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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: The beauty of broken things

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 05.27.25



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It was one of those weekends.

Last Saturday, I was driving my oldest son, Noah, to the driving range on a golf cart when my iPhone had enough of life and flung itself from my pocket. A kind motorist, waving us through the crossing, watched in horror as the screen exploded into a crystalline crime scene.

Faced with this technological catastrophe, I drove to AT&T, where an eager 20-something with a man-bun and the dead eyes of one who'd explained data plans all week sold me the latest iPhone.

I felt pleased. Look at me, I thought, handling life's curveballs like an all-star.

That's when my car died.

Not gradually, the way a reasonable vehicle would after 320,000 miles of faithful service. No, it just stopped right there on the road, as if it knew my smug thoughts and decided to teach me a lesson about hubris.

The next day, I bought a gleaming, reliable car roughly equivalent in cost to a small house in Montgomery, Ala. I parked it carefully in the driveway and began celebrating my weekend's bewildering accomplishments: two major purchases, crises averted, dignity intact.

That's when I heard the sound.

You know that noise glass makes when it becomes a thousand pieces at once? It's distinctive, almost musical if you're a sadist.

I ran outside to discover that Noah, bless his heart, had been practicing his pitching technique against the house, which would have been fine if he'd limited himself to hitting the brick. But no. The garage windows paid the ultimate price.

Life's figurative curveball became Noah's literal one. Thank heavens the victim wasn't my shiny new automobile.

Glass was everywhere. I mean everywhere. It had somehow defied the laws of physics to spread across surfaces that should have been mathematically impossible to reach. My garage looked as if someone had detonated a chandelier in it.

Poor Noah stood there in the aftermath of his transgression, his young face a portrait of remorse that would have moved even the stoniest heart to tenderness. The boy immediately began chattering about employment, declaring with earnest desperation that he would secure himself a position and labor until every penny of the window's replacement had been restored to the family coffers.

I explained the rather inconvenient reality of child labor laws to this 13-year-old entrepreneur and proposed a practical alternative: he would become my personal groundskeeper, undertaking those tedious domestic tasks that I would ordinarily delegate to hired help, thereby working off his debt in the most civilized manner possible.

Immediately, he threw himself into his work with the fervor of a penitent monk. He began with the rose bushes and hedges: verdant creatures that had, this spring, grown with such alarming enthusiasm and to such startling proportions that they seemed almost tropical in their ambition.

Then he turned his attention to the wilderness that had accumulated behind the house: a chaotic collection of storm debris, fallen limbs, and creeping undergrowth that had, over time, created such an impenetrable barrier that it almost completely obscured my view of the charming par three that graces my backyard.

While Noah labored away, I understood that I was witnessing both the ancient and immediate: a boy learning that love and responsibility are not separate, that to live in this world is to break it again and again and spend our lives trying to repair what's irreparable.

Here, alas, is the terrible, beautiful bargain we make, not just as parents, but as people who dare to touch anything. We will break things. Our children will break things. The glass will scatter across the garage floor in patterns that seem to mock any notion of order or control.

Yet we will sweep it up, buy new windows, and continue daily tasks as if we had not just been reminded, once again, of how fragile everything is and how quickly the life we have built can be reduced to glittering fragments at our feet.

The view of the par three is clear now. Noah's hands are calloused from honest work. My phone functions, my car runs smoothly, and I have learned, or relearned, that love is not the absence of breaking but the promise to keep building and believing that something can be made whole even after it has shattered.

This isn't wisdom. It's simply what it means to live.

Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Analyst with the Capital Markets Initiative at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com.

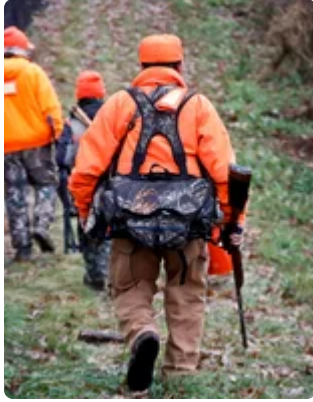
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