

A Community of Risk¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words

David Whyte says, “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.”
For what purpose might we risk ourselves in the world? Where is the yes we are called to say?

Reading: If You Could Go Back Danny Bryck²

I know, I know
If you could go back you
would walk with Jesus
You would march with King
Maybe assassinate Hitler
At least hide Jews in your basement
It would all be clear to you
But people then, just like you
were baffled, had bills
to pay and children they didn't
understand and they too
were so desperate for normalcy
they made anything normal
Even turning everything inside out
Even killing, and killing, and it's easy
for turning the other cheek
to be looking the other way, for walking
to be talking, and they hid
in their houses
and watched it on television, when they had television,
and wrung their hands
or didn't, and your hands
are just like theirs. Lined, permeable,
small, and you
would follow Caesar, and quote McCarthy, and Hoover, and you would want
to make Germany great again
Because you are afraid, and your
parents are sick, and your
job pays [crap] and where's your
dignity? Just a little dignity and those kids sitting down in the highway,
and chaining themselves to
buildings, what's their [effing] problem? And that kid
That's King. And this is Selma. And Berlin. And Jerusalem. And now
is when they need you to be brave.

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² <http://jocsm.org/if-you-could-go-back/>

Now
is when we need you to go back
and forget everything you know
and give up the things you're chained to
and make it look so easy in your
grandkids' history books (they should still have them, kinehora)
Now
is when it will all be clear to them.

Sermon

What does it mean to be a community of risk? As some of you know, this year we have been following a theme-based approach to worship and religious education, following themes chosen by the Soul Matters Sharing Circle. We are among about 200 congregations using these themes. This in itself was a bit of a risk—what would it be like to reflect on topics created by another group? Would we run out of things to say? Would we neglect topics that we might otherwise cover? Or might we ask questions that we wouldn't have thought of otherwise? Might we find hitherto unknown readings and resources for inspiration? We wouldn't know unless we took the risk to try it.

This month's theme asks the question “What does it mean to be a community of risk?” This is a question that can go in a number of directions. All of life includes risk. There are risks we face that we have no control over, and risks that we choose. Is the theme encouraging us to take risks? Or cautioning us to be careful about what risks we take? And why is this a question for worship?

When I hear the word “risk” I remember conversations from years ago among social justice activists about whether or not we should risk arrest—whether or not we should risk engaging in civil disobedience on behalf of a cause that felt important to us. An old friend recently reminded me that this year will be the thirtieth anniversary of the 1987 Lesbian & Gay Civil Disobedience at the Supreme Court. She and I had been part of that massive civil disobedience involving several hundred people. We trespassed on the steps of the Supreme Court building in October of that year, to protest the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* case that upheld a Georgia law that criminalized sodomy. We risked getting arrested to make the point that our love should not be criminal.

We were arrested and many of us were held overnight in the DC jail. I have a funny story from that event. In the women's jail, we were crammed in like sardines—two to a bunk mattress—so I introduced myself to the woman sharing my bunk, and it turned out to be Starhawk, the famous pagan writer. In places other than church, I would joke that I had slept with Starhawk in the DC jail. But not in church of course. In any case, none of us got much sleep that night, but eventually I was released without going to court because the police lost the paperwork on my arrest.

I was glad I took the risk to be arrested at that time. I was one of the organizers of the event, and I led a training in non-violent civil disobedience for participants in the action. One of the things I said to the people in the training was that as LGBT people we were already engaging in civil disobedience, just by living our lives as queer. We knew about taking risks. It was a risk to come out to our families, it was a risk to hold hands with our lovers, it was a risk to live with our partners, it was a risk to be ourselves and to be open about it. Openly living our lives was the most powerful action we could take to win our rights.

Along the way, I participated in many other forms of protest related to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights. In the thirty years since that civil disobedience, real change has taken place. *Bowers v.*

Hardwick was overturned in 2003, and same-sex marriage became legal, first in 2004 in Massachusetts, and then around the nation. So when I hear the question, “what does it mean to be a community of risk?” I think about the queer community, and how we had to be a community of risk, just in order to be ourselves. And because of those risks, after many years of struggle, we started to experience some safety.

