

## *The Ethic of Risk*

### **A message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

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This morning I want to hold up an emerging branch of philosophy that investigates the moral aspects of risk and uncertainty—the ethic of risk. That is, our set of moral principles related to our gaining or losing something. It might be our health, our wealth, our social status, or our emotional well-being. Risk is the intentional interaction with uncertainty. I really like that, the intentional interaction with uncertainty.

As I begin my third year as your minister you might have observed that I have a healthy relationship with risk. Just ask Regina. Sometimes when I tell her what I am doing or what I want to do she gives me a frightened look. Maybe she's more lost in disbelief than frightened. I like to try things without regard for failure. If I fail or something I introduce to the congregation doesn't go well I stop it. That's all. No major catastrophe, no need for a meeting to discuss the failure. And so when I have an idea and am uncertain of the outcome I don't back down. I intentionally interact with the uncertainty. As long as no one is hurt, there is no bleeding, and the building is in tact the risk is worth it. As I always say, I am comfortable living in the awkwardness of risk and uncertainty.

The Buddhist would caution us that in seeking certainty we delude ourselves in believing that we can totally control our lives. Uncertainty, however, is not covered with any savings or policies or guarantees. For most of us, living with it is not comfortable or reassuring. It is dealing with the unknown, undecided, and the unexplainable, but it is present in all of our lives. I wasn't always comfortable with risk. As I traveled down this path, risk was revealing itself to be multilayered. It held a depth of unexpected promises. One unanticipated source, a Business dictionary given to me by an Old Testament professor, shifted my attitude. It pointed out that "manageable uncertainties provide the freedom to make creative decisions". Of course, one could ask what is a manageable uncertainty. Regardless, I questioned that perhaps my vision over the years had been affected by the fear of the unknown. It had narrowed possibilities, hobbled creativity, and exciting expansion. I realized that investing in an outcome of a situation prevents options from becoming evident, stifles the creative thought process from even starting, and possibly results in a situation, which ultimately, may not be the best solution.

As I carried this thought out, it became evident that in the search for certainty, we can kill the spirit within us. Author Tony Schwartz said "Let go of certainty. The opposite isn't uncertainty. It's openness, curiosity and a willingness to embrace paradox, rather than choose up sides. The ultimate challenge is to accept ourselves exactly as we are, but never stop trying to learn and to grow." So it is part of all our repertoires called experiencing life. How we face and deal with uncertainties has much to do with our values, our sense of who we are. The economics of a

situation, physical and mental circumstances, societal constraints, etc. color our decisions, but values seemed to frame so many of these other qualities. They define and guide us. They are the outline which give us a perspective when facing the unknown.

Think about this: You are a member of an urban congregation and the city you are located in provides very few services for the homeless. The local Interfaith Alliance to Combat Homelessness has requested that you open your building and grounds for their work with homeless people, which includes providing sleeping space during hours when a large part of the building is normally not in use. While some congregants believe that inviting such a use of the building is exactly what the congregation should be doing, others have concerns about the security of the building and the safety of congregational members. Would you support the Alliance's request to use your building? Why or why not? What moral/ethical ideas ground your response?

Important questions arrive when we are faced with risk and we must investigate the moral aspects of that risk. Questions like, What are your concerns when you must make an ethical or moral decision without as much information as you wished you had about potential outcomes? Does lack of control of the outcome of a particular action make you less likely to take that action?

Many of us, in the face of uncertainty, go to a place of catastrophe and ruin. I know I tend to do that. Perhaps it's a defense mechanism: we think of all the horrible things that might be, so that we're prepared for the worst and then pleased when the worst doesn't come to pass. We human beings like to know what's going on, and what's going to be going on. We thirst for information and knowledge. We crave predictability, and we love to make plans. When we're "in the know," it gives us an illusion of control. Maybe we're better off when we don't know, when we're clueless.

From moment to moment and day to day, no matter how precisely we plan and structure our lives, seismic shifts are happening deep below the surface, and they can erupt at any time. They might be good, happy surprises and they might be terrible, life-threatening ones. But come they will, and they will turn our lives entirely upside-down or take us down a road we never thought we'd be traveling. Change and uncertainty are constants in our lives, no matter how we might want to deny that reality, no matter how hard we work to keep the wolves at bay. The basic reality of our existence is that we have no clue what our lives have in store for us.

And so, the question becomes: How do we live in the face of such uncertainty? How do we respond to not knowing and, especially not knowing what fate befalls us? And then there's that ultimate uncertainty about what happens to us when we die. This is, for me, the core spiritual question of our lives: how do we live, certain only of uncertainty? Since our knowledge is limited and we don't know the whole story, how do we live our lives amidst all the ambiguity? If we only have an illusion of control over what happens, all we can actually control is how we respond in the face of this reality.

We've got several options, of course. One extreme is to cower in fear in a corner our whole lives and never venture out into the world. The other extreme, I suppose, is to take the selfish,

fatalistic approach that says, “Screw it. Life’s all a crap-shoot, so I’m going to do whatever I want for as long as I can.” We can also choose to live in denial and to hang onto our plans like they’re life preservers in a choppy sea, hoping like hell that the tree really is solid and no limbs will ever come crashing down on us. There are other options, too. But the one I’m working on personally – and I admit it’s a journey and sometimes a struggle--It’s what the Buddhists call acceptance of impermanence, or “non-attachment,” and it’s best illustrated by the example offered by the Thai Buddhist monk Ajahn Chah when he was speaking to a reporter many years ago. When asked about the principle of impermanence, the monk pointed to a glass on the table beside him. “Do you see this glass?” he asked. “I love this glass. It holds the water admirably. When the sun shines on it, it reflects the light beautifully. When I tap it, it has a lovely ring. Yet for me, this glass is already broken. When the wind knocks it over or my elbow knocks it off the shelf and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course.’ But when I understand that this glass is already broken, every minute with it is precious.”

Responding to the impermanence of our lives, our lives that are so full of uncertainty, in this way allows us to see our lives as they are and to live fully into them. It allows us to savor each moment, because we know that it’s going to change and that it all will be gone in a heartbeat. We can look at the tree in our yard and be grateful for the shade it provides today, because we know its limbs will one day fall. The glasses in our lives, our very lives themselves, are already broken. Let’s enjoy and appreciate their preciousness.

May it be so.

Closing Words - The 5th Century Indian poet Kalidasa wrote:

Look to this day!

For it is Life, the very life of life.

In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of your existence.

The bliss of growth, the glory of action, the splendor of beauty.

For yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision;

But today, well-lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore, to this day.