

## **"CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF RISK"**

**A sermon by Rev. Roger Bertschausen  
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
Appleton, Wisconsin  
[www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)**

**September 13-14, 2014**

Reading: from Anne Lamott's book *Help Thanks Wow: The three essential prayers*

If we stay where we are, where we're stuck, where we're comfortable and safe, we die there. We become like mushrooms, living in the dark, with poop up to our chins. If you want to know only what you already know, you're dying. You're saying: Leave me alone; I don't mind this little rathole. It's warm and dry. Really it's fine.

When nothing new can get in, that's death. When oxygen can't find a way in, you die. But new is scary, and new can be disappointing, and confusing—we had this all figured out, and now we don't. New is life.

If you are like me, you'd like to be able to understand and describe life better. Then you could manage and control it and maybe realize a small profit or advantage. But that would be death. And when you see that you have mostly stopped trying to do this, and are instead trying to remember to step outside when you're buggy and to look up, you say "Wow." You mindlessly go into a 7-Eleven to buy a large Hershey's bar with almonds, to shovel in, to go into a trance, to mood-alter, but you remember the first prayer, Help, because you so don't want the shame or the bloat. And out of nowhere in the store, a memory floats into your head of how much, as a child, you loved blackberries, from the brambles at the McKegneys'. So you do the wildest, craziest thing: you change your mind, walk across the street to the health food store, and buy a basket of blackberries, because the answer to your prayer is to remember that you're not hungry for food. You're hungry for peace of mind, for a memory. You're not hungry for cocoa butter. You're hungry for safety, for a moment when the net of life holds and there is an occasional sense of the world's benevolent order.

So you eat one berry slowly, savoring the sweetness and slight resistance, and after sucking the purple juice off your fingers you say: Wow. That tasted like a very hot summer afternoon when I was about seven and walked barefoot down the dirt road to pick them off the wild blackberry bushes out be the goats, Pedro and Easter, in the McKegneys' field. Wow. The blackberries tasted like sweet

purple nectar, not dusty exactly, but dusted just right, not quite leafy but still alive, a little bit bitter around the seed, juicy and warm with sunshine.<sup>1</sup>

### Sermon

Anne Lamott puts it starkly in the reading: stay where it's safe and comfortable, and you will die. She's not just talking about the status quo when it's awful, but also when it's good. Even then, staying in it ultimately is death.

I think Lamott is right. And what I know is that getting out of the comfortable status quo inevitably involves risk. This is why I'm delighted that our theme for September is "What does it mean to be a people of risk?" It's a timely theme for me, and for the Fellowship.

One thing to lift up out of the gate is that there are no guarantees that the risks we take will be successful. One definition of risk in my dictionary is "to expose oneself to the chance of injury or loss." Yep. It should be obvious, but we need to be fully aware that risk is, well, risky. It doesn't always work. It can result in injury or loss, sometimes catastrophically.

Also, not all risks are smart risks. I lifted up in the newsletter article I wrote with my colleague Leah that trying to walk from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon to the North Rim in one hot June day at the age of 50 was not a smart risk. I'll never know how close the heat exhaustion I experienced came to potentially life-threatening heatstroke. As I said maybe a thousand times to my hiking partner that day, "This was the dumbest thing ever." So, please don't leave the Fellowship today and quit your job and sell everything or dump your spouse or get engaged to somebody you hardly know and say, "My minister told me to." The risk you are contemplating may be dumb. It may be something you should NOT do!

I think about some key moments of risk in my own life—smart risk, as opposed to dumb-hike-across-the-Grand Canyon-in-a-June-day risks.

One was when I decided to study abroad in Sri Lanka, a country that was very different from anything I ever knew. In my journey, that was the most significant launching point for my passionate focus on diversity and inclusion.

Another smart risk was taking a time out from intimate relationships after a long string of bad relationships. My comfortable status quo was being in a relationship, so I would jump right into another bad relationship after the previous one self-destructed. Taking the risk of a timeout opened me up to very painful insight and growth. And it paved the way for a much healthier relationship (which just marked its 26th year of commitment).

Another smart risk was coming to a small, not necessarily financially viable congregation with big dreams out of divinity school (that would be the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship) I don't know about all of you, but that risk worked pretty well from my perspective. It pushed me to become a better minister and person. I could have found a safer, more solid congregation to bet my career on. I'm glad I didn't!

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), pp. 86-87.

I am now entering into a new season of risk in my life. I'm taking the risk of walking the talk of equal, mutual marriages and am leaving a wonderful job next summer to step into an unknown future in terms of my career. However that turns out, I am confident this is a smart risk because it's causing me to live up to my belief that my marriage is, along with my growth as an individual, the centerpiece of my life.

This month, I invite you to give some thought to some of the key risks you've taken in your lives.

