

# “Risking it All”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I always wondered, “Why on earth did they choose that name, for their small business?”

Was it only a matter of ignorance...  
not knowing the tragic ending of the mythological story we heard during the Time for All Ages...

Or was it, perhaps, a daring act of risk,  
the expression of a particularly quirky sense of humour,

That caused them to name their travel agency  
“Icarus Air Travel”?

I’m sorry to say, I never risked venturing in to ask them,  
in the decade or so that I noticed their storefront on Danforth  
Avenue.

I always thought it an astonishingly poor choice of name...bringing  
to mind, say, “Titanic Cruise Lines”  
or “Hindenburg Dirigibles.”

I’m sure you can think of others...  
perhaps over conversation at coffee time!

But today, I find myself wondering whether the choice of name  
might not have been ignorant, nor ironic, after all.

Perhaps this was a company that wanted to fly its customers as close to the “sun” of pleasure and excitement as humanly possible.

Perhaps these were people who would “risk it all” to follow their personal calling...to give people the vacation of a lifetime.

I hope that they did!

## §

Stephen Spender’s poem speaks of people who:

“Born of the sun...traveled a short while toward the sun  
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.”

He’s speaking in the poem of the particularly courageous...  
those daring souls who did and do risk more than most,  
for the fulfillment of a higher cause.

But it seems to me that all of us are “born of the sun.”

And all of us, in our own ways,  
fly for a short time toward it.

Like Icarus, sometimes we overreach our grasp,  
and come crashing down to earth.

In fact, it may be that in allowing ourselves to be drawn  
upward...toward our deepest loves, ideals and callings...  
we will inevitably fall...

And that might better help us understand  
both the meaning and the beauty of the human journey.

## §

A few weeks ago, Dave and I were watching the Winter Olympics.

We were particularly fascinated by the Big Air Snowboarders.

As you'll recall, the Gold Medal in this year's inaugural event went to a Canadian: Sebastien Toutant from Quebec.

Flying into the air, perched upon his board, he made four and a half dazzling rotations in the air and landed it perfectly!

But to be honest, the Big Air athletes that most captivated me were the ones who didn't win...

Such as the one who attempted something called a "Switch Triple Cork 1800" which included five full rotations.

This amazingly fancy mid-air maneuver was breathtaking to watch...until the snowboarder landed and couldn't stay upright.

He had aimed just a little too high...ultimately losing the medal.

But that Canadian snowboarder, Max Parrot, said he was happy to have taken the risk.

Reminding me of that old familiar saying,

"Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," he said, "I had the choice to do an easier trick and land on the podium, but I chose not to."

"I went for it."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Toronto Star online, "Sebastian Toutant wins gold in men's snowboarding big air" <https://www.thestar.com/sports/olympics/2018/02/23/sebastien-toutant-wins-gold-in-mens-snowboarding-big-air.html>

## §

Throughout the month of March, we've been reflecting on the theme of Risk in sermons and in Journey Groups, sharing many stories of personal risks we've taken.

As others have pointed out, risk is inherent in virtually every moment we're alive.

That made me think about the many risks built in to leading a worship service.

There's the risk of saying something people in the congregation might disagree with...

The risk of being seen as "not put together" in some way...for my appearance or attire being judged...

The risk of getting facts wrong...or (worse) expressing something that reveals my own intellectual or personal limitations.

There's the risk of leading a service that runs too long, or too short...

One that includes unpopular music (seldom a risk here) an unfitting reading...or a challenging story.

There's the risk of saying something inadvertently that will strike too close to home for someone... that might cause harm in some way.

As I list these many "risks"— which do at times keep Shawn and me up at night—

You might notice that most of them are not really "risks" in a large way.

Most of them, other than the risk of saying something unintentionally hurtful, are risks to what I might see as my “small self”:

Risks to my ego, my sense of personal identity and security.

They’re the risks of not looking good,  
of not being right,  
of not having it all together.

Of falling out of favour.

Falling from grace.

## §

In our culture, those risks are very real to many of us.

And they may prevent us from moving toward  
the light of selfless love  
in ways that might truly transform us.

It’s been said, I believe, at other times this month  
but is worth saying again...

When we look deeply at whatever it is we’re reluctant to risk...

Perhaps others’ disapproval...  
Not “looking good”...  
Not being in control...

We might get a sense of where  
the fiery sun of our soul wants us to go.

## §

Yesterday, 18-year old Emma Gonzalez stood before a crowd of about a million young people in Washington D.C.

Instead of speaking out loudly against gun violence, for the time allotted her on the podium, she held several agonizing minutes of silence.

She did so to illustrate the six minutes and twenty seconds it took for 17 of her classmates to be lost.

It was a huge risk, to say less rather than more... to potentially lose control of the enormous crowd.

And indeed, voices broke the tension at many points with cries of “we love you Emma” and “never again.”

Watching her hold that silence with such power and clarity, motivated purely by love and conviction...

