

When a Book is Like a Person: Lessons from Book Repair

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Think of the material object we call a book; that is, stacked sheets of paper cut or shaped to a size that can usually fit in our hands and easily carried and held. The pages are fixed at one edge and use covers thicker than the sheets bound within the covers. These objects have been in use for over seventeen hundred years and can be found in every privvy, library and home, on every continent where people read. A book is an unusually efficient medium for the imprint and circulation of the written word and image and for sharing the ideas, feelings, and information its authors seeks to convey with those who open its pages. A book is compact and sturdy; each side of the page bears the impress of words and pictures—so it's economical in the use of material. And unlike the ancient scroll format (and our modern electronic devices!), the book provides immediate visual and physical entry to its contents: you can enter at any place, any page at random or by choice simply by physically riffling through and turning to any of its pages.

We've all grown up in a world of books; I can't imagine my life without them. Now I could go on about why they have been treasured and reviled, collected and burned, the role they've played as agents of change and stasis—but that's not my topic today. I have something else in mind this first Sunday of the year. I want to share some lessons from book repair; and how, in approaching and caring for a well-worn book, I learned, perhaps, something about being with and for another person in a caring and constructive way.

We're used to talking about people and our lives as though they were books. We hear people say: I'm going to turn a new leaf. She started a new chapter in her life. Don't judge a book by its cover. Her life was bookended by... My life is like an open book. Books are like people, they turn up in your life when you most need them. Books are the mirrors of the soul. Books are like the generous friends who met me without suspicion. And so on.

I have a fair number of books in my office and at home. In a few short years, I will be able to part with most of them, I think. Some, however, are priceless: treasured companions of my days past and future, touchstones in my life's journey. Some are the favourite books read out loud to my children when I felt, perhaps, most deeply satisfied and competent as an adult and intimately connected with my children. Others, when first read over the years, etched deep

grooves that formed the individual person I have become. Still other books are treasures passed on down and linking our family with previous generations and to our roots stretching down and back through the ages.

Time and use have been hard on many of these favourite books, reference texts and family treasures; they have broken backs, split and frayed spines, torn and dog eared pages, and sheets worn loose from their bindings from countless turnings and reading. I have long wanted to conserve and repair them, but didn't have the skill and time. And then came the months of sabbatical last year and an opportunity to do something about it. So I started a tutorial on book repair last Spring with Aimee Henny Brown of Emily Carr University. She is a knowledgeable and excellent teacher; and through her studied eyes and hands, considered as individual material objects and through the essential principles of repair, I began to see books as never before.

Think about it: each book has a head and foot, a back with a spine, an outer covering like skin, hinges like joints, and a body core—a text block of sewn, bandaged and pasted paper leaves. In a word, I began to see books—the material object—like a person—embodied individuals arrayed in the company of others on a shelf with unique stories and histories. Some are in robust good health—they can stand alone and circulate ready to use; others are cracked, frayed, frail and broken with age and in need of attentive care; others still, a select few, need emergency treatment: bandages for torn paper, sewing jobs and paste to repair grievous injuries—detached covers, broken backs, body parts—pages and groups of pages called signatures—spilling out and in need of surgery.

We soon accumulated tools for the work of repair: sewing needles, beeswax and thread, spare paper, bone folders, splints, scalpels, dissecting needles, and brushes; and we set up a spare table in the dining room on which to operate and carry out repairs. Does this bring a picture to your mind? It was something like an operating theatre, with books as persons in need of surgery and care. From Ms Brown, my teacher, I learned some basics on diagnosis, triage and the tools and steps needed for the repair; I also learned from her some basic principles guiding the process—principles I found applicable to some human situations and relationships.

Four principles stand out: harmlessness, durability, reversibility and like with like; these are goals one should strive for in every treatment. Decisions to act should consider the effects of a particular repair throughout the expected life of the book.

Harmlessness and durability. The repair of a book should do as least harm as possible to the object itself and it should be durable enough to provide protection throughout its life. In practice that means, treatment with chemicals, rubber cement, scotch and duct tape are out—they're really murder on books and paper. Here, I can't help thinking of times when, in response to someone in distress, all-too-often, we hand out clichés like duct tape and drugs when what's really needed is a step back—a thoughtful, listening, empathetic response guided by the principle of what will do the least harm and what will be the most durable thing I can say or do.

