

And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight in the bud
was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

Thank you, Carolyn, for reminding me of that quotation from Anais Nin.

There is risk.

In every moment.

And we think that we conquer it when we stay still,
when we let inertia carry us from one moment to the next.

When we don't make any change -

we think, change is risky, the way things are, that's safe.

No.

That's illusion.

Every moment is a risk.

And we risk remaining too tight,
in bud,

not getting the sun, not coming alive.

Or, we blossom.

And we move away from the middle and toward the edge.

And we hold on for dear life.

Because we are scared.

But we have come to see, somehow,

that we cannot stay as we are,

that we must step out,

come alive,

blossom,

and become.

The risk is terrible, the fear is terrible.

And we move forward together, toward each other,

move forward because we can't stay still, can't stay put,

or because something - a dream of life - a hope - a longing in our heart -

something pulls us open,

to blossom.

To become.

A friend of mine told me a story this week.

She's a teacher, and they have a terrarium in their classroom,

where caterpillars turn into monarch butterflies.

Monarchs are amazing, and deeply endangered.

These caterpillars grow up, eating milkweed.

And a few days ago, while she was watching,

right in front of her eyes, and the students,

the caterpillar, hanging upside down, started to shake,

and then, whoosh, this green fluid oozes everywhere,

covering the caterpillar, and the chrysalis starts to form.
In 2-3 weeks, a monarch will come out, dry off,
and start flying to Mexico.
But you know about the green goo?
It comes out of their head.
Their head splits open, and they cease to be a caterpillar.
It just opens up.
She saw it happen, and she, and the kids,
were blown away.

You want to talk about risk?
Trying opening your head and melting into green goo,
then turning into something else entirely,
and then breaking free and learning to fly.

These are metaphors.
The flower that blossoms.
The caterpillar that turns into goo and then a butterfly.
These are metaphors,
and metaphors are great, and helpful, and suggestive of possibilities,
but I want to talk this morning about real life,
human life,
actual, not metaphorical, risk-taking.
Spiritual risks, relational risks, personal risks.
The flower and the butterfly, they have no choice.
They are programmed to change.
We, humans, are more muddled.
So I want to talk about living at the edge,
and not in the mushy middle -
although that too is a metaphor, edge and middle.

The question we are asking ourselves this month at the church is this:
what does it mean to be a people of risk?
what does it mean to live a life of risk?
And I hope that you'll join that conversation,
and share with one another - in your families, around the table,
with other folks here in spirit journey groups or just at coffee hour,
what it means to you to take risks.
To adventure boldly and explore.
To try something new.
To jump off not knowing what will happen next.
To take the road less travelled by.
For it will, indeed, make all the difference.

I don't know about you, but for me, some risks are easier than others.

Pick up everything and move across the country? No problem.
Speak in front of a thousand people? Not even a little nervous.
Socialize with people I don't know, in a non-professional context? Terrifying.
Stand in a high place without a fence? That is a risk I cannot take.

Walk at night, alone, in what is supposedly the fifth-most dangerous neighborhood in the country; I don't even give it a second thought.

Our fears are often idiosyncratic and individual.
What feels risky to one person doesn't to someone else.
We have different childhoods and different emotional needs.

I was recently complimented by a friend of mine
on how willing I was to face danger, to be brave and go for it,
she said, I wish I could be so brave as you.
And of course I thought, Are you kidding? I wasn't brave at all!
I didn't take a risk until I felt I had no choice at all.

Isn't this often the way it goes?
We see someone take a risk -
and I can think of quite a few of you in this room -
someone take a risk,
to apply to school, get a new job, learn a new skill,
retire, get married, welcome a foster child, walk away from a bad situation,
speak in front of a crowd,
we see someone take a risk and think, wow.
And we share that with them — we should, anyway,
we should say, I'm proud of you! —
and they say, they say, oh, it didn't feel risky.
Or they say, it felt terribly risky, but I didn't think I had a choice.
I had too.

And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight in the bud
was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.
From the outside, it looked like risk.
From the inside, it felt like necessity.
Like the caterpillar, genetically programmed.

The invitation to be a people of risk,
to live a life of risk,
to develop, as Hannah Rosin writes children need to,
to develop our capacity to face our fears and go forward anyway,
this invitation means that we learn how to take risks
even when, on the inside, it doesn't feel absolutely necessary.
That we learn how to take risks not just because we have to,
but to take them because our life and the world would be better if we did.
That we learn to take risks not just in the areas where we are comfortable,
but in the areas we are uncomfortable, too.

Because here is what I know,
and what spiritual teachers of every kind and tradition know:
you need to take risks.
You need to take them because your being is worth more than safety and inertia.
You need to take them because -
trust me, I talk to a lot of people at the end -

at the end of your life, you'll regret it if you don't.
You will.
How does that song go?

"I went sky divin',
I went rocky mountain climbin',
I went 2.7 seconds on a bull name Fumanchu.
And I loved deeper,
And I spoke sweeter,
And I gave forgiveness I've been denying,"

You need to take risks because your taking risks will inspire others -
your children, your friends, strangers you've never met but who hear your story -
that they can reach out, love deeper, go for it.
And you need to take risks because the world as it is,
isn't OK.

Our broken politics, our radical and destructive inequality, climate change,
bearing down on us like a runaway freight train,
these things will continue as they are,
unless we, we, we take risks, big scary audacious risks
for the sake of a better world, a better life, for the sake of our highest ideals and greatest hopes.

So how do we do that?

How do we take risks, when it doesn't feel necessary, and when it's not in our comfort zone?

Well, two things.

First, we do it on a team.

