

## **“Risk and Commitment”**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

### **Reading**

“A Step Along the Way” by Bishop Ken Untener

### **Sermon**

As the Nor’easter bore down on the east coast and us here in Vermont, I had in the back of my mind my plans to travel to Baltimore to join the annual gathering for the UU Religious Professionals of Color. I didn’t go last year, so I was especially eager to take part in a couple days of re-connection with the growing group. Living in Vermont, I’m sure you all are aware of how dicey winter travel can be, and if you do much flying, you’ve probably had those situations where you have to start anticipating whether a flight might be delayed or canceled and how to make other arrangements.

Well, I found myself in this situation. I ended up preemptively rebooking my Wednesday afternoon flight out of Manchester for Thursday morning hoping that the storm would pass by then and the roads and airport would be all clear for smooth travel.

I woke up just after 3am on Thursday morning and was out the door before 4. Another 3 or 4 inches of snow had accumulated overnight and there was a light snowfall. I made my way to I-89, and it only took a couple miles of driving to realize conditions were not great. It was pitch black. The road was not completely plowed and snow was flying into the windshield at a concerning rate. I passed a roadside sign that was flashing the words “Winter Travel Alert.” In that moment, I had to decide whether it was worth the risk to continue on. The exit sign for South Barre appeared, and I thought, “Well, this is a blessing.” I knew I ought to get off

the interstate right then while I could. So, I exited and made my way slowly back home.

Now, not everyone would have made the same decision in that scenario. Our measure of risk and how to respond depends on many factors. Someone with more experience driving in such weather conditions may have felt more at ease. Or, someone driving a different type of vehicle. Someone else in similar circumstances may have given up on the trip sooner and just canceled the flight as soon as the winter storm warning came in.

We are constantly calculating whether and how to take risks. Risk implies that a certain action costs us whether it is emotional energy, time, or even money. The logic goes that a risk is worth it if there is a reward, or some positive gain. My adventure that morning reminded me that risk often involves danger or perceived danger, and we make a calculation as to whether that danger is something we are willing to endure.

We might not automatically think of this church community as a place that is risky. In fact, you may feel like it's the opposite of risky. It's safe. It's comfortable. And, it certainly is those things a times.

But, I believe that this community is also a place of risk. It is a place for taking risks. It's a place of risk because it's a place where we ask one another to make commitments. It's a place where learn together what it means and what it feels like to follow through on commitments, and where we in fact make some of those commitments together in communal action.

We do this in many different ways. Showing up here on Sunday mornings is one form of commitment. We show up here not just because we love the music the choir sings or the story for the children or because we're really interested in the sermon topic that day. We also show up here because of a commitment to being present for one another. We show up here because other people need us to.

In 1962, James Baldwin wrote a letter to his nephew reflecting on his future as a black man in America.<sup>1</sup> Speaking of why white Americans were slow to act on what they knew - that, as he put it, black men are not inferior to white men - Baldwin said, "To act is to be committed and to be committed is to be in danger." In this case, the danger Baldwin was speaking of was the danger of losing one's identity. The danger of having to adapt to a truth one might find difficult to accept.

I think Baldwin's broader point, that making commitments puts us in danger, holds true for all of us. When we are committed, we are in danger of both making change and of being changed. We risk transformation.

What amazes me and inspires me every day is that this kind of committed change and transformation is something we *willingly* engage in here as a religious community.

Each of you chooses to participate in this risky ministry of transformation.

And, from my conversations with you, I know that being a part of this community is risky at times. It can feel risky to be in coffee hour after just having shared something that is weighing heavy on your heart and wondering whether and how to put on a good face while talking with others. It can feel risky to sit with a small group and to open up about the pain you're feeling around a particular relationship or loss. It can feel risky to say aloud to others that you want to do something about the injustice and suffering in the world but don't know where or how to start.

All of these risks lead to some change and transformation - whether within yourself or in the broader world. Your commitment to be a part of this spiritual community is what makes our transformational ministry possible.

Yet, the change we seek to make in ourselves and in the broader world does not come easily and is not always guaranteed.

This has become more apparent to me as our new political reality has set in and I have had to witness so many of the changes I have fought for with others be

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<sup>1</sup> <http://progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew/>

stripped away or threatened - women's reproductive rights, environmental protections, labor rights.

In this climate, it's clear that change we hope for cannot be guaranteed.

