

Soul Matters 2014-15

September

What Does It Mean To Be a People of Risk?

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What Does It Mean To Be a People of Risk?

Ours is perhaps the most risk-averse society in the history of the world. We have whole departments at companies and hospitals devoted to risk management or, if they're really good at what they do, risk elimination. In our households we're much more diligent about eliminating risk for our young ones than ever before.

At the same time, Naomi Klein in her TED talk "Addicted to Risk" talks about how our society has become addicted to extreme risk in finding new and hopefully cheap energy and new ways to make boatloads of money and buy more than we could possibly need. We risk the very well-being of our planet, not to mention our psyches and integrity in our pursuit of cheap energy and money and things.

And then there is the growing industry of thrill-seeking. Mount Everest and other places offering extreme adventure are being overwhelmed with crowds. One of us was dumb enough at the age of fifty to hike across from the South Rim to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. In one day. In June. It didn't work out very well.

Risk-averse in some areas, addicted to reckless risk in others: this is where our society is. This doesn't feel like a very healthy place. The truth is that there are times to play it safe and times to take risks. And there are good and probably not-so-good risks to take (e.g., walking across the Grand Canyon in one day in June).

Maybe we need to find some better balance. Maybe our faith and our spiritual communities can help us find this balance. This month is all about exploring risk-taking--physically, emotionally, and spiritually. If you've been playing it safe, especially in your spiritual life, maybe it's time to get up off the couch and take some risks.

**- Rev. Roger Bertschhausen & Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg,
Fox Valley UU, Appleton, Wisconsin**

Our Spiritual Exercises:

OPTION A:

Take a Spiritual Risk

What would it look like in your life to risk spiritually? Consider trying something new, like opening a meal (by yourself or one you share with others) with a brief moment of silent or verbalized gratitude; praying aloud before bed; sharing candidly about your spirituality with someone in your life who might not share your beliefs or experiences; or writing a letter to the local paper about how your liberal religious values inform your take on an issue of the day. If you are feeling particularly adventurous, take Daniel O’Connell’s advice (see resources below) and use your spiritual fear “like a Geiger counter—not to stay away, but to run headlong toward...If you don’t believe in God, try prayer anyway. If you don’t like being around the poor and destitute, work in a soup kitchen. If you’re afraid of death, volunteer in a hospital. If you’re not creative, write poetry, paint, or sing.” Reflect on how risk-taking can be spiritual. Notice how it feels to risk spiritually in your body, in your mind, in your life, and in your religious community. Come prepared to share with your group!

OPTION B:

Thank Someone for Their Risk

Reach out to someone whose risk-taking has enriched your life and let them know it was meaningful. Did someone come out to you when you knew little about LGBTQI issues, making it easier for you to be an ally when a family member came out to you more recently? Find them on Facebook and share that you appreciate what you learned from them. Did someone in the history of your community help make it a beautiful place for you to build a life? Mail a note and modest donation to the local historical society in their honor. Look around you. Who is taking a risk now who may not be getting credit and encouragement? Tell them you see them and appreciate it. If you'd like, bring with you a token or symbol of what this person's risk has meant to you and share it with your group.

OPTION C:

Take the Risk of Not Allowing Someone You Care About to Be Comfortable

Brian Andreas (in resources below) writes about angels who don’t allow us to be comfortable. Try being one of Andreas’s angels and in a kindly and creative way, discomfort someone you love or care about. Come prepared to share about this experience with your group.

OPTION D:

Take a Risk a Day

Every day for a week or, even better, every day for the whole month, take a risk. The daily risks can be small or large. Keep a journal tracking what you risked and how it felt to take each risk.

Your Question:

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply find the one that "hooks" you most and let it lead you where you need to go. And then come to your Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.

