
JINEN:
Daniel's Teeth

Cracks aren't what they're cracked up to be.

KOAN

Jinen's son, Daniel, has grown up with disabilities. As a result, though he is still a young man, his body has begun to deteriorate. Since he does not brush his teeth, they break and fall out. Jinen makes suggestions, but Daniel won't follow them. There have been many painful times like these over numerous years.

Daniel's teeth continue to decay and break. But tell me, has there ever been a crack?

REFLECTION

What fantasies and wishes do you have for your children? A good education, health, love, a family of their own, a life of their own? Some of what you hope for will happen, some won't. Some children can't hold onto jobs, some can't hold onto their health. Some

never get married or have children, some never leave home. Some have poor personal hygiene resulting in teeth that yellow and fall out, and a body that breaks down at a young age.

Ernest Hemingway wrote: "The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places."²⁰ Things crack all the time—not just teeth, but relationships, careers, families, health, holidays together. At the same time, there's a promise: *Many are strong in the broken places.*

What does it mean to be broken? What does it mean to be cracked? Don't we all have cracks somewhere—in our teeth, in our mind, in our life? You might say that Daniel's cracks are normal for him. You can go further and say that Daniel's cracks are his jewels.

I have a terrible fear of thunderstorms. The minute lightning used to strike near the house, my husband would give me an alert, discerning look. In recognizing my rising anxiety, he was also recognizing my cracks, the unique mix of qualities he thought of as his wife. Zen Peacemakers says its work takes place in the cracks, those places we try to skip over, ignore, or stay away from.

Sunflowers grow in the cracks, and so do we.

The areas of deepest pain, often connected to our children, are precisely the ones where we must pay deepest attention. The gap between life as it is and life as we'd like it to be is hardest here, the universe unfolding according to its own karmic laws as opposed to our fondest wishes. In that gap there's a sense of rawness, as though blinders have fallen off our eyes. Ideas, plans, assumptions, and dreams of the future—all have fallen by the wayside, into the cracks. In working with her son's cracks, Jinen's cracks appear as well, a ripe field of practice.

For hundreds of years, Chinese and Japanese Zen teachers would hit or yell at their students in an effort to catch them by

surprise and break through the conceptual, self-centered veil that is part of our costume as humans. What were they trying to do if not to crack us wide open? Life with children can do that to us, too. And even as we grieve and mourn for a lost sense of normalcy (which is usually a synonym for how we think things should be), we could learn to appreciate these wide-open cracks that demand our attention and creativity, demand that we improvise moment by moment.

The refuge we call *this very moment* is the place where we experience the unity of all life, including youth, sunlight, spring, cancer, gauntness, and a mouth with no teeth. It includes Daniel and his mother's deep love for him, along with her frustration, upset, and disappointment.

How do you bear witness to such fullness? Not by denying heartbreak, but by being present. Bear witness, feel your child's hurt, hear his stubborn rejoinders, see both the smile and the rejection. Don't shut yourself off from anything. Can you see that even as your child is sick the birds still fly to the feeders; the sun shines, followed by a caravan of clouds, and then shines again; cars hurry to their destinations; and couples fall in love and kiss on park benches?

What is a "normal" life for you or your children? When life changes, is there a new "normal?" What happens to it?