

With an open palm

Sandra Derghazarian 

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STORYLINES

WITH AN OPEN PALM

Sandra Derghazarian

Montreal Neurologic Clinic, McGill University Health Centre, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
sandra.derghazarian@gmail.com

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For the past several weeks, I have struggled to write about fear and vulnerability. Every time I would squeeze out sentences, they veered into abstract concepts or impersonal generalities. The result was a narrative that felt empty and unnatural. One night, during this frustrating struggle, I had a dream. With an open palm, I held out a dismantled Rubik's cube for a group of colleagues to see. "This is how I am," I told them. When I woke up, something about the dream felt right.

A few days later, I told my husband about the dream. Halfway through though, he interrupted me. "Wait a minute," he said, concerned, "a broken Rubik's cube is irreparable. It's something you can never fix or play with again. Are you saying that you're broken beyond repair?"

I was quiet. The quick answer is no, I do not think of myself that way.

The slow answer is not so simple. There are a few times when I have feared that I was irreparably damaged. The most obvious was when I received a professional complaint. I recall getting the letter from the mailbox, reading it in the living room and being flooded by utter shock, disbelief and fear. Right in the core of my desire to help and do good, there was an experience of harm. It was like an invisible earthquake, immediately undoing trust in myself. I started second-guessing decisions I made, even in areas where I did not doubt my skills. I started experiencing everything as burdensome and heavy, as the aftershocks of the complaint started permeating other aspects of my life.

With the complaint, I was faced with what I have always diligently tried to avoid: harming others and making mistakes. The fear of harming others and making mistakes are two of my core vulnerabilities. They are the common thread in events that have threatened to dismantle me over the years. That is the image of the broken Rubik's cube I was displaying in my dream. It was an image of vulnerability and imperfection, not of irreparable brokenness.

But my dream was not only about my vulnerabilities per se. It was also about candidly admitting to them. I realized then, that in real life, I had been profoundly avoiding writing about my vulnerabilities. I preferred to close my hand on that Rubik's cube or hide it behind my back. But honestly admitting to them is precisely what had felt right about the dream. And that is why I decided to offer this article. Not as a story about a dream or a complaint, but as a gesture of admitting to fears and vulnerabilities with an open palm. ■

Biographical note

Sandra Derghazarian is a community neurologist and a physician coach who has loved stories for as far back as she can remember. *Storylines* is a column in which she shares stories about work and life. As much as possible, she tries to stay loyal to the messy and sometimes contradictory experiences of everyday life.