Risk works in much the same way in communities as it does in individual lives. So as I think about the Fellowship, I can see numerous times when this congregation took risks that changed the comfortable status quo. This quality is one of the things that makes this such an extraordinary congregation. I mean, the status quo here has often been not only comfortable but pretty darn good, too, and yet there's been the spiritual maturity to risk it for something even better.

Here are a few of the risks the Fellowship has taken:

- Founding a liberal religious congregation in Joe McCarthy's Fox Valley in 1955;
- Moving from the comfortable, much lower stakes of renting space for Sunday mornings to buying the seemingly enormous Moose Lodge in 1981;
- Voting in the late 1980s to embrace growth in numbers, even though people liked the intimacy and low financial expectations of a small congregation;
- Calling for their first settled minister a 27-year-old rookie minister with tenuous Unitarian Universalist identity (me);
- Risking the comfortable status quo of a hetero-normative congregation to welcome intentionally LGBTQ folks;
- Leaving the quirky but comfortable (if you could get up steps) Moose Lodge and digging deep to build an accessible, larger building, and then digging deep again to expand that building.

At this point there are two really important things about risk that I need to lift up. First, we need to talk about the role of privilege in being able to take risks. I am aware that the enormous privilege in my life allowed me to take each one of these risks I shared about, and so many others. If I'm born in a different country or class or with a different skin color, I don't necessarily even have the option of taking these risks. I'm able, for example, to take this next risk because my wife has a job that pays enough for me not to have steady income for awhile. To cite an extreme example, if I'm twenty-years-old and find myself in a cattle car headed for Auschwitz instead of a plane for half a year of study in Sri Lanka, the range of smart risks I can take is starkly different.

The second thing is that it's good to think about not just big risks, but small risks as well. This is part of why I loved today's reading from Anne Lamott so much that this is the second time I've used it in a service here. She writes about risk in a grand way, and then uses as an example the decision to walk across the street and get some blackberries to eat instead of wolfing down a chocolate bar. In the scheme of life, that's not a huge risk, right? But nevertheless it is an important risk for her at that moment. She left her comfortable status quo—self-medicating with

chocolate—and tried something different. So as you think about ways you might risk your comfortable status to grow, don't just think about the big things, think about the little risks you might be able to take, too. They can be just as effective at shaking up the status quo.

So what are some ways that we can cultivate the ability to take smart risks in our individual and communal lives? The first, most important way for me is engaging with the Buddha's idea of impermanence. I deeply believe with the Buddha that impermanence is the nature of life. Everything is impermanent: me; the Fellowship; when things feel rotten, the crappy status quo of my life (which is why suicide is not a good option). And let's add the sun, the earth and maybe the universe. They're not going to last forever, either, at least not in the same form. This gives me perspective, because the truth is that even if I really, really like the status quo, it isn't going to last forever anyway, no matter how hard I try to cling to it. Change is inevitable. This puts risking the status quo in perspective: it's going to change anyway. Why not take a (smart) risk?

Second, I cultivate the ability to take smart risks with a very general sense of faith. I have a basic faith that I will have the internal and external resources to make the best of whatever unfolds for me. This is not a pollyannaish faith that everything will always turn out great, but it's a faith that when troubles come, I will have the ability do the best I can to handle them. I like that I'm hearing this same faith about the Fellowship as it moves into the uncertainty of a ministerial transition. It will serve you well in taking the risks you need to make the very best of what will unfold.

And I cultivate the ability to take smart risks by understanding that the risks might be very small, like Anne Lamott's eating blackberries instead of chocolate. This is particularly true in situations of oppression. Victor Frankl writes about this in *Man's Search for Meaning*, his landmark book about his experiences in that worst of all conceivable situations: Auschwitz. Even there, he found that he still had the capacity to make some choices—like what he thought about. He writes about marching along one icy cold night, hungry and ill-clothed, guns pointed at him by guards all too willing to firing them. He brought to mind his wife. "Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise."<sup>2</sup> Not only did this luminous image keep him stumbling along, he realized for the first time the true meaning of life: human salvation comes in and through love. Embracing the idea of love at Auschwitz is truly a leap of faith! Though it seemed ridiculous and didn't change the status quo of his imprisonment or the fact his life could be snuffed out at any moment, it changed the status quo of his mind and spirit. And that meant everything.

So, friends, what parts of your life feel stale right now? What parts feel like you're under a mushroom, living in the dark, poop up to your chin? And what large or, especially, small risks could you take to step out of the stale comfort of the status quo today?

If your marriage feels stale, maybe you and your life companion could sign up for the Fellowship's Heart to Heart retreat (there's still room!) and take the risk of sharing deeply with one another, or you could set aside an evening a week or month or twenty minutes a week after your kids go to bed for date night or date-twenty-minutes. If your spirit is sapped by a grudge you're hanging onto for dear life, maybe you could take the risk of forgiveness. On the flip side,

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984).

if your spirit is being dragged down by regrets, maybe you could take the risk of making amends to someone you've hurt. If your spirituality feels stale, maybe you could take the risk of trying a spiritual practice for ten minutes a day. If you're troubled by what happened in Ferguson, maybe you could take the risk of exploring how racism and privilege or the lack of privilege work in your life.

