

“The Risk of Becoming”

Rev. Mary Gear

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First reading: “The Growing Edge” by Howard Thurman.

All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born;
All around us life is dying and life is being born.
The fruit ripens on the tree;
The roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth
Against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit.
Such is the growing edge!

It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung,
The one more thing to try when all else has failed,
The upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor.
This is the basis of hope in moments of despair,
The incentive to carry on when times are out of joint
And people have lost their reason; the source of confidence
When worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash.
The birth of the child—life’s most dramatic answer to death—

This is the Growing Edge incarnate.
Look well to the growing edge.

Sermon/Homily: The Risk of Becoming

A few weeks ago, I attended a gathering in a private home, one of the first invitations like that I’ve accepted in quite some time. As I left home, I put a mask on a lanyard around my neck, something I do whenever I leave the house. When I arrived at the gathering, I could see from the door that there were about 18 or so people there, all without masks. In a split second, I decided to put my mask in my jacket pocket, and I stepped inside.

It was both liberating and terrifying. I noticed that I was delighted to see people’s faces, to stand around and chat as if the world was not on fire; it was a joy to be together in person. And I noticed that the entire time I was there, which was a bit more than an hour, there was an alarm in the back of my brain going, “Danger! Danger! Danger!”

Let's just pause a moment. How are you doing right now? How is your body? Your brain?

Your "danger, danger" alarm may have been triggered by hearing the story of my experience. My apologies if so. Take a breath and remember to breathe.

We humans all have that alarm in the back of our heads, it's the amygdala, the small organ in our brain that helps us process emotions, especially fear and pleasure. It's part of the limbic system that helps us respond to danger and avoid pain. It's part of our survival brain that prompts the automatic response to fight, freeze or flee in the face of danger.

In the doorway to that gathering, my survival brain was telling me "Danger! Leave. Right now!" And, that alarm didn't stop when I left the gathering. It continued through that day and for several days after. During that time, I paused to breathe and re-engage my thinking brain, telling myself that chances were that I was fine.

Stress serves a purpose: the stress response helps us stay safe. Our brains notice a threat and prompt us to respond. Back in our cave-dwelling days when humans were in danger from predators, it helped us survive. We would face the threat, then fight or flee, or do whatever we needed to resolve the threat, and then it would be done, our bodies and minds returning to a calm state. The problem with modern day stressors is that they don't end or resolve, our stress is chronic, and wow, has it been lately. We stay under continual stress, so our bodies and minds don't know that we are safe, even when we are.

For two years, our brains have been shouting "Danger! Danger! Danger!" No wonder we are exhausted and burned out. We've been living with a high level of chronic stress and uncertainty for quite some time. Not one of us is our best selves right now.

In order to remind our bodies, minds and spirits that we are safe, we must intentionally end the stress cycle and reset our brains. We can do that with practices like moving our bodies, crying, breathing, laughing, getting affection like a hug from a friend, and being creative-sing, draw, cook. It is not by accident that I invite us to breathe together in worship, in spiritual practices, and in meetings; I need that pause as much as anyone else. We have to develop practices that calm our brains and bodies, reminding us that we are safe.

So, it might seem odd that I am going to talk about risk at a time like this. Don't we already have enough risk in our lives? And yet, as I've reflected on this month's spiritual theme of "become" I keep coming back to the idea of risk. In order to "become," what we say is our OUUC mission in this world, in order to become, we have to take risks.

Becoming implies movement, growth, change, even transformation. Becoming means exploring our growing edges, as Howard Thurman names them, the places where we are challenged, where we think we've reached our limit and we move ahead anyway. To become means to risk.

And so, I wonder if we might engage our thinking brains and consider risk differently. While our survival brains rightly want us to be safe, our thinking brains know that perhaps the best we can do is "safer." We know that we take risks every day, even when we're not in a pandemic. We drive cars, we use electricity, we use cell phones, sometimes while walking, I hope not while driving. The world that we live in has dangers; it always has. To live is to risk.

Maybe what we need is an ethic of risk, a set of moral principles that helps us make good decisions given the reality of risk.

This idea was developed by Unitarian Universalist theologian Dr. Sharon Welch in her book, [The Feminist Ethic of Risk](#). Welch developed her theology of risk in response to her experience in the feminist movement, observing that anyone who engages in social justice work does so with an incomplete understanding of the situation and no guarantee of or control over the outcome. Whenever we do justice work, we take a risk because we never have all the information we want to help us strategize, and it is impossible to guarantee success. Welch asks, "How does a movement persist in the face of partial victories and continued defeats?"

