



What I Learned Turning My Hate Mail into Origami

By Rachel Held Evans

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By Rachel Held Evans and edited by Sarah Bessey

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For Lent this year, I wanted to learn a new creative skill that would enable me to turn something ugly into something beautiful, so I resolved on Ash Wednesday to turn some of my hate mail into origami.

As I wrote back in February, "It felt a little awkward at first, but as I moved my fingers across those painful words, folding them into one another to make wings, then a neck, then a crooked little beak, healing tears fell, and I let my fingers pray."

I've been making origami off and on for forty days now, letting my fingers pray out little swans and sailboats and flowers and foxes, and I've learned some things: about reverse folds and crimp folds, about trial and error, about patience, about retracing steps and following directions, about forgiveness, about letting go, about redirecting some of my anxious and self-focused energy into purposeful acts of creativity and healing, about building bridges, about asking for help.

That last one—asking for help—turned out to be the most instructive part of them all.

The consummate contemplative, I had originally imagined this Lenten practice to be a solitary one. It would be all quiet and meditative and poetic and introspective.

But it was my friend Melissa who mailed me the origami books.

It was my brother-in-law Tim who helped me make my first sailboat.

It was my friend Monika who sat at my kitchen table and made blackout poems out of the most hateful letters, spending Holy Saturday—our special day—forming crooked little pelicans, ducks, and penguins out of scraps of paper.

It was a reader's idea to work some beautiful, affirming words into the process too, inspiring me to scribble the prayer of Teresa of Avila and the fruit of the spirit onto the colored origami paper.

It was my sister who made the jumping frog while we waited for Easter dinner.

It was Dan who managed to make the perfect origami crane in a matter of fifteen minutes... while I only managed to make something that most resembled crumpled paper.

It was the author of one of those letters who emailed an apology upon learning about my Lenten practice.

It was that email that inspired me to issue a few apologies of my own, to be just a little quicker to listen, slower to speak, and slower to get angry.

What I learned turning my hate mail into origami is that we're meant to remake this world together. We're meant to hurt together, heal together, forgive together, and create together. Far from being all quiet and meditative and poetic and introspective, this practice

turned out to be full of laughter, cluttered tables, shared grumbles of frustration, and shared exclamations of delight-"That totally looks like a flamingo!"

And in a sense, even the people who continue to hate me and call me names are a part of this beautiful process. Their words, carelessly spoken, spent the last forty days in my home-getting creased and folded, worked over, brushed aside to make room for dinner, stepped on by a toddler, read by my sister, stained with coffee, shoved into a closet when guests arrive, blacked out, thrown away, turned into poems, and folded into sailboats and cranes and pigeons that now sit smiling at me from my office window.

Because I am a real human being, living a very real life, with a very real capacity to be hurt, to be loved, to heal, and to forgive.

And so are my enemies.

And something tells me we would all be a little more careful, a little more gentle, if we knew how long our words linger in one another's lives, if we imagined those words sitting on one another's kitchen tables, shaped like foxes.

Something tells me we would all be a bit slower to speak if we knew just how long it takes to work those ugly, heavy words into something beautiful, something that can float or fly away.