I want to talk about Ferguson for a moment. I am somewhat amazed that Leah and I wrote a piece about Ferguson in the Fellowship's e-newsletter<sup>3</sup> and heard absolutely nothing in return. Writing those couple paragraphs was one of the hardest things we've worked on collaboratively. And then there was no comment whatsoever, which is a pretty rare thing here.

I'm wondering if there's a little denial going on. You know: not our problem. That's Ferguson, not the Fox Valley. Or maybe it just feels so complex and possibly even hopeless, so it's just easier to ignore it? Or maybe for some of us it's unexamined white privilege at work? I don't know, although I do know I'm being ripped up inside with all of these sentiments.

This was exacerbated for me by being in St. Louis for a week helping my wife Amy get settled there. People there are not ignoring Ferguson. It comes up in conversation all the time, at least it did for me when I talked with other whites. The main thing we heard over and over is that we better be careful where we choose to live. The clear though unspecified implication: don't live in Ferguson, or East St. Louis, or anywhere else where people of color predominate. That's the thinking that helped create what happened in Ferguson. With few exceptions, it feels like St. Louis is now even more deeply entrenched in segregation, racism, and hatred of the other.

So what do I do when I move there? Do I get out of the comfortable car of white privilege and actually enter into working on this daunting problem? Do I go along with the comfortable status quo—comfortable for whites, that is—and live my life in segregation? Where *do* Amy and I live? Whom *do* we interact with? Do we play it safe? Take some risks? And how about you? What are you going to do? At a recent social justice leadership meeting here, someone shared a reading with this truth: “Injustice isn’t ‘coming to a town near you,’ it’s already struck your town.”<sup>4</sup> It’s here, in Appleton and Oshkosh and everywhere else in Northeast Wisconsin. What are you going to do?

I'll close with one final thought, and excerpts from a poem. The other thing that helps us take risks is a willingness to live on the edge sometimes. The poem, "The Edge is where I want to be" by Lisa Martinovic, is well, a bit edgy. It includes some words I don't ordinarily use in the pulpit, or even in my personal life:

so you just want to take the edge off  
one beer  
one joint  
one teeny weeny Prozac

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<sup>3</sup> <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Fellowship-Weekly-Newsletter.html?soid=1109130245032&aid=VNMxHLq7i0k>.

<sup>4</sup> [http://org.salsalabs.com/o/1272/t/0/blastContent.jsp?email\\_blast\\_KEY=1304981](http://org.salsalabs.com/o/1272/t/0/blastContent.jsp?email_blast_KEY=1304981).

get rid of the edge?...

and what's life without an edge?  
that's right, it's DULL  
the edge is the cliff you've dangled from in a hundred nightmares  
you never know what's over the edge  
and there's only one way to find out

Brothers and sisters  
where are we—  
who are we—  
if we take the edge off?

Lose the edge  
and all you've got is middle  
middle aged  
middle class  
middle of the road  
middle management

you're dribbling along in the uncooked vanilla pudding of life  
all fat  
no lean, hard edge to drive you  
sharpen your skills  
your wit  
your senses

the edge holds the answer to your questions  
the question to your answers  
it's the trailhead to the road not taken  
the edge is everywhere  
you've never dared to be

baby, if you're not on the edge  
you're sleepwalking through *been there done that*  
you're stuck watching reruns of somebody else's life  
in the great mushy middle  
where all the droning, moaning masses live  
and eat and act and dress and think alike  
and see the same movies  
so they can have the same conversations and then  
dream the same dreams  
if they dream at all

on the edge you don't know  
what anybody is going to do or say or think

the edge is not available on your cell phone, iPod, satellite dish  
or anywhere in the googleable universe  
the edge does not twitter, it THUNDERS

and there are no disguises here  
on the edge, everyone is naked  
all bets are off  
and the game's not rigged  
the air is clear and brisk  
your heart's pounding  
you're shaking  
you're lightheaded and queasy  
you're scared  
because everything is initiation  
on that sharp unforgiving edge

damn right it's uncomfortable  
the edge is change  
it's what you don't see coming  
so get out of your comfort zone and deal with it...

but if you're tired and weary and battered  
if you can't take one more asshole  
riding herd on your wild and precious life  
if you're mad or sad or bored enough  
to wake up and do something  
if you're ready to feel the pain of the great  
gaping wound your life has become  
then goddamn it, friend!

quit your job  
quit smoking  
quit whining  
leave that jerk  
write that poem  
go dancing  
get sober  
take a road trip—a dare—a spin—a lover—a chance  
honey, break down and cry if that's what it takes  
then pick your ass up  
and for all you're worth run  
don't walk  
to the edge<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://slaminatrix.com/the-edge-is-where-i-want-to-be>.

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