling very privileged when you freely share some of your deep pain with me, and that is why it is an expression of my trust in you when I disclose to you something of my vulnerable side. Our brokenness is always lived and experienced as highly personal, intimate and unique. I am deeply convinced that each human being suffers in a way no other human being suffers. No doubt, we can make comparisons; we can talk about more or less suffering, but, in the final analysis, your pain and my pain are so deeply personal that comparing them can bring scarcely any consolation or comfort. In fact, I am more grateful for a person who can acknowledge that I am very alone in my pain than for someone who tries to tell me that there are many others who have a similar or a worse pain.

Our brokenness is truly ours. Nobody else's. Our brokenness is as unique as our chosenness and our blessedness. The way we are broken is as much an expression of our individuality as the way we are taken and blessed. Yes, fearsome as it may sound, as the Beloved ones, we are called to claim our unique

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brokenness, just as we have to claim our unique chosenness and our unique blessedness.

I must try now to get a little closer to our experience of being broken. As I have said already, this is a very personal experience and, in the society in which you and I live, it is generally an experience of inner brokenness — a brokenness of the heart. Although many people suffer from physical or mental disabilities, and although there is a great amount of economic poverty, homelessness and lack of basic human needs, the suffering of which I am most aware on a day-to-day basis is the suffering of the broken heart. Again and again, I see the immense pain of broken relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, lovers, friends and colleagues. In the Western world, the suffering that seems to be the most painful is that of feeling rejected, ignored, despised and left alone. In my own community, with many severely handicapped men and women, the greatest source of suffering is, not the handicap itself, but the accompanying feelings of being useless, worthless, unappreciated and unloved. It is much easier to accept the inability to speak, walk or feed oneself than it is to accept the inability to be of special value to another person. We human beings can suffer immense deprivations with great steadfastness, but when we sense that we no longer have anything to offer to anyone, we quickly lose our grip on life. In-

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stinctively we know that the joy of life comes from the ways in which we live together and that the pain of life comes from the many ways we fail to do that well.

It is obvious that our brokenness is often most painfully experienced with respect to our sexuality. My own and my friends' struggles make it clear how central our sexuality is to the way we think and feel about ourselves. Our sexuality reveals to us our enormous yearning for communion. The desires of our body — to be touched, embraced and safely held — belong to the deepest longings of the heart and are very concrete signs of our search for oneness. It is precisely around this yearning for communion that we experience so much anguish. Our society is so fragmented, our family lives so sundered by physical and emotional distance, our friendships so sporadic, our intimacies so "in-between" things and often so utilitarian, that there are few places where we can feel truly safe. I notice in myself how often my body is tense, how I usually keep my guard up and how seldom I have a complete feeling of being at home. If I then turn to the Toronto suburbs where I live and see the pretentious mega-houses, the ugly shopping malls strewn about to make consumption more efficient and the alluring billboards promising comfort and relaxation in very seductive ways — all of that while forests are demolished, streams dried up, deer and rabbits and birds driven out of my envi-

ronment—I am not surprised that my body screams for a healing touch and a reassuring embrace. When everything about us overstimulates and overextends our senses and when what is offered to us for the fulfillment of our deeper needs generally has about it a slightly seductive character, it is no wonder that we are plagued by crazy fantasies, wild dreams and disturbing feelings and thoughts. It is where we are most needy and vulnerable that we most experience our brokenness. The fragmentation and commercialization of our milieu makes it nearly impossible to find a place where our whole being—body, mind and heart—can feel safe and protected. Whether we walk on the streets of New York or Toronto, it is hard not to be pulled out of our center and experience, in our own bellies the anguish and agony of our world.

The AIDS epidemic is probably one of the most telling symptoms of our contemporary brokenness. There love and death cling to each other in a violent embrace. Young people, desperate to find intimacy and communion, risk their very lives for it. It seems that there is a cry reverberating through the large, empty spaces of our society: It is better to die than to live in constant loneliness.

Seeing AIDS patients die and seeing the spontaneous generosity with which their friends form community to support them with affection and material and spiritual help, I often wonder if this horrendous

illness is not a clear summons to conversion directed to a world doomed by competition, rivalry and ever-increasing isolation. Yes, the AIDS crisis demands a wholly new look at our human brokenness.

How can we respond to this brokenness? I'd like to suggest two ways: first, befriending it and, second, putting it under the blessing. I hope you will be able to practice these ways in your own life. I have tried and try constantly, sometimes with more success than others, but I am convinced that these ways point in the right direction as means for dealing with our brokenness.