Sharon Welch is a theologian and ethicist who was very involved in the second wave feminist movement. Through her work and activism in that movement, she learned that it is impossible to control or to guarantee the outcome or success of a particular action. And so, she started to ask: "How does a movement persist in the face of partial victories and continued defeats?"

She developed what she calls a "feminist ethic of risk" out of her experience and in an attempt to answer this question. At the heart of this ethic of risk for Welch is a redefinition of "responsible action." She says that, "Responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible, the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes." It is found in taking steps toward a desired goal, and focusing on possibilities, rather than outcomes, and choosing "to care and to act although there are no guarantees of success."<sup>2</sup>

Welch describes what I believe is our endeavor here - to create the conditions of possibility for desired change without being able to guarantee a particular outcome.

Religious life, the life of faith, the spiritual life - is a risky endeavor because it involves committing to possibilities rather than to guaranteed outcomes.

Now, this might sound like a strange thing to say on the first Sunday of our annual pledge drive. Usually, we think of making financial commitments and investments with some sense of a specific, desired outcome in mind. I went out to a movie the other night and assumed that for the \$9.50 I paid I would receive some enjoyable entertainment. Or, if you put money in the stock market, yes, there is risk involved, but you might only take the risk if you can guarantee some minimum return on your investment.

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<sup>2</sup> Sharon D. Welch, "A Feminist Ethic of Risk." (Fortress Press, 1990.)

The financial contributions you make to this church involve a different kind of risk and commitment. The act of giving and pledging is not transactional.

You are not asked to make a financial commitment so that you can receive in return a certain number of visits with your pastor, or so that the choir will sing your favorite song, or so that we end racism or bring a stop of climate change once and for all (though I wish I could guarantee those things).

The spiritual endeavor here is not undertaken with guaranteed, immediate results in mind.

I think this is especially important to reflect on now, in the context of the broader struggle for justice that we are engaged in and that might feel hopeless in light of the immediate setbacks we are facing.

The monk and theologian, Thomas Merton, was in correspondence for about eight years in the 1960s with Jim Forest, a conscientious objector and peace activist. In 1966, Jim had written to Merton that he was in a bleak mood, saying “I feel like an ant climbing a cliff, and even worse, for in the distance there seems to be an avalanche...Perhaps you have some thoughts that would help?” Merton’s response included these words: “Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.”<sup>3</sup>

The truth of the work itself is the foundation of our shared ministry here. It is what lies beneath our mission statement. It’s what lies beneath the number of meals served, the amount of money donated to community groups, the hours of religious education programming, and the number of rallies we attend.

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<sup>3</sup> The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (1985), p. 294

The truth of our work, our shared ministry as a religious community, is the love, the compassion, the hopefulness, the commitment to human dignity and the respect for our planet that give roots to our aspirations and our vision.

This greater truth makes it challenging to guarantee specific, concrete, or even measurable results with a finite end point of the transformational ministry we are engaged in. Instead, this ministry is unfinished and ongoing.

The reading from Bishop Untener speaks beautifully to this reality.

“Nothing we do is complete,” he writes.

“No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way.”

This upcoming church year, we will take another step along the way.

In the next year, UCM will continue to be a prophetic voice out in the community. We will continue to explore ways of addressing our growing numbers and making this a welcoming place for all who want to be part of it. We will discern together how we want to nurture our spiritual journeys through religious education programming and staffing. And, we will continue to work towards the five year vision statement adopted by the congregation last year.

Our preliminary budget for next year includes a roughly 10% increase over last year which will enable us to continue the transformational ministry we strive towards.

As you make your pledge this year, I encourage you to consider the financial contribution you are able and willing to commit to support this community in taking these steps along the way in fulfilling our mission and in creating the possibilities for change.

It is with grateful hearts and a strong belief in all that UCM is and can be that Jared and I are pledging \$3,000 towards the 2017-2018 church year budget. We are fortunate to be able to make this 11% increase in our pledge, especially at a time when the congregation and its budgetary needs are growing. We make our pledge with a wholehearted belief in the truth and beauty of the ministry of this congregation.

Part of the reason that early morning drive to Manchester felt too risky to complete is that I was alone. I was alone on a dark road with very little light to guide my way.

Though there is darkness and many challenges that surround us, I am grateful to this community that I don't have to go it alone, and that we can be for one another a light on the path.

May love and a commitment to all that is possible through our ministry inspire our generosity and continued stewardship of this place and our world.

Thank you to each of you for your generosity to this community in all its many forms and for the gifts that you share with one another.