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INTRODUCTION: WRITING TO REPAIR

What IS Repair in Human Relations?

We tend to select topics for our anthologies that resonate with us personally—and which we would like to explore with others because they are common challenges, essential for healthy, resilient relationships . . . and difficult to stay with comfortably. Repair is one of them for me—perhaps because it requires such patient good faith, accountability tempered by self-acceptance, and a firm sense of proportion and time, none of which, even at sixty-one, are my most reliable virtues (although they are my husband's). Repair also requires attunement, a taste for the subjective worlds of others, an ardent desire for things to turn out 'right,' a flexible and inventive freedom to re-imagine that 'right' in a way that makes room for changing insights, realities, and stories, and tenacity that verges on the quixotic, all of which, for better and worse, are intrinsic to me.

But what *is* repair? In the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, it is defined as "1. restore (something damaged, worn, or faulty) to good condition. 2. set right (a rift in relations)." Its root is the Latin "*reparare*, from *re-* 'back' + *parare* 'make ready'." In the two definitions, we hear some of the tensions we experience with repair in human relations. What *is* it that we are making ready? And ready for what? What is this *thing* that is damaged, worn, or faulty? What thing has a rift in it? Is it just a hairline fracture? A shattering? A molten mess?

Whatever we are able to do with it now, to repair means something was once whole, functioning, that now is not. It may well be something whose wholeness or functioning we recognize only in retrospect, perhaps only when it is too late. When we agree to try to repair a relationship, we are agreeing first of all to know it as *not* the seamless, intrinsic, seemingly reliable thing it was before. Repaired, a relationship may be good as new, but it will not, by definition, be new. It may function better than before, but its vulnerability (to damage, wear, or fault) is now part of our understanding of it.

Repair, if we undertake it, also means that we are committing

ourselves to live in a world that is not all about new beginnings, right steps, happily-ever-afters. It's not just about our best selves or the best selves of those we choose to live with. Even knowing that, we are going back for more, redefining what a good ending, or a good relationship, or a good self, is in the process.

But what was that relationship? A shared goal that people needed to conform to and couldn't or wouldn't? A resonant affective flow that has been blocked or channeled elsewhere? A shared reality that has been shattered? What planet did you come from, we wonder when we no longer feel we have any common ground. What does repair have to do with separate solar systems, expanding universes?

This metaphorical play has an important purpose, for how we imagine what a relationship is has a lot to do with how we imagine what repair is both needed and possible. To ground us in the particular, I share one from my relationship with my husband (my third and, if either of us has anything to say about it, my last).

This is a story about *Our Baby*. My husband and I have been married for almost fifteen years now. The marriage is a keeper and both of us are keenly aware of our good fortune in finding each other—and the mutual tenacity that kept us coming back, seeking new ways to connect, over an issue that astonished us with its ferocious intensity for years: our children. I don't mean ours, of course. I mean the two he fathered and the one I mothered to adulthood. Although our children were young adults when we met, we fell in love with the (essentially single) parent in each other. We identified with the challenges and rewards of the role. We saw ourselves reflected there. Wouldn't we have done it better together, we wondered. However, second, or third, marriages have, for everyone concerned, complex histories of powerful attachments, painful and often devastating ruptures, ours perhaps more than many. So, although we identified with each other imaginatively, the reality was something very different. The ruptures my son and I had experienced and the ruptures my husband and his children had experienced intersected poorly. They didn't cancel each other out, they magnified each other. All the ambivalences that our children 'should' have directed toward others found their way toward us (and why shouldn't they, since we, the historically turn-to parents, were the ones who were inexplicably changing). But we were so well-intentioned, so undeserving! I don't think our children (all off making their own mistakes, building their own lives) gave us much thought most of