

The Art of Fixing What's Broken

What Kintsugi teaches us about solving creative problems — why making new things is the practice of efficiency, but fixing things is the art of empathy.

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.

The practice arrives from the wabi-sabi tradition of perfection through imperfection. 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.

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

The steps to fix a broken bowl:

1. Carefully examine the broken piece and collect all the broken bits
2. Clean the exposed surfaces
3. Prepare the pieces with lacquer (which provides gloss and works as a bonding agent)
4. Fit the pieces together, finding any gaps
5. Fill gaps with putty and clean away excess
6. Join the parts together carefully
7. Paint with lacquer, let dry, repeat
8. Apply gold dust lacquer to the joints

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.

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 they don't know who that audience is. Maybe they don't have the right workflow in place. 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.

But we'd be remiss if we didn't challenge our clients to consider, when appropriate, whether 'more of X' is the right thing to do. 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? Pick up each piece of broken pottery and consider it.

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.