In March 2017, in today's America, there are many communities in which people face risks every day, just to be who they are. For example, right now, transgender folks are not safe. It was getting better for many years, but now things are going backwards. You may have heard about laws that are being passed that make it illegal for a transgender person to use the bathroom of their gender identity if their original identified gender doesn't match up. This means that a trans individual faces a risk of harassment and violence just going about their daily lives in public spaces. But it is about so much more than bathrooms. Seven trans women have been murdered just in the first two months of this year.³

So a question comes up for those of us who are not trans—what might it mean for us to be a community of risk in alliance with the risks that trans people are facing each day? I saw one suggestion on Facebook, from a woman in her 50s—she suggested that all older women who are not trans start taking the risk of using the men's bathroom, in solidarity with trans folks.⁴ She writes, with a bit of humor, but also totally seriously: “I’ve chosen what is going to get me arrested in 2017. Because this year we’re all going to stand up for something enough to cause a fuss. I never thought I’d be a Rosa Parks of toilets, but the cause is just and I’ve got a tiny bladder.” Think about it. If a whole bunch of ladies used the men's room, they couldn't arrest us all.

But closer to home—might we create signs on our own church restrooms that make it clear that people can choose the restroom that matches their preferred pronouns?⁵ [hold up signs]⁶ Can we add a gender neutral sign to our handicapped accessible bathroom? [hold up sign]⁷ Can we make one building and one community feel a little bit safer? Maybe being a community of risk means becoming a community of safety for those at risk?

There are many others who are living with risk because of their identity or religion or what legal papers they hold or do not hold. Let me introduce you to one person. Yosimar Reyes was born in Mexico and brought to the United States at the age of three. He grew up in East San Jose, California. In high school he got involved in poetry slams, and he has become a nationally acclaimed poet, educator, performance artist and public speaker. He explores themes of migration and sexuality in his work. What does it mean to be undocumented right now in America? Yosimar wrote “A Poem so that the Weight of this Country does not Crush You.”⁸ Let me share that poem with you:

Somedays you may wake up sad
somedays you may wake up frustrated
somedays you may wake up tired
somedays you may wonder if its worth it
somedays you may question your own growth

3 <https://thinkprogress.org/six-transgender-women-killed-2017-1d3a2ccd988b#.g2qv534yp>

4 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/old-ladies-occupying-bathrooms-its-time_us_58ae14f2e4b0ea6ee3d03546?

5 <http://www.uua.org/lgbtq/welcoming/ways/bathrooms>

6 Gender diversity is welcome here. All are welcome to use the restroom that best fits their identity. A gender neutral, wheelchair accessible restroom is located down the hall.

7 Gender neutral restroom/ Everyone is welcome to use.

8 <http://mijente.net/2017/02/25/poem-weight-country-not-crush-yosimar-reyes/>

somedays you may think on how immense the world is
to be caged in this country
to be subjugated to all this abuse
somedays you just want to breath

And baby I am here
to remind you to sit in those moments
to sit in that whirlpool
but just know that there are people like me
picking up the load when you can't
there are people like me pushing
so the weight of this country does not crush you
that there are people like you
who will fight when I can't
we will take turns
pushing against these walls

I got your back and you got mine
and in the scheme of things does anything else matter
even if our fight is unfruitful
we will depart
with our dignity intact
we will depart knowing
that this country is losing
a prized possession

this country is losing
the gift of our resilience

We will watch them as they tear in to each other's skins
and thank the heavens
we never turned beasts
like them

It gets complicated for those of us who are relatively safe, while others are facing risks that we don't face. That is one of the definitions of privilege—the status of identity that keeps us safe while others face the risk of harm. But those with privilege in any given situation face the risk of turning into beasts, if we merely stand by while others are harmed. The reading today by Danny Bryck asks that question—we think we would march with King, or hide Jews in our basement, but what makes us imagine we would be any different from those in other times who were baffled and had bills to pay and just went along?

We might wonder, for example, if people who didn't intervene in the Holocaust were morally reprehensible. But it is more complex than that. Social scientists have explored the question of why some people become helpers, while others remain bystanders in crisis situations.⁹

One factor is related to difference and similarity—people are more likely to help someone they perceive to be more like themselves. But other causes seem more mundane. One cause researchers identified for

9 http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/we_are_all_bystanders

non-intervention is a “diffusion of responsibility.” When people think there are many other witnesses to an emergency, they feel less personal responsibility to intervene. Another cause is “pluralistic ignorance:” a tendency to assume that if other witnesses are maintaining a calm demeanor then no emergency is actually taking place. And, in another study done with ministry students, if participants were merely told that they were late to the next event, they were less likely to stop to help someone in distress.

All of these factors might lull us into a stance of moral passivity—and certainly we can see these dynamics in our world today. The whole nation is watching as immigration raids have increased, and there are many voices saying that only criminals are being targeted, that this is legal and appropriate. Those targeted are likely to be people of color. The sense of panic in the nation at large can make us feel like we've got to rush through our days, and there is nothing we can really do to help.