Consider these practical rules when choosing a repair method: always test before you begin any treatment; always begin with the least abrasive and complex approach; don't laminate, chemically treat, scotch or duct tape, don't use paper clips and rubber bands; always seek advice when you need it; and, given a book with many problems or conflicting possibilities, when in doubt, don't do anything to the book, make a box for it and leave well enough alone. Sometimes we need to follow the advice of the exasperated stage director rehearsing her actors when she cried out: don't just do something, stand there!

Reversibility. These practical rules, along with the principles of harmlessness and durability, bring up the next book repair principle: it's called *reversibility*—that is, don't do anything you can't undo. For example, when a book and its pages are in need of repair, Ms Brown showed how a paste made of simple, organic ingredients—unprocessed wheat or rice flour and water—when brushed carefully onto a paper bandage applied to distressed and torn paper—makes for a durable, relatively harmless and reversible repair. That is, if you need to return and improve the repair, and I've done this and it works!—all you have to do is carefully brush a small amount of water onto the paper bandage you've fixed on the page with your mixture of wheat or rice flour and water—and voila!—the bandage loosens up and permits you to readjust and strengthen the repair. It may seem counterintuitive and anxiety making, but a simple, non-invasive repair with water and paste, and a bit of pressure applied with weights, can be very forgiving.

There's a novel called *A Month in the Country* written by J.L. Carr that I love. A young World War One veteran named Birkin, trained in art restoration, has physically survived the war, but bears grievous emotional wounds. In the summer of 1920, he accepts a commission in a remote rural town with its medieval church to remove a layer of paint—imagine a blank, white washed wall—that covers up what may be an extraordinary depiction of the Last Judgment on

the transept walls of the church arching over the apse of the chapel. With simple, non toxic solutions, carefully applied, step-by-step, Birkin begins to remove the paint to reveal what lies underneath.

I'm not going to tell you a lot of what happens—I don't want to spoil your experience of encountering this unusually quiet and insightful story, except this: hundreds of years ago, and for complex reasons, a great, medieval narrative fresco and its secret message were completely painted over and thus hidden from view. Down through the centuries, what lay beneath was protected from the vicissitudes of changing climate and religious tastes. But the effects of the over-painting and the materials used long ago were reversible under the skilled hands of someone who could repair and thus reveal what had been hidden. And as Birkin, the soul damaged war veteran, began to uncover the fresco—to bring the past into the present, to reveal a festering, unquiet secret one reparative brush stroke at a time,—as he did this, he began to heal his own deep wounds.

The cycling spiral of the seasons tells us that time doesn't flow in just one, irreversible direction. The wounding of words and deeds, as well, need not always be an irretrievable, irreversible blight. Even in the 21st century, the human capacity for repentance and forgiveness endures. Truly, there are times when there is nothing we can do, and we make a box with a door that can be opened, and set a well-worn, complicated book inside it. What I can, and want to say, is that if we care enough for each other, for our stories, our past, and put the principle of reversibility into practice, it may turn out that people and our relationships with them, *can be* as forgiving as a distressed and abraded book if we would but approach and handle them with reparative care; that grace, even, can break through; it need not be unimaginable.

Like with like. This brings me, in the end, to the fourth principle of book repair. Think about a page in a book: the paper's torn and you want to repair it. Here I remember my instructor's words: you repair like with like. First, examine the paper with the torn page in the book. What kind of paper is it; what is its weight; what direction does the grain of the paper run? Whatever paper you choose for the repair should be as similar as possible to the paper in the book including weight and grain. This ensures consistency in the surface and the durability of the repair.

It's like the sewing of patches on to clothes that are ripped: if the patch is made of material different in kind and weight, before long, the joint between the two kinds of material

buckles, shreds and gives way. Over forty years ago, when I was a missionary in France, I biked day in day out everywhere for my work. All that biking wore out the seat of the suit I had to wear as part of my uniform. The suit was store bought when I was in grade nine, ill-fitting and made of cheap polyester. It served its purpose, but here were nonnegotiable tears in the fabric that had to be repaired; and I didn't have money to buy another suit. The solution? I sewed in a cheap polyester sock of the same weight and colour to mend the rips. I was kind of proud of my needlework. It wasn't pretty, and I didn't invite anyone to take a close look, but it conformed to the principle of like with like.

