

Professionally Speaking...

by Denise M. Paul MA, CT, CPLC

The Precious Scars of Grief

The thought of feeling “broken” or “shattered” is a very common metaphor used to convey a parent’s state of being following a miscarriage, stillbirth, or early infant death. The challenge that all grieving parents face is the ability to move forward and function in this state of brokenness.

A grief exercise that exemplifies this feeling is sometimes used in grief support groups with children and adults. It involves taking a hammer to a clay flowerpot and smashing the pot into several pieces. The bereaved person is then instructed to glue the pot back together again, either in the same shape that it once was, or in a totally different fashion. It can then be decorated with paint, jewels, or any variety of art supplies. The purpose of the activity is to demonstrate that a person will never be the same after losing a loved one, but that they can still function and be “whole” in a different and even beautiful way.

An advanced artform that exemplifies this same idea is the Japanese art of Kintsugi. Kintsugi teaches that broken objects are not something to hide, but rather to display with pride. Instead of throwing away a broken bowl or precious vase, the Japanese who practice this technique keep the item and enhance the breaks by using liquid gold or silver as glue, thus adding value to the broken object by highlighting its cracks.

How does this artform symbolize what the grief journey looks like? Consider this. You feel broken – even shattered after your baby dies. Your heart is hurting, while the rest of the world carries on without even noticing your brokenness. You try to hide the fact that you live in fear of never being the same again. The metaphor of a broken bowl works well here. When we break a bowl, we often use an invisible super glue to attempt to fix the bowl and hide the evidence of its cracks. The Japanese choose to highlight the cracks with gold and silver lacquer so that everyone can see the imperfections. It is their belief that the lines of lacquer make the bowl even more beautiful and interesting.

Think of the cracks as scars on your heart where the memories of your baby are held. The scars are physical manifestations of resilience. The scars show that you feel different, but stronger. There have been some lessons learned. There have been tears shed. You would not want to survive this loss and be exactly the same as you once

were. Your baby's brief life has changed you, not into a broken person, but into a stronger person who has overcome a deep hurt.

Everyone shares a common need for their grief to be witnessed. The broken bowl is a tangible representation of how the pain of loss affects a person. In revisiting the broken bowl metaphor – if the breaks in the bowl are fixed with glue that dries clear, the cracks would not be illuminated, hiding the precious scars that serve as reminders of your sorrow, resilience, and strength.

The beautiful cracks remind you of the pain that is the most precious connection to your baby. You may be whole again, but the memory of your baby will be etched in your heart forever...and you will never be the same.