I saw, again, how great leaders take new and unexpected risks...venturing where others might never go.

Meanwhile, in B.C. this week, not only Elizabeth May but local M.P. Kennedy Stewart were arrested this week, for protesting the Trans Mountain pipeline.

Stewart said that he felt a responsibility to his constituents to take that risk.

In other words, he was motivated by love not only for the land, but for the people he served.

There are, of course, countless examples of people who risk their freedom, their reputation, or their lives...for the cause of peace or justice.

Many of them become well known, in part because of the risks they take, and often because of what they have lost.

There are others whose risks are more quietly taken...

And they, too, can point us toward the light of love that can guide us in our own journeys.

## §

A few weeks ago I went to see the documentary film “Walk With Me” about the Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh.

Now 91, he has lived in exile from his native Viet Nam for many years, as a result of his activism for peace.

The film, though, focuses mostly on the nuns and monks, many of them quite young, who live with him in Plum Village in southwest France—giving up virtually all of the trappings of modern life to learn to live with deeper compassion and peace.

They’ve taken the risk of letting go of money, possessions, sex, alcohol, and an entertaining and self-directed life... in exchange for the possibility of something more.

For me, the most moving scene in the film took place in a nursing home, where a nun came to visit her father.

Along with a group of other monastics, she had accompanied Thich Nhat Hanh to New York for a speaking engagement.

As a result, she could visit her father for the first time in several years.

It would not be an overstatement to say that when the two of them were reunited, their faces shone like the sun.

With her face pressed close to his, she sang to him as he wept—  
overcome by gratitude and joy.

Yet, as the camera panned left,  
you could see other family members—  
evidently the nun's mother and two sisters—  
looking impatient and critically judgmental.

Avoiding the eye of the camera and their loved ones,  
they pulled out their cell phones—  
unable and unwilling to enter into the experience of  
loving embrace.

Meanwhile, the nun and her father embraced each other,  
their faces radiant with love.

And despite her relatives' obvious disapproval and rejection...  
the young woman's face remained joyful and utterly serene.

In some ways, she had given up everything...

She had fallen from grace as a daughter, as a sister...

She had given up so many things that we feel are valuable...  
including of course, the freedom to see her family more often.

And yet she had gained something that was truly priceless.

The ability to surrender, fully and completely,  
to deep love in the present moment.

Now, lest it appear from these stories that the only risks I feel are worth taking are very dramatic ones, such as speaking before a crowd of thousands, sacrificing one's freedom for justice, becoming a Buddhist monk, catapulting off a mountain at high-speed...

Let me bring everything back down to earth, by saying again that every life calls us in the direction of great risk...

And that risk we know simply as love.

Every life gives us the opportunity to offer ourselves to something...or to someone...

To be drawn toward the sun of our deepest values...

To turn toward that light as naturally as a sunflower...  
And to fly toward it as optimistically as Icarus.

I'm both happy and sad to confirm what you already know, that whenever we do that, we often do fall.

Things don't work out as well as we'd hoped...

We're not quite up to the challenge we'd set for ourselves...

Our beloved is an ordinary human being...

A beloved project turns out differently than the fantasy we'd had for it.

Throughout history, religious teachings from all traditions as well as many myths and wisdom stories

have taught us to fly faithfully in the direction of love,  
knowing that falling is part of the journey.

The late Canadian songwriter Jesse Winchester had a  
wonderful song called “That’s What Makes You Strong”  
that I think illustrates this point.

In the lyric, he talks about love of a person...  
but it could equally apply to love of a community...  
a congregation...  
a cause...  
or to life itself.

*“When you love someone...  
then that means you need someone.  
And when you need someone...  
that’s what makes you weak.*

*But when you know you’re weak  
and you know you need someone...  
Ah, it’s a funny thing,  
that’s what makes you strong.*

*That’s what makes you strong  
That’s what gives you power  
That’s what lets the meek come sit beside the king  
That’s what makes us smile  
In our final hour,  
That’s what moves our souls  
And that’s what makes us sing.”*

*And to trust someone  
Is to be disappointed  
It’s never what you wanted  
And it happens every time  
But if you’re the trusting kind*

*That don't even cross your mind  
Oh, it's a funny thing, that's  
what makes you strong.*<sup>2</sup>

We fly towards the light of our deepest loves and dreams...  
and that is how we fall.

But the poets teach us, it is also how we rise.  
How we deepen.  
How we grow.

And so, we can live in the deep assurance  
that our love is always worth the risk...

Our caring for a person...  
For a community...  
For a place...

For a cause...  
For a project...  
For some crazy dream that lifts us up  
and won't let us go.

The Spirit of Life carries us up,  
on wings both strong and fragile...

Through storms we fear  
may take everything from us...

But that in fact,  
may be nothing at all...

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<sup>2</sup> Jesse Winchester, "That's What Makes You Strong" (BMG) on Gentleman of Leisure (1999).

Compared to the light  
of love that leads us on.

May it be so.

Amen.

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