



The art of fixing what's broken

What Kintsugi teaches us about solving creative problems.



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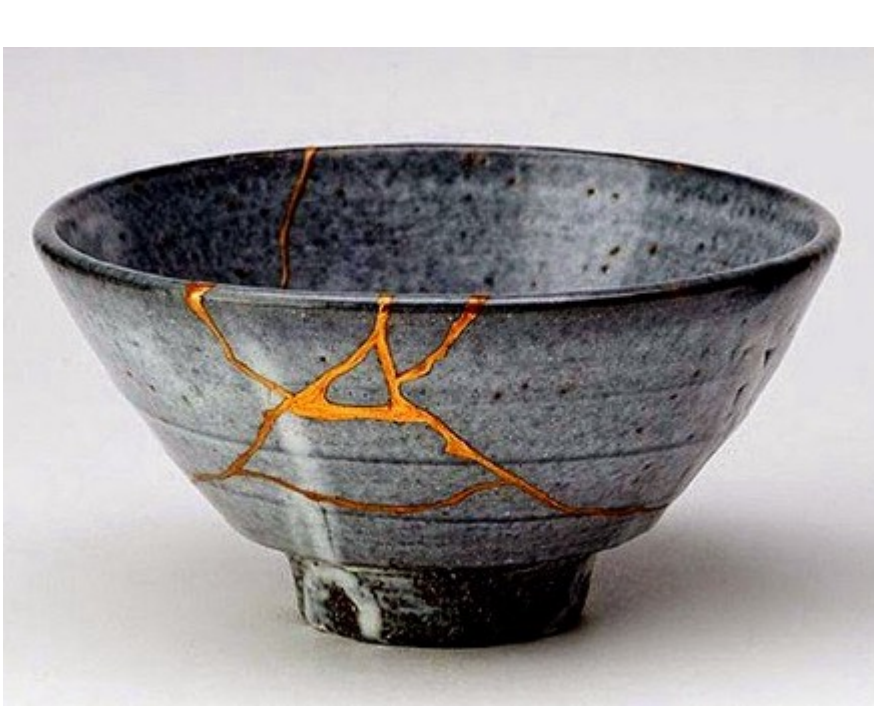
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An eternal golden bowl

Recently, while in Japan, I had the opportunity to take a course in Kintsugi, the practice of repairing broken pottery with lacquer and gold.

Kintsugi translates as “golden joinery,” though I’ve simply been telling friends that it’s the ancient Japanese art of fixing what is broken.

You’ve seen Kintsugi bowls? They look like this:



And like this:



Beautiful, right? The golden parts are the cracks where the bowls broke.

The practice arrives from the [wabi-sabi](#) tradition of perfection through imperfection. You can see how the golden imperfections make the original piece more beautiful. They also happen to make the bowl more valuable.

And that’s what is truly delightful about Kintsugi: it elevates breakage and repair as the most enduring part of the object — an important part of the object’s history, rather than something to disguise.

As it happens, this is also a good metaphor for working on tough creative problems. Taking the time to fix what is broken often makes the object stronger.

It can make the person who’s doing the repairing stronger, too.

Move slow and fix things

Before you go off gleefully smashing your kitchenware, here are the steps I took to fix a broken bowl in my classroom in Tokyo:

1. Carefully examine the broken piece and collect all the broken bits.
2. Clean the exposed surfaces with ethyl alcohol.
3. Dab the exposed surfaces with lacquer from the lacquer tree ([Toxicodendron vernicifluum](#), for all you taxonomical fundamentalists out there). This step is about preparing the pieces to be joined. The lacquer provides the object’s gloss, but it also works as a bonding agent.
4. Fit the pieces together, finding any gaps.
5. Fill those gaps with putty.
6. Clean away any excess.
7. Carefully join the parts together.
8. Clean away any excess putty that squeezes out the sides.
9. Paint the restored piece with lacquer, let it dry, repeat.
10. Clean away any excess lacquer.
11. For the final step, apply gold dust lacquer to the joints and let it dry.

It takes time. It takes patience. Rebuilding a bowl can take months, which is a lot longer than it takes to buy a new bowl.

But then again, that’s the point.

It’s time for a tortured comparison to creative work!

Our clients often come to us with broken things. Something isn’t working right, or something could be working better.

Maybe their challenge is reaching their audience. Maybe their challenge is they don’t know who that audience is. Maybe their challenge is figuring out what to say. And sometimes, maybe, they don’t have the right workflow in place. Their marketing team doesn’t talk to their sales team. Or, their sales team doesn’t talk to their product team. Or their sales team doesn’t know what to say to their prospects, or how often to say it.

You can describe these challenges in many ways: comms challenges, workflow challenges, product-market fit challenges, advertising challenges, content creation challenges, whatever.

But, basically: their bowl is broken.

Often, the first instinct is to throw the bowl out and get a bright and shiny new one. That’s what ordering a new strategy is. That’s what ordering a new ad campaign is. That’s what asking “Can you make us some white papers?” is. Deprecate the old, promote the new.

Happily, we’re quite good at all these things! What’s more, we know there are benefits to throwing something out and putting something new in its place.

It’s quick. It’s iterative. You get market feedback. You learn from the market’s response, and you adjust. (This is, of course, how the modern economy works: the easier and quicker it is to make and distribute something, e.g., code, the more of that thing will be made, and quickly ... not fixing what’s broken is called “tech debt”.)

But we’d be remiss if we didn’t also challenge our clients to consider, when appropriate, whether “more of X” is the right thing to do. To consider, instead, Kintsugi.

For a client, that might mean not jumping immediately into a new strategy, but instead looking deeply at why the previous strategy didn’t work. What were the assumptions? Who was the audience? What were the incentives? That is: Pick up each piece of broken pottery and consider it.

Because sure, you can always make more bowls. Some bowls will be better. Some worse. But it’s worth considering what one learns by simply ordering more bowls instead of repairing the bowls you already have.

In other words: Making new things is the practice of efficiency. You get better at making things.

Fixing things is the art of empathy. You get better at understanding yourself and others.



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