The first response, then, to our brokenness is to face it squarely and befriend it. This may seem quite unnatural. Our first, most spontaneous response to pain and suffering is to avoid it; to keep it at arm's length; to ignore, circumvent or deny it. Suffering—be it physical, mental or emotional—is almost always experienced as an unwelcome intrusion into our lives, something that should not be there. It is difficult, if not impossible, to see anything positive in suffering; it must be avoided away at all costs.

When this is, indeed, our spontaneous attitude toward our brokenness, it is no surprise that befriending it seems, at first, masochistic. Still, my own pain in life has taught me that the first step to healing is not a step away from the pain, but a step toward it. When brokenness is, in fact, just as intimate a part of our being as our chosenness and our blessedness,

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we have to dare to overcome our fear and become familiar with it. Yes, we have to find the courage to embrace our own brokenness, to make our most feared enemy into a friend and to claim it as an intimate companion. I am convinced that healing is often so difficult because we don't want to know the pain. Although this is true of all pain, it is especially true of the pain that comes from a broken heart. The anguish and agony that result from rejection, separation, neglect, abuse and emotional manipulation serve only to paralyze us when we can't face them and keep running away from them. When we need guidance in our suffering, it is first of all a guidance that leads us closer to our pain and makes us aware that we do not have to avoid it, but can befriend it.

I remember vividly the day that I came to your house, and you had just come to the realization that your marriage had come to an end. Your suffering was immense. You saw a life-dream evaporate; you no longer had any sense of a meaningful future; you felt lonely, guilty, anxious, ashamed and deeply betrayed. The pain was etched on your face. It was the hardest moment of your life. I happened to be in New York and dropped in on you. What could I say? I knew that any suggestion that you would get over it, that there were still good things to think about or that things weren't as bad as they seemed, would be completely useless. I knew that the only thing I could do was to be with you, stay with you and

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somehow encourage you not to run away from your pain, but to trust that you had the strength to stand in it. Now, many years later, you can say that, indeed, you could stand in your pain and grow strong through it. At the moment, it seemed an impossible task, and, still, it was the only task to which I could call you.

My own experience with anguish has been that facing it and living it through, is the way to healing. But I cannot do that on my own. I need someone to keep me standing in it, to assure me that there is peace beyond the anguish, life beyond death and love beyond fear. But I know now, at least, that attempting to avoid, repress or escape the pain is like cutting off a limb that could be healed with proper attention.

The deep truth is that our human suffering need not be an obstacle to the joy and peace we so desire, but can become, instead, the means to it. The great secret of the spiritual life, the life of the Beloved Sons and Daughters of God, is that everything we live, be it gladness or sadness, joy or pain, health or illness, can all be part of the journey toward the full realization of our humanity. It is not hard to say to one another: "All that is good and beautiful leads us to the glory of the children of God." But it is very hard to say: "But didn't you know that we all have to suffer and thus enter into our glory?" Nonetheless, real care means the willingness

to help each other in making our brokenness into the gateway to joy.

The second response to our brokenness is to put it under the blessing. For me, this "putting of our brokenness under the blessing" is a precondition for befriending it. Our brokenness is often so frightening to face because we live it under the curse. Living our brokenness under the curse means that we experience our pain as a confirmation of our negative feelings about ourselves. It is like saying, "I always suspected that I was useless or worthless, and now I am sure of it because of what is happening to me." There is always something in us searching for an explanation of what takes place in our lives and, if we have already yielded to the temptation to self-rejection, then every form of misfortune only deepens it. When we lose a family member or friend through death, when we become jobless, when we fail an examination, when we live through a separation or a divorce, when a war breaks out, an earthquake destroys our home or touches us, the question "Why?" spontaneously emerges. "Why me?" "Why now?" "Why here?" It is so arduous to live without an answer to this "Why?" that we are easily seduced into connecting the events over which we have no control with our conscious or unconscious evaluation. When we have cursed ourselves or have allowed others to curse us, it is very tempting to explain all the brokenness we experience as

an expression or confirmation of this curse. Before we fully realize it, we have already said to ourselves: "You see, I always thought I was no good.... Now I know for sure. The facts of life prove it."