- 1. Are there ways in which risks you've taken have paid off or not? How or why?**
- 2. How do you decide when and how to risk? Is it a process of logical deduction or more of an intuitive leap? Some of both or something else as well?**
- 3. Have you ever felt ashamed for taking a risk that didn't pay off? How did this impact your capacity for future risk-taking?**
- 4. Does the Spirit of Life (or however you understand that which is Ultimate) call you to some level or risk-taking? Are you called to some level of comfort-seeking? What forms do these calls (or conversations) take and how do you respond?**
- 5. How does it make you feel when others around you are risking more or less than you? What kinds of privilege and oppression might play into this?**
- 6. Is it easier for you to take emotional or physical risks?**
- 7. Are there risks you feel called to take but might not be ready to make the leap? Do we have to follow through on all of our impulses and plans?**
- 8. Our world can force us into taking scary risks we might not otherwise choose! Has this ever been your experience? How have you faced those risks of circumstance and what has it been like to heal from them and hopefully move on?**
- 9. Can you think of a time in your life when you realized that the status quo was no longer good for you and it was time for some changes? What sorts of risks did you need to take to change the status quo? Can you imagine facing such a moment in your life again?**
- 10. At this moment in your life, what do you feel most called to do? What is in the way? What can you do today, this month, and this year to move towards fulfilling your call? Does it feel risky to you?**
- 11. In some ways our society has become obsessed with safety and the elimination of as much risk as possible. At the same time, Naomi Klein in her TED talk (see resource below) asserts we have become addicted to risk. Where do you fall on the continuum with safety obsession on the one hand and addiction to risk on the other?**
- 12. What are you afraid of spiritually? Are you staying away from that which you fear spiritually, or are you moving toward it? Is it time to change your approach?**
- 13. What motivates you to take risks (physically, emotionally, spiritually)?**
- 14. In *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Sharon Welch celebrates people claiming their own power and creating new mechanisms of power. At the same time, she challenges people who are "in control" of things to take the risk of relinquishing their power over others and instead participate in power *with* others. Where do you fit in Welch's conception of power? What is she calling you to risk: claiming your own power or relinquishing your power over?**

Recommended Resources:

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to "be a people of risk."

Wise Words:

The day comes when remaining the same becomes more painful than the risk to grow. And when that happens there are many goodbyes. We leave old patterns, old friends, old lovers, old ideas, and some cherished beliefs. Loss and growth are so often one and the same.

--Phoebe Eng

from the Hebrew Scriptures: Numbers 11: 26 – 30

Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. And Joshua, son of Nun, the assistant to Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My Lord, Moses, stop them!" But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions
Before the taking of a toast and tea.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
And indeed there will be time
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?'
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
[They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!']
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.
~T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock"

The wise person knows it is fruitless to project hopes and fears on the future. This only leads to forming melodramatic representations in your mind and wasting time. At the same time, one shouldn't passively acquiesce to the future and what it holds. Simply doing nothing does not avoid risk, but heightens it. There is a place for prudent planning and for making provision for situations to come. Proper preparation for the future consists of forming good personal habits. This is done by actively pursuing the good in all particulars of your daily life and by regularly examining your motives to make sure they are free of the shackles of fear, greed, and laziness. If you do this, you won't be buffeted about by outside events. Train your intentions rather than fooling yourself into thinking you can manipulate outside events.

--Epictetus

Suppose that a half dozen of us are seated around the walls of a very dark room. We are told that somewhere in the open middle space is a chair. Who would find it? Not those of us who sat still and philosophized about where chairs are placed in rooms. The person who would locate it is the one who'd get up, then walk and stumble around until he or she discovered it. Nobody ever found anything while sitting down. So don't be afraid to stumble!

-Samuel Johnson

Life is not intended to be safe. A safe life has two small a name for a creature of eternity. Life at its noblest and highest has a hazard about it; it ponders tomorrow but does not know it; it sounds the depths of the ocean, but knows not the hazards of the bottom. Life at its best takes a chance on righteousness no matter the hazard, no matter the cost. Life, when answering to its true name, lifts on wings, feeling no invisible hands supporting it.

- Ethel Waters

The things that haven't been done before
Are the tasks worthwhile today;
Are you one of the flock that follows, or
Are you one that shall lead the way?
Are you one of the timid souls that quail
At the jeers of a doubting crew,
Or dare you, whether you win or fail,
Strike out for a goal that's new?

~Edgar Guest

To take, as a building, as a fiction, takes us,
Into another frame of space
Where we can ponder, celebrate, and reshape
Not only what we are, where we are from,
But what in the risk and moment of our day
We may become.

