

Seeing beauty amid our brokenness

Our spiritual lives are like kintsugi pottery—mended with gold leaf along the cracks.

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Rural cooking pot repaired with Kintsugi technique. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Guggger](#).

Along with two friends, each week I visit Nora, an elder experiencing the slow-motion slide into dementia. My friends and I go to accompany Nora (not her real name) and one another, to share soul-revealing conversation, and to keep vigil with our friend, who charts the passing of cognitive abilities she always defined herself by.

An inherently deep and intelligent woman, Nora is well aware of what's happening to her. She grows frustrated searching for words, pulling up synonyms her net snags on. She relays stories of not remembering and wondering, for example, if it's the middle of the night or time to get up—the symbolism of clocks no longer signifying

the time. Yet she also shares detailed dreams she recalls, and astute reflections from day-to-day. Every Tuesday when we arrive, she lights up with surprise, though we're standard weekly fare and always listed among the felt-tip-penned daily events her husband posts on the fridge. "I love Tuesdays!" she exclaims as we trickle through her door.

For as long as I've known her, Nora's blue-gray eyes have shone with rare love and wisdom. So I was surprised when, on a recent visit, she was overwhelmed with guilt about her life and how (she feels) she's treated people. The weight of her self-reproach transfixed her, and surprised all of us really. It was shocking since Nora seems especially caring, as people go. Yet from the precipice of memory loss she looks on her life and sees moral failure. "Nora," I told her, "when we look at you, all we see is a beautiful, kind person." "Oh, I love hearing this," she replies, leaning forward, reaching, trying to soak it in—uncharacteristically needy for our affirmation. I, along with my other friends, repeat it, all telling her: *You are a beautiful, beautiful person*. We'll keep reminding her.

I recently read an author who used Japanese kintsugi pottery as an illustration of spiritual life (thank you, friend [Jake Owensby](#))—kintsugi being the method of repairing broken pots with gold leaf. So I pulled out this illustration for Nora. As I described the pots to her and explained the analogy, she lit up. Most who know her can see the stunning vessel of growth and grace she is, someone whose long life of experience has been repeatedly, gorgeously mended and re-mended through hard lessons, love, forgiveness, and courageous risk-taking. But at this moment, she mostly sees shards.

I think we're all like this, in a way. How many of us see ourselves as the exquisite, unique, gold-laced pots that we are? Even more challenging, how many of us see other people this way, beyond the tight hallways peopled with our loved ones? There have been a few fleeting moments in my life—times tinged with ecstasy like I'd mainlined some sort of drug (I hadn't), when I could see people around me so astutely and compassionately that I wept with love for them. It was like briefly having X-ray vision to see their hidden transcendence and eternal nature, or to see God in them—ordinary people shopping for toilet paper or slouching down a busy city street. Then as quickly as the epiphany came, it went, and I was left hostage to my critical mind that sees mostly brokenness.

My close friend [Deb](#) is a gifted, heartfelt songwriter; and my favorite of her songs includes the lyric: “God is a big surprise; he’ll kiss you with my eyes.” Like many writers-lyricists she probably wrote “more than she knew” as she composed this. As I reflect on the words, I’m stuck by the multi-dimensionality and stark truth they convey: most notably for me, how God shockingly uses these frail human hearts of ours to love, and how, when we see someone as they truly are, we *are* God’s love and presence, God incarnated by hairy, neurotic, sack-of-blood-and-bone humans. It is magical, this creation, this way we are made and invited to participate.

If I could I would prescribe to each person whatever might enlighten them to their beauty, and to their belovedness to the Great Spirit (a swarm of butterflies? a strain of a particular, meaning-laden song that surfaces when they need it?). And I don’t mean belovedness in spite of who we are, which is what we are so often wrongly told. I mean belovedness because of who we are in our deepest identity—mended and strengthened in the broken places and bearing shiny hints of divinity, however buried they may become.

Originally posted at [Brown’s blog](#)