Michael would never take the risks he takes without Shelia.
(And before you say, he shouldn't, that girl is a bad influence,
remember: 1) it's a metaphor and 2) the overprotected kid).
We need someone to take our hand and say,
let's go!
You can do it!
We'll do it together!

The biggest risks I've taken in my life,
I've been able to do because someone showed me the way,
believed in me,
talked me through.

And when I get scared, I have a few folks I can call on,
whether it's professional or personal,
and they say, it's OK to be scared,
that's natural,
but don't let it stop you.
Don't let your fear keep you in the middle,
because the edge is where life is.

I don't want to give the impression that this is easy.
Taking risks, even with encouragement, friendship, support,

is very scary.

There are times I don't just want to hide under the covers and pretend the world doesn't exist,
there are times I have do exactly that.

And that's OK, for a little bit.

But you can't stay there,

and so make that call, get that friend who you know will buck you up and tell you to carry on.

You've got a friend like that?

I hope so.

If not, maybe that's why you are here,

because I know it can be a big risk to just walk in the doors of a church,
and yet you did that.

You need a friend like that, or a partner or a parent or sibling like that.

Someone like Shelia, who pulls you toward the edge

because they believe in your capacity to face the unknown,
and they'll face it with you.

Don't be afraid of some change.

Today will be a joyful day.

Not easy.

That's not one of the verses.

Joyful, a time of change.

A moment of possibility.

When I am frightened, will you be with me?

If you will, I can learn to live.

To reach out,

to take that other road,

to live a life that matters.

My former brothers-in-law, when we would gather over holidays,
and play bridge, the two of them, me, and my former-father-in-law,
when they played together, would call themselves Team Risk.

John and Albert would play a little loose, bid a little high,

go for it, when they played on a team with me, or with their dad,

but when they played together, it was a whole other thing. Team Risk.

And sometimes they went down in flames.

Way overbid.

But often they made it.

Like Kennedy saying, we'll put a man on the moon by the end of the decade,
when we had no idea how to do that,

sometimes you throw out an audacious goal,

and then you try and you reach.

And whether or not you make it isn't the point.

We weren't playing for money, just for fun, so they had fun.

And life isn't about playing it safe,

it's about living, about the experience you'll never ever forget.

But it was each other's encouragement and willingness to be risky
that made it work.

Team Risk.

Who is on your team risk?
Who do you adventure with?
Who delights in overbidding, and going for it,
because life is meant to be lived?

Look, life is not a game.
And some risks are not wise, but foolish.
Driving without your seatbelt.
Smoking.
Jumping from airplanes without parachutes.
These things aren't risky, they're deadly.

But even non-foolish risks, worth taking might cost us a lot.
Falling in love is an enormous risk.
You might have your heart broken;
indeed chances are that, more than once, you will.
Working for justice is a huge risk.
You might get martyred for your work,
plenty have laid down their lives,
and we admire the courage but we wish
they had won the fight without the paying that price.
Or, working for justice, you might not succeed,
and you risk the loss of time, and energy, and spirit,
from what feels too often like a Sisyphian struggle.
Changing jobs, moving cities, having a child -
these are huge risks, and they might not go well;
they are very likely to not go according to plan, at least.
And even when the risk does work out,
there's a cost,
what you left behind
in order to move forward.

We need a team. We need a Sheila,
to pull us into our best, most interesting life.
We need someone to give us courage,
to show us how,
or to say, I'm scared too, but we'll jump together.

That's first: we need a team.
But we need something more.
A letting go. Call it Buddhist metaphysics or Christian prayer or Quantum mechanics,
we need to let go and let it be and be in the moment.
That's second.

We need to remember that staying put is risky too.
We need to remember that nothing ever stays the same,
that each moment is a new moment,
that life is short,
yesterday but a dream and tomorrow only a vision,
we need to remember the exhilaration of possibility,

we need faith and we need forgiveness
and we to let go of the fiction
let go of the fiction
that we are in control of everything.

Hold on loosely.

Life is about getting somewhere,
it's about living in this moment,
so don't conserve what you've got,
experience what you can.

This goes against our calvanist european cultural instructions,
but we're not calvanists,
we believe that the holy is love
and it's all going to be OK,
in ways we can't even understand,
and so, why not? live fully!

As one of my colleagues once wrote,
don't "save your soul" - souls are not meant for saving,
like pennies in a ceramic pig,
use your soul, live your life, deal it out to the world,
this moment shall pass,
so go ahead, move toward the edge,
try something new,
live while you still can,
be expansive and courageous and do something you might regret,
but that you'll never forget.

It's my experience, and the wisdom of others who've walked the road,
that when we have these two things:

1. a team, a friend, a companion, to encourage us - to give us courage,
to show us and pull and push and believe in us,
 2. an ability to live in the moment, to let go of past and future, and the fiction of control
- when we have these two things,
then it is amazing what we can do.

The audacious, inspiring risks we can take -
take for the sake of our best life,
take for the sake of the ones we love,
take for the sake of justice, for our conscience and our greatest dreams.
It is amazing what we can do,
when we seize the present moment together.

So whether you feel a desire - not yet a necessity,
but an longing in your being,
whether you feel a desire to do something difficult, risky, uncertain,
whether you feel it for the sake of yourself or another,
for the sake of our joy or your sense of justice,
I hope and I pray this day,
that you will reach out, and find someone for your team,
that you will let go of what is unreal,
and live in what is true,

that you will remember that you can do what you dream of,
that the middle is dull, and the edge is life,
that fear is suffocation and hope is air,
that inertia might be comfortable but adventure is compelling,
and that you will be risky, that you will reach, reach out, reach in,
and live your best and most exciting story.
That is my prayer this morning for me, for you, and for us.
May we have the courage to make it come to pass.
Amen, Blessed be, Namaste.