Like with like. True story. There was a young woman in a psychiatric ward and pretty much given up on as a hopeless case. Every day, she slipped from her hospital bed and lay underneath it motionless, curled up and without speech. Her doctors didn't know what to do. So they invited a then young therapist named Arnold Mindell who had something of a rep for being kind of "out there" to visit this young woman. Mindell entered her room, and without giving it much thought, dropped to the floor and just laid there under a chair near the bed underneath which the young woman laid curled up in a ball. This went on for several days. The same routine, without words being exchanged.

Finally, the young woman spoke: "It's no good being a human being. I am a fish." And Mindell replied: "blub," and quietly waved his hands around like fins. And then she said "blub, blub." And then they just looked at each other.

I'll shorten the story: After a couple of months, that young woman—who'd been speechless, catatonic and beyond the pale—walked out of that hospital. Time passed and she went to see Mindell. Several visits ensued, and finally she told him she was the daughter of a man who had committed unspeakable atrocities in violent warfare. When she found that out, she decided it wasn't worth being a human being anymore. "I didn't want to kill myself," she said, "so I became a fish." The two of them cried. And, I will add, she went on to have a fabulous life.

Looking back, Mindell said this: It's so important to join with people, to step into their dream especially if it's a nightmare and to validate their experience. And the thing is, she did an enormous favour for me. How many times have I had the chance to play with another adult as a fish? You see, she was also healing something in me. People heal us, heal each other, by bringing up very different kinds of experiences that help us understand the full range of what it

means to be human, and this happens when we make ourselves available to each other.

<http://www.madnessradio.net/madness-radio-physics-dreaming-and-extreme-states-arnold-mindell/>

For Mindell, it meant becoming a fish so that she could meet this young woman in her fish world, and then step by step bringing her back into the circle of humanity. *Like with like*.

One more story. To become a Unitarian minister, I had to do on-site training as a chaplain in a major urban hospital. I was there in emergency rooms, surgeries, meeting grieving kin who'd just received word of the death of a loved one, and visiting with people in their hospital rooms. (I have enormous respect for the work and wisdom of our hospital chaplains.)

In training, however, we were schooled in no uncertain terms that we were there to minister *to* the patients, and not to be ministered *by* them. If issues arose while visiting as chaplains that brought forth our own unprocessed, personal stuff, we were not to share it, not to burden them, not to lean on the patient to minister to the minister. I get it, and for the most part see the wisdom in it. One time, however, I seriously violated that rule.

There was a man in his early seventies awaiting major surgery the following morning. We fell to talking, and soon I learned that he was a World War II veteran who'd fought with US forces in the Pacific, just like my father, and in some of the same theatres of war. It's hard to explain—like no other time in my life since his death, I felt like my father was there, that I was speaking with him. Contrary to all the rules I was learning as a chaplain, I shared some very personal feelings with this man—some of them were very painful. And then, from a place beyond the tiresome tempests and worries of this life, an elderly man my father's age, having walked in something like my father's shoes, acknowledged the pain of estrangement, and spoke to me and, as I recall, to his own estranged son who wasn't in that room—he spoke to us as if from beyond the grave: healing words of love, contrition, mercy and forgiveness, words knitting together needs, like with like, that rose to something like grace.

In that hospital room long ago, I guess I broke the rule of withholding myself, trusting that what could heal was mutual compassion—the disclosing and giving of self-to-self, like-with-like—and thus, urging forward the work of reparative emotional healing. I think that that was exactly what an elderly man facing surgery, contemplating the course and value of his life, and what I needed in that moment and mortal place of encounter.

There are books on my shelves in need of thoughtful, skilled repair; books cracked, frayed, frail and broken with age, books with detached covers, broken backs, pages spilling out in need of attention and care. There are people and relations, too: similarly built and embodied, worn, abraded, and deeply loved and valued beyond price. From the work of book repair, I'm thinking and feeling—if only we would approach and care for one another in the way a person skilled in the work of conservation and repair listens, handles, cares and repairs a book in need of thoughtful and loving attention! If we'd only do this, we'd be living in a different, a more humane and caring world.

May the principles of harmlessness, durability, reversibility and like with like, may the practical rules of repair, guide my book repair work, *and* as we live and relate to the people we love in this short sojourn we call a human life.