But the researchers also offered suggestions about how to break through the passive bystander problem. Psychologist John Darley says:

More people need to learn about the subtle pressures that can cause bystander behavior, such as diffusion of responsibility and pluralistic ignorance. That way they'll be better prepared next time they encounter a crisis situation. “We want to explode one particular view that people have: ‘Were I in that situation, I would behave in an altruistic, wonderful way,’” ... “What I say is, ‘No, you’re misreading what’s happening. I want to teach you about the pressures [that can cause bystander behavior]. Then when you feel those pressures, I want that to be a cue that you might be getting things wrong.’”

Anti-bullying activists have found that when students can talk about their own fears, they are more likely to step in when someone else is being bullied. Researchers also say, “Just as passive bystanders reinforce a sense that nothing is wrong in a situation, the active bystander can, in fact, get people to focus on a problem and motivate them to take action.”

What can a church community do in the face of raids against those who are undocumented? Some churches are becoming “active bystanders.” On February 15th, the First Unitarian Society of Denver offered sanctuary to Jeanette Vizguerra, a 45 year old mother of four children, three of whom were born in the U.S. Vizguerra has lived in the United States since 1997. To be deported would mean to be separated from her young children. She had earlier pleaded guilty to using a fake ID in order to work in 2009. She was granted deferments of deportation each year, but she is now classified as a criminal by the Trump administration because of that misdemeanor offense. This year she was afraid to check in with Immigration and Customs Enforcement after another mother was deported during a check-in in Phoenix.

Across the country, dozens of churches and other faith communities are preparing to offer sanctuary to immigrants who are in the country without documentation. First Unitarian in Denver had previously provided sanctuary in 2014 for an immigrant father, so they were ready to respond to Vizguerra's request for help. According to an interview in the LA Times,

When First Unitarian [first] began exploring the idea of protecting undocumented immigrants three years ago, debates erupted among the 430 members. There were questions of legal responsibility, zoning, building codes and security. Legal experts were called in. Finally, the church decided to let each side argue its case and then hold a vote. “We didn’t realize how many supporters we had until we saw them all lining up to speak,” said Kat Parker, a member of the church sanctuary committee. “We ended up with more

than 70% of the votes.”

After taking in Garcia, the congregation discovered how fiendishly complex the immigration system could be.

“Arturo living here profoundly changed us,” [Rev. Mike] Morran said. “We were appalled by what we learned. [The United States has] created an impossible immigration system that puts people in impossible situations, and then we berate them for being in that impossible situation.”¹⁰

“It is our position as a people of faith that [providing sanctuary] is sacred, and faithful work.”¹¹

I find that when I hear about other UU Churches providing sanctuary, I say to myself, maybe we could do something, too. Their active bystander stance encourages me to feel less baffled. At A2U2, we don't have a room in the basement with a shower to offer, but there are many ways to intervene for immigrants. In some cities there are interfaith networks of faith communities who commit to bringing “sanctuary” to the people when they get news of an ICE raid in their towns.¹² Churches create teams of members who are ready to show up at the scene, hold a prayer vigil, film the raid on phone cameras, and be a presence in support of the family.

One of the main points that researchers make is that when we feel a connection with other people, we are more likely to lend a hand when they are in trouble. It is part of being a human being. I think about the words we say in our affirmation on most Sundays. “We believe in helping others.” Sometimes we need to take a risk to really live that belief. But if we don't take that risk, won't we lose something of the humanity in ourselves?

Really, that is what we are asked in this time—to be human beings. To notice when other human beings are suffering, and respond as human beings. To cut through the haze that might tempt us to look aside, to pretend it doesn't concern us. I've spoken today about the risk that transgender people face, the risks that undocumented immigrants face—of course there are other vulnerable groups, too. And all of us are potentially vulnerable in a society that is abandoning care and respect in favor of narrowness and nationalism.

But if we show up to support those who are most vulnerable, we are creating something more powerful than any hateful practices. We are creating a community of love and connection. And in community anything is possible. Maybe love will look like a welcoming sign on a bathroom door, or maybe it will look like offering sanctuary to someone at risk. Maybe it will be a potluck with our Muslim neighbors, or a prayer vigil for water protectors. We might invent something that no one has thought of yet. We'll be able to see the way when we need to, because our hearts will be open. May it be so.

Closing Words

Remembering once again the words of David Whyte,
We are here to risk ourselves in the world. We are meant to hazard ourselves for the right thing,
the right work, the right person, for a gift given against all the odds. Don't be afraid to say yes!

¹⁰ <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-sanctuary-church-20170222-story.html>

¹¹ <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/16/515510996/colorado-church-offers-immigrant-sanctuary-from-deportation>

¹² <http://sanctuaryphiladelphia.org/1962-2/>