

Until it stays open

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God breaks the heart again and again until it stays open. —Hazrat Inayat Khan

You have two choices when you feel it happening. You can let your heart stretch to the point of ripping open to the beauty and agony of living in this mortal world.

Or you can pull the protective shield back over the vulnerable center. **You can break or you can burrow.** I have done both. Only one gives life.

This morning I will drive to the hospital early, before the roads crowd with commuters, before pale sun softens dark sky into gray. I will carry my son into the surgery center. I will let strangers wheel my baby away and put him under. I will watch the clock and chew my nails and pretend to read while the surgeon operates on him.

A quick and simple procedure, the nurses promise. He will be fine, logic and lots of wiser people assure me. But what if? I still wonder.

Always this is the winding worry that wraps around my thoughts. We each know the exception, the unexpected, the fluke, the tragedy. We press the threat away, shove the rare possibility to the farthest corner of our mind. That cannot happen to us. It will not happen to us. But still my heart beats and fears to break.

I think back on the Big Times I had my heart broken. My brother's death. That awful break-up. Infertility and miscarriage. Friendships forever changed.

I dealt with them well and I dealt with them terribly. We are all works in process.

But whenever I let the heartache change me, when I let my bruised soul stay stretched out so much longer than I thought possible, when I made the grueling choice again and again to let this loss soften my sharp edges into empathy—that was when I discovered God.

As if I were tripping over an obvious root on the path—*oh! there you were all along!*—and remembering that this was exactly how growth happens: you love, you lose, you live on changed.

Does God break our hearts on purpose? Make us suffer to learn a lesson? Theologically I bristle at these thoughts. This is not the nature of love.

But I do know that something strange and surprising happens when I sit with loss. When I refuse to push away pain. **I find God in the midst of it.**

I learn how God's heart breaks over and over again with ours. I begin to understand again how the mystery of dying and rising is the shape of loving wisdom. Even when I want to protect myself from pain, small scared creature that I am.

Today I will open my heart up again in a tiny way to the terror of loss. Today I will choose to lift up in prayer those who lie alone in hospital beds with no one to worry over them. Today I will try to remember parents who are losing their hearts and minds right now as their beloved child suffers in their arms.

Today I will make myself sit with the uncomfortable truth that all my children will know pain, loss, suffering, and heartache deeper than I dare to imagine for them. None of us are spared this truth.

But today I choose to wedge this heart open with love, too. I choose to see my oldest son's sparkling blue eyes and wonder at the gift of his life in mine. I choose to let him go again into the wide world that can hurt but also heal him.

I choose to give him time, presence, comfort, attention—all the simplest things that children crave—by giving up all of my own.

Letting go and letting our children change us. These are two of the hardest and holiest practices of parenting. It is an unrelenting school of humility, this daily learning to love the creatures we help to create.

But how good it is, too, when our hearts widen beyond what we thought possible. When we see what starts to happen when we stay open.

He will do just fine with this, his doctor assured me earlier this week.

He'll do better with it than you will, she added, looking at me over her glasses with a doctor's wisdom and a mother's empathy.

She is right, of course. I believe this in my bones. But if I let my worrying heart break open and stay open—here and now, again and later, a thousand more times through their childhoods and beyond—then maybe I can do better, too.

Maybe I can pull from broken fear and leap into wider love.

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