

Gathering up the fragments: Pieces of possibility

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

“I am looking for a way to vocalize, perform, act out, address the commonly felt crises of my time,” Terry Tempest Williams writes in her new book, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* (Pantheon). “These are spiritual exercises.”

After 9/11 and the start of the wars that quickly followed in its wake, Williams says she “asked the sea” for a word to guide her, and the ocean answered: mosaic. Her book is a record of what she has come to understand as “not simply an art form but a form of integration, a way of not only seeing the world but responding to it.” Her attempt to understand takes her to Ravenna, Italy, where she studies mosaic-making with masters of the craft; to Bryce Canyon National Park, where she observes Utah prairie dogs in a protected yet vulnerable prairie dog colony; to the bedside and grave of her brother Steve; to Rwanda, where, with the artist Lily Yeh and others, she helps survivors of the genocide create a memorial to their dead from shattered fragments left behind by the war; and back to her native American West after reconfiguring the mosaic of her own family.

This is a book of patterns and resonances that shimmer on the surface but also burrow deep into secret places underground. “The ability to recognize patterns,” Williams writes, “is the gift of the attentive life,” and the quality of attention Williams brings to the world makes visible unexpected patterns and unlikely similarities. The endangered prairie dogs, for example, remind her of defiant fists raised to the sky, of monks at prayer, of the flute in Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony, carrying the melody through a tragic history. One of the prairie dogs reminds her of her grandmother; she recognizes a familiar set of the mouth, a dignity of carriage. As the prairie dogs dig their interconnected burrows below ground, out of her sight, she thinks of her father and her brothers, pipelayers by vocation, who through their digging create “the infrastructure of their respective communities.”

Her experience in Rwanda challenges her ability to reconfigure the relations between things. “Whatever boundaries and borders had been drawn inside of me,” she writes, “are trembling, breaking down and shattering.” As she works alongside genocide survivors, hears their stories and shares her own, she comes to see herself as a mosaic. As she shares her project of making something beautiful from the fragments of the past with others, the broken pieces of her life take new shape in relation to them and to their lives. She comes to see the history of the genocide in Rwanda not simply as the tragic history of others, but also as a history that marks her and holds her accountable. “It’s not just my history,” a survivor tells her. “It is your history too.”

The boundaries of her family are redrawn as well. She loses her beloved brother Steve, but then she and her husband—who had chosen to have no children—decide to make room for an adult son from Rwanda when they return to Utah.

Mosaic-making is less about finding beauty—although she often comes across beauty—than it is about “creating beauty in the world we find.” The practice of mosaic-making is deeply communal, as it pieces together shards and fragments of material objects, but also the lives and histories of human beings. As the mosaic artist Marco de Luca teaches, “We create a future through a rearrangement of forms, what we have learned from the past.”

As we live into the first months of this new year, with so much broken around us, we can learn a lot from Terry Tempest Williams and her fellow artists. Creating a mosaic is not the act of putting what has been broken back together into a familiar whole; it is the creation of something new: new forms, new paths, new futures. The mosaic fragments are not puzzle pieces that can fit in only one place, but fragments of possibility; the new thing we create from them may be even more than what we started with.

When Jesus broke a few loaves and fishes with a crowd of thousands, it seemed impossible that even a few people could be fed. But when all had eaten their fill, there were baskets and baskets of broken pieces left over. “Gather up the fragments,” Jesus said, “so that nothing may be lost” (John 6:12).

What would happen in this new year if we took those words to heart? If we decided not to waste a single broken piece of all that lies around and within us? If we rearranged the forms in which we live by placing the broken pieces of our lives and histories alongside the lives and histories of others? What would happen if we

gathered up the fragments of these uncertain times and, together, created something beautiful?