Welch sought to address what she named "middle class despair." Her's is a question for our time, and not just for a justice movement. How do we as a people persist in a time that feels precarious, where the victories are few and fleeting, and the defeats are many? Whether we're thinking of the pandemic or the fragility of democracy here and around the world, or the climate crisis, or racial injustice that continues century after century, how do we remain engaged and not turn away from the enormity of it all? How do we take the next best step? How do we sustain hope?

Welch's answer is to develop an ethic of risk: responsible action grounded in community with a willingness to take strategic risks. Welch lays out a theology that calls on us to risk taking a step toward our goal, letting go of outcomes and holding on to possibilities. Embracing what is possible, keeping the ideal, the dream, instead of clinging to an outcome that we can't control.

It is easiest for our brains to think of the risks of becoming who we truly are, of becoming different than we have been. We might lose friends. It might be uncomfortable. It might feel unsafe.

We have to be intentional to remember that there are also risks to NOT becoming who we truly are, to not change when it is time to do so. We might lose the connection to our true self. We might live in despair and hopelessness, without integrity. We might become irrelevant and disconnected from others and the world.

So, Welch's theology also invites us to embrace our community, communities of memory of the past and hope for the future. And developing a community in the present that is as diverse as possible, taking the risk of bridging differences.

An ethic of risk would invite us to acknowledge that we can't control the outcome and we must take the right step anyway. An ethic of risk would invite us to let go of a limited definition of success and embrace that there are gains and defeats, and that we may never see the results of our actions. We can't ever know the outcome of our actions because of the complexity of our interconnection. An ethic of risk would invite us to move past despair and move toward hope.

If you think about it, this is exactly what COVID has invited us to do: take responsible action like wearing a mask and getting vaccinated, in community with the common good in mind, and taking strategic risks to learn new ways of connecting and of being in the world. And, when we're ready, take a leap of faith to try the next step of re-engagement.

It is also what the world situation is asking us to consider. How do we decide what responsible action is when democracy is at risk, the ideal that each person is worthy and has a voice? How much are we willing to risk in order to protect that ideal? How much will we risk in order to bring that ideal into reality? The people of Ukraine have an answer and they are risking everything. The people of Russia protesting the war are risking their lives. Those of us in the rest of the world will be asked to consider what we are willing to risk and how we share that risk, so the impacts are not disproportionate to those on the margins. In this situation, what is responsible action grounded in community? That is our global discussion and decision right now.

As Rev. Javier-Duval reminded us in our opening reading today, a faith community is also a risky place. Yes, you may find comfort and safety here and that is good. And a faith community is a place of risk because it is a place where we ask one another to make commitments. We make commitments to each other, to the institution, to our faith, to our community, and to justice. Being in a community requires the risk of relationship, the risk of change, and the risk of commitment. Once we make those commitments, we are called to take responsible action grounded in the community to make our vision come to life, our vision of an interconnected world that is loving, just and healthy. We are called to risk in service to that mission.

As we consider where we place our time, energy and financial resources, what are we willing to commit to? Being part of a faith community isn't a consumer transaction where something is delivered to your doorstep in a cardboard box. What are we willing to risk in order to live into those commitments?

As we begin to gather in-person again, here at OUUC and elsewhere, we will be asked to calculate how much risk we are willing to take over and over again every day in each situation we face. For some of us this time feels liberating, for others it feels more dangerous, and some of us feel both at the same time. We each have to consider our circumstances and decide what is a reasonable risk and what isn't.

We know that uncertainty will continue. Honestly, I think learning to live with uncertainty is part of learning to live with COVID and learning to live in this world. Here's some ideas for what we can do as we learn to live with that uncertainty.

We can increase our awareness of our stressors and calm our own stress; breathe together, sing together, walk or move together, sharing a smile with our eyes, even a touch as we are comfortable, working to return to our best selves once again.

We can remember that the person we're with may have an alarm in their head saying, "Danger! Danger!" as we chat about the weather or their family. We'll need compassion as we seek to rebuild and remember our relationships.

We can commit to do what we can, to make that next best step. It can be offering a helping hand to a neighbor or sending money to help people in Ukraine. Once we calm our survival brain, we can consider more clearly what is next.

We can remember that we've made commitments and covenants, and that our work is to live into them.

More than anything, we will need grace and forgiveness for ourselves and each other.

In the days and weeks ahead, may we dream, and may we risk becoming in all the ways we dream about.

Let's hold a moment of silence together.