

BREAKING OPEN

Finding Treasure in the Chaos



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On Christmas of 2013, in the freezing heart of northern Minnesota, I received a most peculiar gift. When I pulled it out of its box, it seemed utterly pointless . . . a grey, dirty, lopsided . . . rock? Mildly disappointing and quite messy, the dust from its shell wanted only to cling to the perpetual black of my winter clothing.

“What is it?” I ask.

“It’s a geode.”

“Oh. What do you do with it?”

“You crack it open, and there’s crystals inside. Or not. Sometimes you get nothing. Cool, huh?”

Hmm. Unconvinced, I decide to hang on to it anyway until I return home a few days later. There, I (hammer-wielding warrior in my flannel PJs and perfectly squishy MSU slippers) have entered into the ultimate battle in my garage with the offending geode. So far the score is geode 2, Tamara 0. The darn thing won’t break!

Ok, this is it. Third time’s the charm . . . I turn the hammer sideways, and with one, resounding *thwack!*, the geode breaks open. I pick up the two halves and peek . . . glittering inside is a veritable treasure of white and lavender crystals.

“Wow! Cool.”

Who knew?

And I begin to think about the last few years of my life, and how many of us start out like that dusty little geode, wholly unaware of the infinite potential buried within us until life cracks us open. Sometimes we don’t get it right the first time. Or the second. But once you know what you’re made of, there really is no going back.

There is, of course, one catch: We might not ever discover the treasure we hold until we have the courage to be vulnerable.

That’s a hard thing. As veterinarians, and especially students, many of us struggle with making mistakes, and even more so with talking about them. This is not a new revelation—we are, after all, selected in a very particular fashion. We have become accustomed to tying our self-worth to things that have absolutely nothing to do with who

we are—grades, success, wealth, popularity . . . The perfectionist paradigm that exists in our professional culture was woven into our core beliefs long before we started veterinary school, and it doesn't necessarily shift upon graduation when we begin practicing as licensed veterinarians. Suddenly, we are acutely aware of something that those who have travelled this road before tried to show us many, many times, but maybe we didn't understand—that medicine cannot be solved within the pages of a textbook. In many cases, the rubric to our patients' problems, our life problems, lies somewhere outside the scope of things we thought we knew, and very few of us are ready to expose our fleshy underbelly to the world. That, coupled with an enormous debt-to-income ratio, leaves some of us with a grim outlook and very thin coping skills.

And then there's life.

I know the landscape of depression and fatigue all too well. My demons hid quietly, insidiously, in a six-year struggle with miscarriages that culminated in my being hospitalized with a ruptured blood vessel in my abdomen, and the subsequent crumbling of my marriage. The depression that followed each miscarriage impacted everything around me, from my leadership style, to my relationships at work and at home. I made poor decisions that were not a reflection of who I am, but rather, where I was at the time. My colleagues at the clinic that I managed during part of that period believed I was completely incompetent at my job, having no idea what I faced on a daily basis because they never asked, and I certainly wasn't going to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing me struggle. I suffered in silence until I broke down. The defining moment for me was lying in my hospital bed, thinking, "Oh God, I am going to die, and I'm not done yet." I had no choice but to let go.

I share this now, not because I feel sorry for myself, but because I truly believe that the destruction of the life I knew became the greatest

blessing I could ever ask for—I just didn't see it at the time. I have been tested, and enduring that test gave me the courage I needed to fully live the life I want.

The same is true for all of us. With a little faith, honesty, and compassion (as the world is not painted in black and white), we have the unique ability to become the architects of our own lives. But we can't move forward in pieces, any more than we can expect to accomplish great things by separating ourselves into *good* and *bad*.

Think of it this way: have you ever wondered about the word *integrity*? We tend to think of it as denoting some iron-clad pillar of principle, when in fact, it is derived from the word *integer*—whole, complete, undivided. We are nothing if not equal parts light and darkness, and we are certainly greater than the sum of our parts. As it happens, sometimes the only way out of our darkness is to pass through it.

Thankfully, this story ends well. After taking the time I needed to heal, I enrolled in night classes and completed my prerequisites for veterinary school while working full-time as a veterinary sales representative. In December of 2013, I was admitted to MSU's College of Veterinary Medicine.

I will never look back.

Of course, in a perfect world, we'll all find the edge of discomfort and pause just enough to grow before taking the next step into the unknown, avoiding the long, hard fall into utter pain and chaos. But realistically, some of us have to hit rock bottom to know where that edge is. And it's okay—those of us who've navigated such unforgiving terrain before will light the way, for we are proof that the best is yet to come; the breaking open helps us find it.

Which brings us back to our precious little geode. I will always think of 2013 as the year of fruition. Old patterns were laid to rest so new ones could emerge; one dream was realized, and others have since bubbled to the surface, ready to break open. And as fate would have it, shortly after I received my letter of admission, our beloved Spartans, warriors of my alma mater-to-be, won the Rose Bowl. It was an incredible way to start a new journey.

Now the imperfect halves of my geode rest peacefully on my desk, a lovely reminder of what can be when we give ourselves permission to break open, embrace our flaws, and surrender control to the process of life. Rumi once wrote, "Do not worry that your life is turning upside down . . . How do you know the side you are used to is better than the one to come?"

The future is wide open.

