

A Church of Risk, Part I
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I have a lot of favorite lines in our hymnals.
One of my favorites is that line in Sing Out Praises for the Journey,
about the pilgrims who knew wild roads,
about how we depart from the wayside hostel they left,
and then we go forward on our journey,
in their spirit, but further than they had ranged so far.
Pilgrims who knew wild roads.
Onward, with the great companions!
Pathless, we sail wild seas!

This is the spirit of our faith, of our living tradition.
A pilgrim church, an exploring church, a church and a faith that takes risks.
Today is the second sermon this month on the subject of risk,
and it's the first in a two-part series on what it means for us to be a church of risk,
a faith of risk.
So since you are here today, you had better make plans to be here next week,
and catch the rest of the story.

Pathless, we sail wild seas!
Guided by love, we risk the way things are, the status quo,
the orthodox tradition which no longer serves.
We are searching in the soul's deep yearnings.
Our religious story is a story of people who stepped out of line,
who asked the kinds of questions that Mark Belletini asks -
what words would make it plain?
why should anyone wish that its meaning was singular?
why are the questions of those who live at ease so different from those who live in constant struggle?
why would we think that any human answer is all there is to say?
what opens our heart and our mind?
These kinds of questions.
Our religious story is a story of people who imagined something more,
something different, and spoke up, wrote, built, advocated, risked,
and sometimes died for asking those questions, for stepping out of line.
Our religious story is a story of people who asked religious questions,
and who were motivated by their religious convictions to ask questions about society,
about justice and sustainability and fairness.
And our religious story is a story of people who asked social questions,
who were disturbed by society as it was and is,
and who discovered in this living tradition that social questions and faith questions
went hand in hand.

Sometimes our story is about the brave, path-breaking, visionary individual.
Miguel Servetus, studying alone in his library,
writing a book about how the trinity had it all wrong,
standing up to John Calvin, sure that logic would win the day,
and being executed for his proto-Unitarianism, in the middle of the 16th century.

There are other stories like this, lonely explorers, making their own way.

But much more common, and much more successful,
are those networks of risk takers,
what Dan McKanan calls the cooperative sisters;
the chain of women leaders, ministers, and suffragists who changed this country,
a lot of Unitarians and Universalists;
who supported and mentored each other, generation to generation,
who gave each other courage, who were the team risk to each other.
The cooperative sisters.

The early Unitarians, who preferred to be simply called Liberal Christians,
just before and after 1800,
gathered in each other's living rooms and studies,
to share ideas,
to talk about the Bible and freedom and new scholarship,
to pray together, and be a comfort in times of trial.
Alone, each of these men would have probably altered each of his own preaching a little,
but mostly kept his head down in the face of the more orthodox order of the day.
But together they had the courage to say,
we believe in a different form of Christianity,
one that values reason and justice,
one that rejects God's vengeance in favor of God's love,
one that affirms the capacity of human beings to be good, decent, and govern themselves.

The early Universalists, rural farmers and self-educated shopkeepers,
needed each other to escape the bonds of stifling Calvinism.
They opened their hearts, they opened their minds, and they found there a God of infinite love.
A God who forgives all, who loves all,
no matter what we have done or failed to do;
they compared that love to the doctrine of hell, and predestination, and punishment,
and said, no.
No, no. All are loved.
There is no hell.
And by themselves, they probably would have just went to church and silently disagreed.
But they found each other.
And together they were brave.
They imagined a whole new religion,
and they preached it out loud,
and they set the country on fire with the doctrine of Universal Salvation;
it was a great and scandalous heresy.
What will make the people behave,
said the authorities?
If God does not stand in judgment?
And the Universalists said, love will.
Not fear of punishment, nor hope for favor:
but gratitude, and love, and grace, and joy.
It was deeply risky, and they did it together,
and they changed the whole country;
they changed the shape of popular faith,

and they saved millions of people from the despair and misery of believing in a vengeful God.

These are our origin stories,
the way that our two traditions began -
Unitarianism and Universalism -
they began in heresy, in stepping out of line,
in asking deep questions
and not being afraid of the answers.

This was the spirit of liberalism, and of liberal religion,
to embrace the power of reason and progress,
to not assume that something was true just because it was tradition,
to listen to the heart's own wisdom, to attend to new ideas,
to open ourselves to the ideas of other traditions.

And so we became a church of risk -
we became the kind of place that welcomed both religious and social risk takers,
people who wanted to ask deep questions.
They came to us, because they heard that we were that kind of place.

When you claim the identity as a church of risk,
as a church that asks questions,
as a church that cares about justice and peace and inclusion and love,
well, you cultivate and attract people who are ready to take risks
for the sake of their vision of a better world.

We have been, more often than not, a spiritual home, a supporter, an advocate,
a place for meeting and resistance and renewal,
for those risk-takers who called for the abolition of slavery,
for the right of women to vote,
for an end to Jim Crow and segregation,
for the equality of all people regardless of who they love,
for, as you heard in the story of Rachel Carson,
environmental stewardship and responsibility,
for peace - whenever and wherever there has been war, we have cried out for peace,
as we still do, and unfortunately must.

For refugees, and the displaced, the poor, for children,
we have worked, we have advocated, we have sung, we have raised money,
we have lent our voices and our strength.

