

Sometimes all you can see are the cracks.

I grew up with a father who worried constantly about everything; in particular, he was sure our house was going to fall down around our shoulders. If we were in the garden, admiring a bed of flowers, he would suddenly straighten up in alarm. “Look at that crack,” he’d say, and we children would peer obediently at a fissure in the plaster. “The house is settling. That crack is going to go deep into the foundation. Pretty soon the entire house will collapse.”

I believed him, of course. He was the authority on all things structural. He had built a room for my grandmother with his own hands; we had watched this happen over many nights and weekends. He knew how to make walls and how to festoon them with electric wires that would bring light to dark places. Ergo, he knew how walls could come down, too. I learned early on that there are people who are authorities on houses; they are engineers, and contractors, and fathers. They understand trouble; they have mastered the art of repair.

In spite of his prognostications, 40 years later my father’s house is still standing. It is strong and solid. Yes, the plaster cracks. But what doesn’t? That hasn’t stopped my dad from worrying. And now, I worry. This is one of my inheritances.

That crooked leg on the bed. That peeling paint on the ceiling. That damp spot in the basement. The worry can be overwhelming because if something is wrong, someone has to fix it, and that means finding help, which is in itself overwhelmingly difficult. I’m not good with tools; I’ve never learned what to do when the toilet doesn’t stop running, or the lamp shorts. Far easier, at times, just to let problems go and hope for the best. So many things can go wrong. So many things do go wrong—and that makes it difficult to tell what’s a sign of real trouble, and what’s just, well, a superficial crack in the plaster.

It was a cry for help, we say. Houses are capable of crying for help; they are actually efficient at telling you they are in grave trouble. But even a worrier can smell trouble all around and still not get it. My house at the beach, for example, had a peculiar odor for years; I noticed a sharp mustiness every time I arrived. My response was to open the doors and windows and air out the rooms; within an hour

the smell was laced with the pungent, salty sea breezes and the gorgeous, heavy perfume of the autumn clematis. I told myself the problem was simply that the house had been closed up. I just didn’t want to think about mold or damp rot—until the house was coming down around my head. Too late to save it.

Now I am perhaps hypervigilant. The slightest creak or ache sends me to the doctor; the slightest click or groan sends me to the plumber, or the electrician. You can only imagine how ridiculous our conversations are: “No, Mike (or Rick or Pete or Doug), nothing is leaking (or shorting out or broken), exactly. But I think it is going to be leaking (or shorting or breaking), soon. I think something is going to be wrong; I’m just telling you that I’m seeing early warning signals. No, I know, there’s nothing to fix; there’s nothing to do until it is broken, I guess. Can’t you keep it from breaking?”

No one can keep anything—or anyone—from breaking. All we can do is take care. Watch over one another; watch over our homes. Plug the holes. Scrape away the rot. Unwind the coils. Smooth the buckling and heaving messes. Tamp down the drips; mop up the tears. Take care. Bring out the best in what we have been bequeathed. As the holidays loom into sight, and with them, the sense of new horizons that comes with a new year, we would do well to pay attention to the cracks.

But you know what? It would also be smart to stop worrying about them and, instead, honor everything that is straight and strong and true about the world around us. Everything is full of cracks. Those we love and hold dear are laced with fissures. If we’re paying attention, nothing needs to slip through the cracks. We just have to keep our foundations sturdy. So my hope for everyone, as the year closes, is that we get down to what really matters, underneath all the paper and plaster and pipes. Get to the heart and soul of a home—and the only thing that keeps anything standing. Love.



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