



The Broken Plate

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This broken plate was my grandmother's. It broke in transport from my mother's home of over 40 years, which I sold a couple months ago. You may ask why I kept this beautiful broken plate.

Before I tell you why, I am going to share with you a few other broken plates that I googled on the Internet last night. There were over 3 million hits for the words "broken plate." I found broken plates in the following places:

Restaurant
Xray
Craft stores
Movie
Land form
Clip art
University literary magazine
Car decal sticker
Piano tuner
A 2nd helping of chicken soup for the soul
Legal court case
Juggler
A fashion plate, broken....

And many more. Why are so many people, like me, attracted to broken plates? Here's a story I found on the Internet about a broken plate:

Mom walked to the cupboard and took down a plate. Holding it up, she said, "See this chip? I was 17 when this happened. I'll never forget that day." My mother's voice softened and she seemed to be remembering another time. "One fall day my brothers needed help putting up the last of the season's hay, so they hired a strong young man to help out." Mom paused, then continued. "My mother had asked me to go to the hen house to gather fresh eggs. It was then when I first noticed this very handsome young man. I stopped and watched for a moment as he picked up the large and heavy bales of freshly cut hay and slung them up and over his shoulder, tossing them effortlessly into the hay loft. I tell you, he was one gorgeous man: lean, slim-waisted, with powerful arms and shiny, thick sandy-blond hair. He must have felt my presence because with a bale of hay in mid-air, he stopped and turned and looked at me, and just smiled. He was so incredibly handsome," she said slowly, running a finger around the plate, stroking it gently.

"Well, I guess my brothers took a liking to him because they invited him to have dinner with us. When my older brother directed him to sit next to me at the table, I nearly fainted. You can imagine how embarrassed I felt because he had seen me standing there staring at him. Now, here I was seated next to him. His presence made me so flustered, when he asked me when I was to graduate, I got tongue-tied. I don't remember what I said!" Suddenly remembering that she was telling a story in the presence of her young daughter and a neighbor, Mom blushed and hurriedly brought the story to conclusion. "Well, anyway, he

handed me his plate and asked that I dish him a helping. I was so nervous that my hands shook. When I took his plate, it slipped and cracked against the casserole dish, knocking out a chip. I handed the plate back to him, hoping he hadn't noticed."

"Well," said Marge, unmoved by my mother's story, "I'd say that sounds like a memory I'd try to forget."

"On the contrary," countered my mother. "As he was leaving the house he walked over to me, took my hand in his and laid the little piece of chipped glass in my palm. He didn't say a word, just smiled that incredible smile. One year later I married that marvelous man. And to this day, when I see this plate, I fondly recall the day I met him." She carefully put the plate back into the cupboard -- behind the others, in a place all its own. Seeing me staring at her, she gave me a quick wink. Aware that the passionate story she had just told held no sentiments for Marge, she hurriedly took down another plate, this time one that had been shattered and then carefully pieced together, with small droplets of glue dribbled out of rather crooked seams.

*"This plate was broken the day we brought our newborn son, Mark, home from the hospital," Mom said. "What a cold and blustery day that was! Trying to be helpful, my six-year-old daughter dropped that plate as she carried it to the sink. At first I was upset, but then I told myself, it's just a plate and I won't let a broken plate change the happiness we feel welcoming this new baby to our family. As I recall," she said, "we all had a lot of fun on the several attempts it took to glue that plate together!" (excerpt from "The Little Glass Chip," ***A Second Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul***, by Jack Canfield & Mark Victor Hansen.)*

Nobody ever had a lot of fun in my house for breaking plates. Yet, who among us has not broken a dish? When we do that we feel so remorseful. We made a mistake. Those of us who have been brought up to strive for perfection are constantly let down with our mistakes. The symbolic beauty of "broken plates," letting ourselves fall apart, feeling our lives shattered into pieces, is that we have an opportunity to reconstruct our lives, bricolage – the French term, found in French hardware stores, for "build a life."

The past year, my family experienced several heart-breaking losses, including moving my mother from her home of 40 years. As a way to move through my grief, I envision this broken plate as a symbol for letting myself fall apart, letting the pieces of my life shatter, and taking the time to observe what I am doing, how I am leading my life and what is meaningful to me. As a result of these "shattered plates," here is what I chose to create:

- Edit a special issue of the *Career and Adult Development Journal* on "career and caregiving" (and invite leading career/caregiving specialists) to contribute;
- Start an online community for active seniors (agingworks.org);
- Create a "Certified Family Caregiving Counselor" training program with my colleague Donna Christner-Lile, who recently wrote a book on *Aging-in-Place* (I wrote the introduction);
- Write a narrative recipe book dedicated to my mother (My mother's recipes are more valuable than anything one could pick up at an estate sale.). I wrote the book in four days, directly after I moved my mother.);
- Write a photo essay dedicated to my mother's dedication to education and community (I wrote the photo essay in four hours the day before I went to visit her at her new senior residence).
- Take my son's dog Annie for a walk every day;

- Invite my friends to celebrate my 60th B-day tea party in my friend Mae's garden (It was a grand occasion). I commit to being off sugar and cream for a week;
- Listen to other people's broke-plate stories, and help reconstruct them with meaning.

Related to broken plates are broken glasses. In Jewish weddings, the groom breaks a glass to symbolize the Jewish community's continuing sorrow of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Among Kabbalists (adherents of Jewish mysticism), this custom is said to be a reminder of the broken fragments of Creation, and our need to engage in Tikkun Olam, the repairing of the world on a spiritual level. Broken plates symbolize letting the pieces of of my life fall apart and then picking them up and putting them together in new ways.

Now I want to hear your stories.