This isn't just nationally or internationally, but right here,
this church in Rockford;
this church welcomed and supported Augustus Connat, a noted abolitionist minister,
it has been, in its lay people and its ministers,
the catalyst for countless justice and service organizations in this town;
we stick our necks out when others are shy, we lead the way, we step out of line.
When folks in Rockford look for a congregation that will
take a risk for the sake of justice,
they look to us.
As they have for 173 years.

Being a church of risk isn't just about social justice, though.
It's also about theology, and spirituality, and religious ideas.

Our founders were heretics,
and we keep attracting heretics,
and we keep growing them within our own body.
When we teach our children, as we do, that they should have their own ideas,
the strangest thing happens:
they do!

Less than a generation after those first groups of risk takers
proclaimed their belief in the oneness and mercy of God,
the value of human beings and the goal of justice,
less than a generation,
the transcendentalists came along and said,
hey, let's be even more risky!
Let's celebrate each person's spiritual wisdom, let's open the doors to all that is,
let's sing with the body electric and sail wild seas.
Two generations after that,
the religious humanists, following that thread,
said, let's get really risky.
Let's let go of the old forms and the old language,
let's have a religion that matters to human lives as they are now:
both the pain:
the teeming cities, the tenement houses, the unsafe factories, the growing divide of wealth,
and the possibility:
evolutionary and cosmological discoveries, advancing progress, world community.
It was risky, to step away from the old ways of doing things;
and people came, they wanted that faith free of fear, that religion for the time.
It was risky, through the 20th century,
to become more and more an interfaith and diverse religious movement;
a place where Christians and Atheists worshiped together
quickly became a place where Christians and Atheists and Buddhists and Jews and Sufis and Pagans
and Taoists and all-of-the-above and I'm-not-sure and I-might-change-my-mind
were all worshiping together.
Talk about risky.
Talk about taking chances.
By becoming that kind of church, we invented a brand-new way to do religion,
a way never seen before in the world;
not just the peaceful co-existence of different faith communities, side-by-side,
but the presence of people with divergent ideas, metaphors, and rituals
in one religious home;
that risk came out of, and reinforced our radical, heretical belief,
that the holy, the truth, is bigger than any one tradition, any one word.
"why should anyone wish that its meaning was singular?"
We are many of the spirit, one in search,
Wide the spectrum, great the reach.
Boldly learning, Beginner's mind, endurer's heart.

In the last ten or so years, we've taken, as a faith, another set of risks -
we've become more religious.
More spiritual and more reverent.
I'm going to talk about this more in a few weeks, when we kick off our month on renewal,

so I don't want to give it all away this morning.
But suffice to say that this recent development,
claiming an interfaith, reverent, grounded spirituality,
is not a departure from our risk taking, but it is well within the stream
of who we are and who we have been.

A church of risk.

Wide the spectrum, great the reach.

A traveling faith, for traveling pilgrims.

A church of wayside hostels.

A place for connected sisters and connected siblings.

A place of questions.

A place where we wonder, and hope, and imagine,
and gather, and share.

A church of heretics and activists.

A church of risk.

This is who we are;

as Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists.

For more than 200 years in this country,

for almost 175 here in this town,

we have been reaching out, reaching deep, taking chances,
traveling pathless seas.

We have done it when it comes to the work of justice in the world,
and we have done it when it comes to our yearning search for truth and meaning.

Theologically risky, institutionally risky, socially risky,

willing to take that less travelled road,

a place where we engender and encourage,

a church of risk.

For me, this heritage is provocative.

It provokes always the question: what's next?

What the social justice issue that too few people are paying attention to?

What's the minority opinion that needs a champion?

This week, I'll tell you that it feels like it is the voice for peace that must be shouted from the rooftops;

To say, what fools are we to repeat, again and again, the same horrible mistakes,
this same hubris and short-sightedness.

The same folly in the desert, again and again for 100 years.

For you, maybe it's that, and maybe it's something else.

What feels risky? Our fore-bearers were afraid, too, but they did it anyway.

And they helped end slavery, and win suffrage, and save the spring from silence,

and secure marriage equality, and end Jim Crow. They helped do that.

Because they risked it all for the sake of love.

What about theologically?

What's the risk we need to be taking?

In this increasingly "spiritual but not religious age"

when connectivity is growing but institutions are fading,

what risks should we be taking so that we can make a difference in the world,

bring the good news of love and reason and open-minded faith

to a world that wants it,

but doesn't know where to find it?
What risks should we take, now?
What questions should we ask, that we don't know the answer to?
What does science and faith and the encounter with diversity have to teach us
for the coming century?
What is the longing of our heart in this age?
I don't know the answers to those questions;
and that of course, is the point.
I'll make some suggestions in part two of this sermon, next week;
but today, this week, I want you to be provoked,
as I am provoked,
by the heritage of those saints who went before,
those who defied the kings and clerics,
who stepped out of line and got wild;
be provoked by their devotion to truth, and to each other,
be provoked by their courage and their confidence.
Be provoked, and wonder what it might for you
to be part of a church of risk,
to be a people of risk;
to start out on your journey from this wayside hostel,
to follow these saints,
what might it mean for you?
Let that question settle in your heart and mind,
and open yourself to possibility.
And let's come back here and see what we think,
and how we feel, and what calls us forward into the future together.
For now, let us be inspired, let us be provoked, and let us sing,
sing in honor of those pilgrims and great companions,
who gave to us this legacy, this heritage, this path in the wilderness.

