Everybody hurts

When I applied to study psychology many years ago, I was asked the standard question: Why do you want to be a psychologist? I cannot recall my exact answer but it went something like: “I want to help people, I want to make a difference”. I knew then about the pain in the world, about the pain in each of us. I knew that “Everybody hurts” as in the popular REM song of the same name. I also knew that I wanted to make things better. I wanted to comfort and make things “right” again, to fix things.

And so it was that I qualified and have people coming to me to ask me for strategies to run away or escape from their hurt and pain. They bring me their grief, shame, disappointments and fears asking “to be fixed”. “I want to feel normal again!” , “I don’t want to feel these feelings”, “Please make them go away” they implore. Many of them tell me stories of trying to hide from their pain through affairs, overworking, eating too much or too little, and taking medication. They tell me stories of how they tried to numb their pain through addiction to alcohol, carbohydrates, sugar, drugs, gambling, gaming and porn. They blame their parents, their partners, their bosses, their children for their pain and discomfort. And they blame themselves.

Then they look at me in a bewildered way when I talk to them about the need to acknowledge their pain, not just superficially, but really deeply; allowing themselves to connect with and express their pain and hurt. I tell them that we cannot hide from, outrun, or numb our pain – that it is an integral part of ourselves which must be acknowledged before the journey of healing can begin.

In June 2010 what I was trying to say to my clients was wonderfully presented in a Ted Talk by Brenë Brown entitled “The Power of vulnerability”. Brenë Brown is a Research Professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work who has spent the past 10 years researching and studying vulnerability, courage, authenticity and shame. Her argument is that essentially we are all looking for connection, to give our lives meaning and purpose. But what stops us from connecting with others authentically is, in essence, our fear that we are not good enough. This means that we cannot really be seen for whom we are, for to be seen (really seen) would expose us as being fundamentally unworthy and unlovable. In essence, the thing that keeps us out of connection is the fear that we are not worthy.

So we attempt to cover up our imperfections (it is not surprising that Photoshop, concealers and cosmetic surgery are so popular) and we pretend to ourselves, to each other and to the world that “we are fine”. But really we are covering up and hiding our vulnerability. When the pretence stops working we often become sick, depressed and exposed. Some people may be surprised saying “But he/she seemed so together”, “But they have it all” etc. Criticism, judgement and secrecy make up the shame that we feel (according to Brown) as the illusions, self-deceptions and persona start to crumble and fade. Our attempts at selectively numbing our pain, disappointments and fears also leads to the numbing of our creativity, joy, gratitude and happiness says Brown. It is often at this point that my clients present in therapy and where the opportunity to have the courage to be imperfect presents itself.

This courage to be imperfect is beautifully visually articulated in the Japanese art form called Kintsugi. Kintsugi or “golden joinery” is a method of restoring a broken piece (usually pottery or ceramic) with a lacquer that is mixed with gold, silver or platinum. In Kintsugi that which is broken or damaged is not concealed or discarded. It is instead embraced as part of the history of the object, made strong by the repair, and in the process is often transformed into something more beautiful.
than the original. This is powerfully articulated in a quote from Ernest Hemingway when he says: “The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places.”

So, now, some 30 years later, if I was asked the question why I am a psychologist, my answer would be a bit more considered, measured. I still want to help people and I still want to make a difference. But I now know a bit more about how to go about it. I have become better at helping people to find their own way, giving them enough comfort to be themselves. And I have learnt that there is beauty, healing and treasure to be found in life’s scars.

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