

We are Whole
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UUMSB

I went to the “big city” yesterday, for the first time in a while. By big city, I mean bustling Hadley, Massachusetts, home of big box stores, cornfields, and tobacco farms. I had gone into, what I affectionately call the belly of the beast, a couple of weeks ago to stand in line outside at Trader Joes for the first time since March because I was out of my favorite cleaning spray, but yesterday, I went into Whole Foods. On a Saturday. Two weeks before Thanksgiving. There were people everywhere. The way the checkout lines worked had changed since I was last there, I got confused, and the staff person helping direct traffic got really frustrated with me. I felt like crap. I felt like a poor country mouse and had glum thoughts about not coming back down the mountain again for a long time. But then, I finally got to the checkout, and the woman at the register was kind and I remembered that I am an adult, and worthy of shopping wherever I choose. It was a small thing, but when I felt out of place and less than, it hit all my buttons about *being* small, and unwelcome, and not right. And that was just a grocery store. It can sometimes be these little things, little moments, that make us feel like we are part of the community, part of the whole, or separate, different, and alone, and it can be as simple as one person drawing a line to keep us out, or offering a hand to invite us in.

In the Hindu tradition there is a goddess, whose name translates to “she who is never not broken,” Akhilandeshwari. Shivali Bhammer, a former investment banker and current singer and performer, wrote for *Hinduism Today* about her experience of connecting with this Goddess on a trip to an ancestral village in India with her father. I will share a bit of her reflection:

In religion, philosophy and culture, we are usually focused on the completeness of something, both in ourselves and outside of ourselves. ...However, the existence of Akhilandeshwari Ma completely flips this concept on its head. She represents the very opposite: she represents the parts or pieces—not the whole. She represents every fragmented shard of us strewn across a floor of our most challenging moments. She represents our complete brokenness. I am drawn to her because, in the recognition of these shattered pieces of my self, I am embracing a truth that, ironically, brings me far closer to the concept of completeness than I would be otherwise.

Why is acknowledging our own seemingly broken, incompleteness so appealing? I think it is because the Goddess represents the power and creativity to pull ourselves back together as we wish to be, the power to constantly recreate ourselves again and again. If we were complete and whole, without an incomplete imperfection, we would be void of change, evolution and creative expression; we would be stagnant. Existence would be unsavory and stale.

...

[She continues]

If we have a puzzle to solve, it is up to us to determine how we wish to put it together. If we did not have pieces within us, how then would we move, adapt and change our life to one day complete it? This challenge is only possible because we are disassembled. Only by accepting this fractured nature within us are we enabled to grow and to face the trials and tribulations of the world. Akhilandeshwari Ma is beautiful because she reminds you

of who you are and who you have the potential to be. The Goddess takes consciousness and places all that energy, and the reins that direct it, back into your hands—which is truly empowering.¹

Shivali Bhammer suggests, and I think she is right, that it is through knowing our brokenness that we are able to transform and put together something new. And, that is incredibly hard if we are feeling like we can't hold all the pieces. When there is stress on a system, like a global pandemic, our cracks, our brokenness show all the more. We see where our social safety net is frayed. Where people whose stories need to be told, who need to be seen, are ignored. In ourselves, and in our families we might not deal with stressors and challenges in ways we wish we would. We might not be our best selves, in a time when we need all our emotional and spiritual resources most. And so, I like to remember that Akhilandeshwari, the never not broken Goddess, rides standing on a crocodile. She stands upon fear and the potential of destruction and moves forward. What is the crocodile on which we stand? Perhaps fears we have overcome, challenges we have met, the power we have as part of the web of life, knowing we are connected to all that is. All of this is a foundation we ride through everything, whether we notice it is there or not.

It takes courage to admit that we are broken, and to know that all of us are broken. But brokenness does not mean that we are less than, or not okay or ruined – being broken means that we are human, and that we change, that we have tools for rebuilding. When I remembered this reflection from a UU colleague, Rev. Beth Lefever, I thought of Akhilandeshwari:

We are whole, even in the broken places, the places where fear impedes our full engagement with life; where self-doubt corrupts our self-love; where shame makes our faces hot and our souls cold.

We are whole, even in those places where perfectionism blunts the joy of full immersion into person, place, activity; where “good enough” does not reside except in our silent longings; where our gaps must be fast-filled with substance, accomplishment, or frenzied activity lest they gape open and disgust.

We are whole where we would doubt our own goodness, richness, fullness and depth, where we would doubt our own significance, our own profoundness.

We are whole, even in our fragility; even where we feel fragmented, alone, insubstantial, insufficient.

We are whole, even as we are in process, even as we stumble, even as we pick ourselves up again, for we are whole. We are whole.²

We are whole. We may be pulled in different directions, we may be struggling with any number of feelings, stresses, grief, and, we are whole. And we have the power to remind those we love, *and* strangers that they are whole as well. Whether a cashier at the grocery store, or a dear friend, we are whole. And we are in relationship with all that is. Even when we have to remind *ourselves* because we are alone in the room, we are whole.

¹ <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=5880>

² <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/175456.shtml>

To be whole is to know we are imperfect, and are supposed to be imperfect. Do you remember the Buddhist story of the water goblet?

You see this goblet?" asks Achaan Chaa, the Thai meditation master. "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 the shelf and the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, 'Of course.' When I understand that the glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious.³

The goblet, perfection, is already broken. This lesson from Buddhism is to help with understanding attachment, and that is part of this work as well, because if we are whole, there may be less emptiness to fill with "things" and instead an opportunity to be present.

Now, let me be very clear, this is not my strength - this is very much an aspirational kind of sermon, but let's go back to my moment in the grocery store. On a different day, maybe if I was feeling more present, or grounded, or connected to all that is, you know, not in a pandemic in a packed store, when I made a mistake and the guy got annoyed, maybe I could have invited him to laugh with me about my mistake, about the glass already being broken, but yesterday, I let it in to push old buttons, and fester--for a few minutes--until I remembered myself and felt that connection to another person. I remembered that I can ride a crocodile if I need to. We are whole even in the broken places, and have the tools to build what comes next, when we are ready. Let's help each other remember.

So may it be.

Amen.

³ Mark Epstein's book, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, p.80-81