

HOW SHALL WE LIVE

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

I read about a family on vacation. They were camping and hiking in a remote national park. On the first morning, the sun came out and the sky was a beautiful shade of blue. Everyone got ready for a long day-hike. They had sandwiches, snack bars and water, good shoes and hats, the temperature was mild and they had had a good night's sleep. Everyone was excited about the prospect of a beautiful day on the mountain.

As often happens in families...people had differing opinions about the best path to take. Most wanted to go on the marked trail, through cleared areas...with stable places to walk...but a few more adventurous persons wanted to walk into the wilderness...wanted to avoid the path, and strike out for the unknown.

So the group split into two...the first group took the cleared and marked path, and the second group went off-trail.

It was well known that bears lived in those woods. And those who walked straight into the wilderness were a bit nervous about the possibility of encountering a bear. So they stayed on their toes...alert to danger...they walked quietly, highly attuned to their environment. As they walked, they heard every branch break and every leaf move.

Alerted by a soft slithering sound, they spotted a beautiful black snake. They combed the underbrush with their eyes...searching for a telltale change in the colors of foliage. And overhead they heard a variety of bird calls, though none seemed to be sending a danger message.

As they walked they noticed wild raspberry bushes, and flowering laurel. Stopping for lunch, they sat quietly enjoying the view, and heard a coyote call not too far off.

Several times, one of the group...pretended that they heard a sudden noise that sounded like something the size of a bear. They all laughed and remarked on the heightened senses they were all experiencing.

Hours later when they arrived back at the campsite...they were most disappointed to report that they had had no bear sighting or wild animal encounter. They were tired, but exhilarated. They told of the wild beauty they had seen...and of the reverence that was stirred in them by their experience. Every member of the wilderness group was glad they had ventured off the marked path...and taken a risk...for they felt more alive...and happy than they had for a long time.

It's easier to walk on the marked path of life, but sometimes the rewards of off-road living are worth the risk.

Every day we wake up and are faced with making choices about how we will live that day.

At the turn of a new year, we wrestle with making choices about how we want to live in the year ahead.

We can stay on the marked path of last year...or the safe path that someone else has laid down for us....we can follow a set of rules or laws...or we can live out an ethic of risk.

Choosing an ethic of risk moves us toward greater challenge...and also toward greater joy and vibrancy.

As liberal religious people, I think an ethic of risk is called for. As a Unitarian Universalist, I feel called to stay out ahead of the curve...ahead of the mainstream, pushing the envelope...not taking risks for its own sake, but risking for the values that I believe in.

I want to take risks that lead to more aliveness, more engagement, deeper meaning and more effective action in the world.

Aren't the values of liberal religion intended to lead to transformative change? Isn't spiritual growth in our congregations and in society predicated on change and challenge?

But how do we decide what change is meaningful, what change matters, what change is in harmony with our values? How do we decide that taking a risk- walking off-trail into a new and unfamiliar wilderness-is the right thing to do?

An essential element of our faith is hope. Hope in the possibilities of this world...hope in the potential of human agency.

Change and hope...sounds a bit like a political campaign, doesn't it?

That's ok, I think good politics and good religion are not that different. Both require a world view that is wide and deep...open and trusting...inclusive and willing to risk for their values and beliefs.

One thing that gets in the way of our good intentions...our ability to trust enough to take life affirming risks- is fear.

How many end of year movies were about the end of the world? How many headlines were telling us to be afraid of something that might happen? How many pharmaceutical advertisements scare us to death? How many pundits analyze world events in order to tell us how awful, how dire, how dangerous our world has become? And what about those scary weather forecasts?

How can we make good decisions when brought low by fear- both rational and irrational?

And what if we make the wrong decisions? What if the off-trail family had met up with a bear? What if a terrorist does manage to get on a plane with an incendiary device? What if we discover that law school is not for us? What if we do retire early and we live to be a hundred? What if that used car turns out to be a gas guzzler?

Part of the hopefulness of our faith teaches that we can trust the natural processes of life...we can trust our own experience,...we can trust that all will be well...we can let go of outcomes....that intention matters more than success...that the very categories of right and wrong...success and failure are too limited-too binary- to serve the cause of transformation.

In posing the question, "how shall we live" I am asking you to think about how you choose to spend your day, how you choose to spend this new year, this hour, your life. And I am asking you to consider an ethic of risk.

I am asking you to consider journeying into the wilderness...not knowing what might happen, acknowledging there are dangers, and fears, and complexities...still I am asking you to live your values, really live your values...to take risks, risks that might or might not work out.

