

The Art of SCARS

Perfection is overrated. Our broken bits actually make us more distinctive, more beautiful, and immensely more valuable.

By Kathy J. Hagler, Ph.D.



The first time I saw a Japanese *kintsugi* vase in an online art room, I was convinced I already understood that healing was an art. It was unique and beautiful, like other pieces of fine art that speak to the soul. But this vase got my attention because it had obviously been broken before the pieces were rejoined with gold bonding. At first, I wondered why the artist hadn't repaired the scars in a way that made them less noticeable, perhaps with a clear glue. Then, I realized that the gold scars made the vase more distinctive and valuable than it had been before it was broken and reassembled. This new vase—a much-elevated version of the original—owed its beauty entirely to its scars. The vessel was not beautiful merely in spite of those imperfections.

When I saw the vase, I thought, *It's healed and beautiful. I don't feel healed and beautiful.* Instead, I was waiting for the next, horrible thing to happen. When my husband died of cancer several years after our son was killed, I felt as if I was being targeted by life. Then came my own cancer. The feelings of my broken, scarred body and spirit loomed large. But this vase seemed to be telling me that I could be a full, whole human being again. I could heal, put myself back together. It was my choice. My scars were my wings.

I wanted to understand *kintsugi* at a deeper level. What would it look like and feel like to heal a *kintsugi* vase and make it whole? I went searching for a *kintsugi* artist, and I was surprised to find Kati Cushman, a *kintsugi* artist and a *kintsugi* counselor. Kati told me that she could help me experience *kintsugi* while at the same time explaining how the process can be healing to individuals.

She told me to begin by purchasing two pottery pieces. I suggested that I find them in an antique store. I wanted to begin with something beautiful, but she told me to buy inexpensive pieces at a thrift store. As Kati reminded me, I was just going to break them. I couldn't help imagining hitting the vases with a hammer.

Fracturing Fear

When I arrived at her workshop with the vases, Kati put them in two plastic bags, and we walked down the stairs to the street. There, she told me to drop the two bags of pottery on the pavement. I was shocked. This step of the process seemed dramatic and unnecessary. I had already become somewhat attached to the vases and already appreciated their imperfections. While I thought I could bear seeing them cracked, I did not think I wanted to destroy them. But Kati insisted, so I let go



of the bags and watched as the pottery crashed to the ground. All that was left of the vases were large, sharp shards of cracked clay sticking through the plastic.

My spirit felt broken as we climbed the stairs again to the artist's workshop. I was silently questioning if I had made a big mistake. In that moment, it was clear to me why people want to hide their brokenness from the public. The vase

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reflected how I felt every day, as if the world were chipping away at me, leaving me vulnerable and imperfect. I could relate to being just pieces of my former self.

Following Kati's directions, I deposited the jagged pieces on the table. One of the vases was almost completely destroyed, and I could see it would take a very talented artist to make it whole again. The other was broken into about twelve pieces, but about a third of the vase, including the entire base, was still intact. Looking at the broken vases reminded me of the moment when my husband was diagnosed with cancer. He lost all joy and hope, and until his death several years later, he rarely smiled. His energy seemed to have died that day, just as broken as the pieces on the table. As I looked at the vases, I could feel the prickles of anxiety starting up my neck. There were so many tiny pieces of gray pottery spread out on the table. How could they ever become something beautiful and valuable again?

"It's okay," Kati said when she saw my long face and teary eyes staring at the shattered vase. She had warned me that some materials work better than others for *kintsugi*, which is why she had told me to bring two vases. "We can use this one instead." She indicated that the second vase, which was still partially intact, could be healed more quickly and easily than the other.

"Let's get started," she said.

An awkward moment of silence followed. I simply looked back at her, confused and anxious. Did she think I was going to put the vase together? Ever so softly, I said, "I'm not an artist. Can't I just watch you?"

Kati smiled and said, "The art is in the creation. This is your art to make. Art is for capturing your meaning, your ideas, and your dreams."

Part of me wanted to refuse. I had come there to see and understand the steps. I realized that in order to benefit from *kintsugi* I would have to do it myself. And yet I continued to resist.

"I'm afraid," I whispered in a tiny, frightened voice.

Kati continued to look at me without speaking. My mind struggled to adjust to the fear and to the broken condition of the vase.

Finally, I sighed deeply, and gave in. "OK." I felt myself surrender. "What do I do first?" I asked.

"What do you think you should do first?" she replied.

Oh no, I thought, *I am going to have to do this myself?*

Kati suggested that I prepare the shards by cleaning them and observing them as puzzle pieces as opposed to broken pieces. She suggested I touch the pieces and explore their beauty, shapes, textures, and size. It was obvious to me that she loved this part of the art. Kati kept telling me how beautiful the pieces were. I found it fascinating that brokenness was beautiful to her. As I considered this, my mindset shifted: These were pieces of a puzzle, not symbols of brokenness.

I began gingerly cleaning the pieces, and, with caution, moving the sharp bits of pottery around on the table. My courage began to grow, and with Kati's encouragement, I slowly felt capable and in control. In the space of just a few minutes, I found that my courage had eclipsed my fear.

Lesson Learned

Then came another surprise: I learned that the order that I placed the pieces onto the intact part of the vase had to be perfect since the gold lacquer dries quickly. I had to consider which pieces were the critical few to make the vase whole again. I pondered that. This artistic process required making decisions that would ensure the best healing. I immediately understood that this art of healing included making informed choices. I needed Kati's expertise. I needed to connect with, collaborate with, and learn from her. I did not have all the answers. I needed to understand which pieces would provide integrity to the vase so that it could be healed, so it once again could be used for its original purpose: to hold water and flowers. If there was a piece missing, I needed to prepare a binding agent to fill the space. It was thought-provoking. As Kati led me through how to think about the puzzle, it was a comfort to know I did not have to do this alone.

I began gently placing the large and small pieces together to try to find the central piece, the piece that most influenced the strength of the vase and the place where the other pieces would fit. I felt inspired and almost

lightheaded. I wanted to do my best. I had no fear, just excitement about the art of healing. Step by step, Kati provided me with immediate, authentic feedback and encouragement. She mixed a special gold lacquer and gave me an exceptionally fine brush to use to bond the pieces together. Beginning with the central piece, I traced the thinnest lines of lacquer on the broken edges, caressing each scar with gold. Each scar was beautiful and held its own story as part of the whole vase. I carefully embraced each one. I now felt proud of the scars rather than shamed by them.

Finally, I observed the beauty of my golden-joined vase. I felt a surge of energy where fear had existed before I'd started. I had created a masterpiece from something quite broken. Its scars were strong and golden. It looked as if light were shining through the spaces between the broken pieces, shining through the scars. I shared with her how I felt and celebrated the flow of transforming fear to light.

Looking at the *kintsugi* vase I had made, I also saw myself. I had felt physically, emotionally, and spiritually

broken by my experiences. But now I felt my wounds could heal and, in healing into golden scars, that I could be whole—even improved. A two-dollar vase, broken and mended through the process of *kintsugi*, could be worth hundreds of dollars. Through the lens of *kintsugi*, I could see myself as a better person because of my scars. I no longer had to hide them or be ashamed of them. My light could continue to shine through my brokenness. I could have a new beginning. 🌱

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