March 2017

What Does It Mean A Community Of Risk?

To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. ~James Baldwin

Risk is usually associated with the daredevils and thrillseekers. The real danger, we’re told, is a life of boredom. The battle is between the bland and the bold.

Yet, as James Baldwin reminds us, it’s not quite that simple. He places commitment, not thrills, at the center of the game. For him, the ones to be admired are not so much the daredevils as the dedicated ones. And that Holy Grail? Well, he suggests, maybe it’s not “the exciting life” as we’ve been told. Maybe it’s the faithful life.

And that turns everything wonderfully on its head.

From this perspective, the important question about risk (and about life) is not “Are you willing to jump off?” but “Are you willing to jump in?” Not “Are you willing to put yourself in danger?” but “Are you willing to give yourself to something bigger?” Not “Will you be daring?” but “Will you stay true?”

And the message changes, too. Suddenly, it’s not “Run to what’s thrilling!” but “Don’t run away!”

It’s all about remembering to not let the thrilling trump the faithful. As exciting as riding roller coasters and jumping out of planes might be, let’s remember to remind each other that the most deeply rewarding risks are the ones that involve jumping into causes and putting our hearts in the hands of others. As the poet David Whyte puts it: “We are here essentially to risk ourselves in the world. We are meant to hazard ourselves for the right thing, for the right woman or the right man, for a son or a daughter, for the right work or for a gift given against all the odds.” Bob Marley’s take is equally compelling. He writes, “The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you. You just got to find the ones worth suffering for.”

And here’s the twist: It’s not just Baldwin’s dangers, Whyte’s hazards and Marley’s suffering that come at us when we take the risk of living faithfully. Grace and gifts slip in there, too! As the Scottish writer W.H. Murray explains, “Concerning all acts of creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur from the decision, raising in one’s favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no one could have dreamt would have come their way.”

How thrilling is that?!
QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH

Below is a list of questions to open the mind’s gateway to reveal the wisdom that is right below the surface of our ordinary, everyday lives. Pick one question, any, the one that grabs you and won’t let go, then walk with it. Let your mind wander and wonder. Let the question percolate. Listen curiously to what surfaces.

1. Are your commitments deep and big enough to put you in danger? (To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. ~James Baldwin)

2. Who in your life needs their vulnerability affirmed? Who near you is taking a risk and needs reminding that others are watching with admiration and awe? Who needs help seeing that they aren’t simply exposed, but radiant? (“What makes you vulnerable, makes you beautiful.” ~Brené Brown)

3. How breakable is that heart of yours? Is it more “carefully wrapped” than you noticed? What one small risk this month might help it get some “air?” (“Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to keep it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable.” ~C.S. Lewis)

4. How might it hurt less if you reminded yourself you picked well? If you took the time to remember that you’ve “found one worth suffering for?” (“The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you. You just got to find the ones worth suffering for.” ~Bob Marley)

5. Have you fallen into more “vanilla pudding” than you thought you would? How’s “the middle” feeling to you these days? (“Brothers and sisters,...Lose the edge and all you’ve got is middle - middle aged, middle class, middle of the road, middle management. Lose the edge and you’re dribbling along in the uncooked vanilla pudding of life.” ~Lisa Martinovic)

6. Have the adventures gotten a bit out of hand? Is there a bit too much “living boldly” going on for you right now? Might it be time to take the risk of turning some adventures down?

7. How might that struggle of yours change if you took the risk of sitting down and listening rather that the risk of standing up and speaking? (“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” ~Winston Churchill)

8. What about the risks of letting go? What about the boldness of taking a pass? Sometimes deciding to walk away from the cliff is as courageous and bold as jumping off.

9. Are you (or someone you love) being reckless and calling it “freedom?” (“We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom.” ~Toni Morrison)

10. Are you scared? And if so, why aren’t you telling someone?

11. When was the last time you referred to life using the phrase: “The thrill of it all?” Where is there room this month to make life a bit more trilling?

12. Are you putting up with recklessness? (“Don’t be reckless with other people’s hearts, and don’t put up with people who are reckless with yours.” ~Kurt Vonnegut)

13. How does it feel to be an “intelligent lady”? (“[She was] an intelligent lady: a little too mature for recklessness, a little too young for caution.” ~Connie Brockway)

14. What’s your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don’t include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find your question.
Spiritual Practice - Deepening Experiences
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Option A:
Risk Letting Your Counter-Cultural Self Loose

Each of us have counter-cultural commitments that we don’t lean into as fully as we wish. Often this has to do with a lack of courage. It’s risky to be labeled “a radical.” And so we downplay our pacifism. We don’t make a big deal out of our veganism. In order not to be seen as the “weird parents,” we’ve given up on those “silly” efforts to limit TV, put phones away at dinner, or just not buy cable at all. Our closest friends don’t really understand what UUism is, because we don’t want people to think we’re “evangelical.” We deeply believe in racial reparations but we rarely mention it because the backlash leaves us not only angry but with an even more devastating sense of mourning and isolation.