The bears are out there...but I think you'll be alright, I think you'll survive...it won't be the end of the world...all will be well...and you won't be alone. Most importantly, you won't be alone in moving toward meaningful transformation.

I read a book about how our brain helps us make decisions. "How We Decide" by Jonah Lehrer, an editor and writer on the new areas of research in neuroscience...study of the brain.

Lehrer reports that neuroscience confirms that the best decisions flow from errors. We learn through our mistakes.

This is part of the justification of risk taking...if things don't turn out well, then we learn something, adjust our thinking, alter our response and try again...

During the holidays, I had plenty of time to watch our 20 month granddaughter take risks. I saw her brain in action. She is in love with going up and down stairs. Some banisters she can reach...others not...some stairs are carpeted...others not...some steps are high...others not so much. But every house she enters, Madeleine heads for the nearest stairway...to practice her risk taking. And she has taken her share of falls. She has encountered her share of bears...

But going toward her mistakes, toward her fear, toward her joy...she is being transformed...she is learning by trial and error...she is laying down a stair climbing and a stair descending pattern in her brain and in her muscles...that will serve her for the rest of her life. And she is definitely experiencing some life affirming excitement and appreciation along the way.

Was 2009 a terrible, horrible year...or a year full of opportunities to learn from our mistakes? Consider the economy, the war in Iraq, the H1N1 scare, the health care debate, airport security, - 2009, a wonderful year for learning!

The notion that we learn from our mistakes is consistent with our liberal theology. There is no clock-maker God in control of the universe, no unifying theory or goal of Life...there are patterns, and there is human learning: life is a process and we humans are meant to be searching, seeking, self-reflecting creatures. We are meant to risk and learn.

There is much hope in our capacity to learn and grow...to change and transform.

We make decisions by using both decision-making parts of our brain...the limbic system or the emotional brain...which leads toward decisions of instinct and intuition...and the pre-frontal cortex or the rational brain.

Our challenge as decision-makers of the 21st century is to learn when to rely on which part of our brain...what circumstances favor use of the older and more practiced emotional brain and what circumstances favor use of the more recently evolved rational brain. And how to use both in an effective balance.

Our challenge is to think about how we think. To reflect, meditate, discern, wait, and think about how we make decisions.

I'll close with an example from Lehrer's book.

Pilot error used to be a significant cause of airplane crashes.

Recent changes in the training of pilots and of airline crews have brought pilot error to a significant low percentage in the cause of plane crashes.

Two changes have brought amazing results.

The first is the improvement and regular use of flight simulation as a training technique for pilots. Hours spent on a flight simulator give pilots a chance to experience a variety of systems failures and unanticipated circumstances in the air...and to see and de-brief on the consequences of their responses.

If the plane crashes or loses an engine, or drops altitude precipitously...then the pilot can test different responses...and he or she can pattern the correct response...so that a real in-flight crisis will set off a successful patterned reaction in the well-trained pilot and a safe landing is a more likely outcome.

Flight simulation is a way of training the brain through trial and error. It is a way of practicing going up and down stairs.

The second change is a social change...a behavioral change.

It used to be that the pilot, the captain was the recognized authority and decision-maker on board. In any crisis or circumstance all crew members turned to the captain to make the crucial decisions.

But research has shown that better decisions are made when the co-pilot and all crew members are given a chance to give input, to ask questions, and to offer their own point of view.

It is now standard practice for crew members to speak up if they have a question or a perspective in an emergency. This process is called CRM or Cockpit Resource Management...it recognizes what is called the wisdom of crowds.

If our family hiking in the wilderness, came upon a bear, it is likely that the wisdom of the crowd would figure out a successful survival scheme.

Given what we know about our flexible brains...about our ability to learn from our mistakes and our human potential to help one another make good decisions...I confidently encourage us to approach the new year with an ethic of risk. Let us think about how we think...Let us counter fear with moving toward.. toward life and our values. Expansion and depth are religious concepts- we can grow wider and deeper, but it takes some risk.

Let us consider how we can go off-trail together as a congregation...let us move courageously into the wilderness with hope in spiritual growth and transformation. With trust in our years of practice as a congregation and trust in each other.

Thus we will experience greater joy and vibrancy. Thus we will help move our country and all people from fear to hope.

Later this year, I will invite you to participate in choosing some risks for us to take as a congregation. I will invite you to join in crowd wisdom. So start practicing your risk-taking skills!

Get ready for 2010 with a wider and deeper approach to life. Take some risks!

Amen/Blessed Be