The great spiritual call of the Beloved Children of God is to pull their brokenness away from the shadow of the curse and put it under the light of the blessing. This is not as easy as it sounds. The powers of the darkness around us are strong, and our world finds it easier to manipulate self-rejecting people than self-accepting people. But when we keep listening attentively to the voice calling us the Beloved, it becomes possible to live our brokenness, not as a confirmation of our fear that we are worthless, but as an opportunity to purify and deepen the blessing that rests upon us. Physical, mental or emotional pain lived under the blessing is experienced in ways radically different from physical, mental or emotional pain lived under the curse. Even a small burden, perceived as a sign of our worthlessness, can lead us to deep depression — even suicide. However, great and heavy burdens become light and easy when they are lived in the light of the blessing. What seemed intolerable becomes a challenge. What seemed a reason for depression becomes a source of purification. What seemed punishment becomes a gentle pruning. What seemed rejection becomes a way to a deeper communion.

And so the great task becomes that of allowing

the blessing to touch us in our brokenness. Then our brokenness will gradually come to be seen as an opening toward the full acceptance of ourselves as the Beloved. This explains why true joy can be experienced in the midst of great suffering. It is the joy of being disciplined, purified and pruned. Just as athletes who experience great pain as they run the race can, at the same time, taste the joy of knowing that they are coming closer to their goal, so also can the Beloved experience suffering as a way to the deeper communion for which they yearn. Here joy and sorrow are no longer each other's opposites, but have become the two sides of the same desire to grow to the fullness of the Beloved.

The different twelve-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics and Overeaters Anonymous, are all ways of putting our brokenness under the blessing and thereby making it a way to new life. All addictions make us slaves, but each time we confess openly our dependencies and express our trust that God can truly set us free, the source of our suffering becomes the source of our hope.

I vividly remember how I had, at one time, become totally dependent on the affection and friendship of one person. This dependency threw me into a pit of great anguish and brought me to the verge of a very self-destructive depression. But from the moment I was helped to experience my interpersonal

addiction as an expression of a need for total surrender to a loving God who would fulfill the deepest desires of my heart, I started to live my dependency in a radically new way. Instead of living it in shame and embarrassment, I was able to live it as an urgent invitation to claim God's unconditional love for myself, a love I can depend on without any fear.

Well, my dear friend, I wonder if I have helped you by speaking in this way about our brokenness. Befriending it and putting it under the blessing do not necessarily make our pain less painful. In fact, it often makes us more aware of how deep the wounds are and how unrealistic it is to expect them to vanish. Living with mentally handicapped people has made me more and more aware of how our wounds are often an essential part of the fabric of our lives. The pain of parental rejection, the suffering of not being able to marry, the anguish of always needing help even in the most "normal" things such as dressing, eating, walking, taking a bus, buying a gift or paying a bill... none of this brokenness will ever go away or become less. And still, embracing it and bringing it into the light of the One who calls us the Beloved can make our brokenness shine like a diamond.

Do you remember how, two years ago, we went to Lincoln Center and heard Leonard Bernstein conducting music by Tschaikovsky? It was a very moving evening. Later we realized that it was the last time

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we were to hear this musical genius. Leonard Bernstein was, no doubt, one of the most influential conductors and composers in introducing me to the beauty and the joy of music. As a teenager, I was completely taken by the enthusiastic way in which he played the role of both conductor and soloist in a performance of the Mozart piano concertos at the Rurhaus Concert Hall in Scheveningen, Holland. When his *West Side Story* appeared on the screen, I found myself humming its captivating melodies for months afterward, returning to the cinema whenever I could.

Watching his expressive face on TV while he directed and explained classical music for children, I realized how much Leonard Bernstein had become my most revered music teacher. It is no surprise, therefore, that his sudden death hit me as that of a very personal friend.

As I write you now about our brokenness, I recall a scene from Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* (a musical work written in memory of John F. Kennedy) that embodied for me the thought of brokenness put under the blessing. Toward the end of this work, the priest, richly dressed in splendid liturgical vestments, is lifted up by his people. He towers high above the adoring crowd, carrying in his hands a glass chalice. Suddenly, the human pyramid collapses, and the priest comes tumbling down. His vestments are ripped off, and his glass chalice falls

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to the ground and is shattered. As he walks slowly through the debris of his former glory — barefoot, wearing only blue jeans and a T-shirt — children's voices are heard singing, "Laude, laude, laude" — "Praise, praise, praise." Suddenly the priest notices the broken chalice. He looks at it for a long time and then, haltingly, he says, "I never realized that broken glass could shine so brightly."

Those words I will never forget. For me, they capture the mystery of my life, of your life and now, shortly after his death, of Bernstein's own splendid but tragic life.

Before concluding these words about our brokenness, I want to say again something about its implications for our relationships with other people. As I grow older, I am more than ever aware of how little as well as how much we can do for others. Yes indeed, we are chosen, blessed and broken to be given. And it is this I want to speak of now.