It’s not simple. And it’s never easy. But not letting our counter-cultural self loose comes at a cost. So this month, take the risk of letting it all hang out, or hang out to the degree that feels right to you. Maybe it’s wearing your Pride Parade t-shirt to the gym. Maybe it’s inviting your friends over for a vegan dinner, or perhaps sharing UU prayers or discussing the merits of drastically reducing the military budget (ok, that’s a bit overboard, but you get the point). Or how about asking a friend to come to church—not to recruit them, but just so they get a better sense of this piece of your life that is so important to who you are. Or maybe it’s even time for you to let your friends at church know you voted republican and why.

Come to your group ready to talk about the cost of “letting loose,” but also can come with a story of how the gift so out-weighed the price.

Option B:
Resist Standing Up and Risk Sitting Down

“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”
~Winston Churchill

Winston Churchill’s words are indeed a celebration of the “quieter” acts of courage. Yes, the more assertive risks get most of the attention: speaking up, defending, pushing back, demanding your voice be heard. And yet, sometimes that instinct to “let them have it” isn’t the brave thing to do; it’s just the easiest. Sometimes speaking up is simply a way to avoid courageously listening to the other side. Sometimes putting yourself on the line to “change them” is just a sneaky way to avoid them changing us. Or a tragic, missed opportunity to grow. Yes, we should urge each other to “bravely keep going” and “courageously take control.” Yet, there are also times when what’s most needed is the risk of letting go of control and just sitting with unknowing.

And so, maybe a bit more space it needed. Maybe it would do us some good to make some room for a “spiritual time out” before we leap into the louder acts of bravery. Maybe it’s good to risk “letting a little more in” before we “let them have it.”

And so, here’s what this spiritual assignment invites us to do:

Find three opportunities to “sit down and listen” when your first instinct is to “stand up and speak.”

Yes, that’s NOT going to be easy. But it will be worth the risk!
Come to your group ready to share not only what it was like to try to listen better, but also (and maybe more
Other Wise Words...

To laugh is to risk appearing a fool,
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.
To reach out to another is to risk involvement,
To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true self.
To place your ideas and dreams before a crowd is to risk their loss.
To love is to risk not being loved in return,
To live is to risk dying,
To hope is to risk despair,
To try is to risk failure.

~William Arthur Ward

Fear
Barnabus Browning
Was scared of drowning,
So he never would swim
Or get into a boat
Or take a bath
Or cross a moat.
He just sat day and night
With his door locked tight
And the windows nailed down, Shaking with fear
That a wave might appear, And cried so many tears
That they filled up the room
And he drowned.

~Shel Silverstein

We are here essentially to risk ourselves in the world.
We are a form of invitation to others and to otherness.
We are meant to hazard ourselves for the right thing,
for the right woman or the right man, for a son or a daughter,
for the right work or for a gift given against all the odds.

~David Whyte

I've found what makes children happy doesn't always prepare them to be courageous, engaged adults.

~Brene Brown

The Edge is where I want to be
Brothers and sisters,...
Lose the edge and all you’ve got is middle
middle aged
middle class
middle of the road
middle management.
Lose the edge and you’re dribbling along in the
uncooked vanilla pudding of life
Baby, if you’re not on the edge, you’re sleepwalking...
you’re watching reruns of somebody else’s life...
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!

~Lisa Martinovic

Full poem at: http://slaminatrix.com/the-edge-is-where-i-want-to-be

When I think about risk, what strikes me most is the
ordinariness of it all. That’s right. Most of it is pretty
ordinary, everyday stuff. That’s not to minimize it. I
think it actually elevates it. It reminds us that risk,
bravery and boldness aren’t once-in-a-lifetime things
done in uniquely daring moments, but instead make up
a way of life that must be lived out each and every day.
Yes, there are those stories of someone pulling a
stranger from the burning car. Yes, we should sit in
awe of the civil rights workers who put their life on the
line for justice or the soldiers who are willing to give
their lives for others. But in addition to such dramatic
acts that alter history, there are daily choices that
prevent history from altering us. Staying centered and
maintaining integrity don’t happen without daily
bravery. Ordinary risk is what stops us from
disappearing, losing ourselves or becoming small.

~Rev. Scott Tayler

We have arrived at a moment of decision. What is at
risk of being destroyed is not the planet itself, of
course, but the conditions that have made it hospitable
for human beings.

~Al Gore

OPENING WORDS

When we walk to the edge of all the light we
know, and step out into the darkness of the
unknown, one of two things will happen:
there will be something solid for us to stand on
… or we will fly.

~Anonymous

CLOSING WORDS

Do not go where the path may lead,
go instead where there is not path
and leave a trail.

~Ralph Waldo Emerson