~Josphine Miles (from the longer poem, *Center* <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/238736>)

The Parable of the Talents: Matthew 25:14-29

14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, [a] to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18

But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 26 But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

"First, parents and migrating youth are not naive. They usually know the dangers, which include injury, rape, extortion, kidnapping, and even death. Parents carefully consider the risks before making the decision to spend thousands of dollars to send their children away." <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/25061-blowback-on-the-border-americas-child-refugee-crisis>

Videos and Online:

**must listen/read*

The Edge is Where I Want To Be!

<http://slaminatrix.com/the-edge-is-where-i-want-to-be>

A Unique Restaurant Experience

http://sfglobe.com/?id=2334&src=share_fb_new_2334

Taking a risk to step in another's shoes

Ted Talk, *Addicted to Risk*, Naomi Klein

http://www.ted.com/talks/naomi_klein_addicted_to_risk

"As a culture, we have become far too willing to gamble with things that are precious and irreplaceable and to do it without a backup plan or exit strategy."

ABBA's *Take a Chance on Me*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-crgQGdpZR0>

Trust Fall

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPOgvzVOQig>

The Risk of Extreme Sports

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYm8v_eUIpQ

Articles:

Essays by Readers on Risk (Christian Century-- read through and pick a couple)

<http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-06/risk>

UU World Articles containing the word "Risk" (read and choose a few)

<http://www.uuworld.org/about/searchuuworld.shtml?cx=007175923080295419477%3Afjrpqhyopuq&c of=FORID%3A11&q=risk>

How to Convert, Daniel O'Connor

<http://www.uuworld.org/2003/04/advice.html>

Among other things, we have to take spiritual risks!

Risk Blessing, Rev. Christine Robinson

<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/188489.shtml>

The Mystery of Risk, National Geographic

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/06/125-risk-takers/gwin-text>

"We are all descended from risktakers."

Ed Viesturs: What Went Wrong on Everest, Men's Journal

<http://www.mensjournal.com/adventure/outdoor/ed-viesturs-what-went-wrong-on-everest-20140421>

"There's a serious amount of risk that must be accepted."

Books:

The Exquisite Risk, Mark Nepo

A Feminist Ethic of Risk, Sharon Welch

A Sense of the World: How a Blind Man Became History's Greatest Traveler, Jason Roberts

Movies:

Draft Day

At the NFL Draft, general manager Sonny Weaver has the opportunity to rebuild his team when he trades for the number one pick. He must decide what he's willing to sacrifice and risk on a life-changing day for a few hundred young men with NFL dreams.

Good Will Hunting

Will Hunting, a janitor at M.I.T., has a gift for mathematics, but needs help from a psychologist to find direction in his life. He must risk being vulnerable to succeed in life and love.

The Pursuit of Happyness

A struggling salesman takes custody of his son as he's poised to begin a life-changing professional endeavor.

Mona Lisa Smile

A free-thinking art professor teaches conservative 1950s Wellesley girls to question their traditional social roles.

October Sky

Risk of following your dreams: The true story of Homer Hickam, a coal miner's son who was inspired by the first Sputnik launch to take up rocketry against his father's wishes.

Misc.:

RISK, Board Game of World Domination

One Congregation's Small Survey on Risk:

What life choices involved RISK:

All; marriage, having kids, new jobs/leaving old jobs; Leaving everything behind for a loved one; everything. But especially love, and becoming who you want to be

Jobs, relocations, relationships, medical treatments/surgeries; Getting married, staying single, marrying again

coming out; career moves, first dates, choosing a college, buying a house or car

Where do you encounter RISK in your everyday life?

Driving. Husband-kind or mean ; job; Just going out and trying to be kind and help others; everywhere.

Managing medications & physical abilities, personal security when shopping due to disability;

Driving; being gay

SOUL MATTERS FACEBOOK PAGE

Join our Soul Matters Facebook group at: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/>

This is a great way to connect the dozens of Soul Matters groups from congregations around the country. The goal is to inspire each other by sharing material related to the monthly themes (quotes, movies, books, personal experiences related to the monthly exercises).

So please sign up and share a post about where Soul Matters led you this month!