

TO TRY IS TO RISK FAILURE

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s, Story of Risk for the Sake of Justice

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The name, Martin Luther King Jr., is synonymous with justice, courage, and faith, and an insistence that non-violence and love are the only ways to make a lasting difference. If we could say nothing more about him, we could certainly say that he made a difference.

His life makes it clear that creating change involves taking risks. This understanding is part of his legacy. Risk is that precarious link between success and failure, between hope and despair, between life and death.

Rev. TIM KUTZMARK, Reading, Massachusetts, tells a story of bungee jumping as a metaphor for the risks we take in life. (CLF Quest January 2006)

Standing on a tiny platform 15 stories above the pavement, held by nothing more than four elastic cords he recalls,

"How suddenly the important things in your world can change. Those four bungee cords are now the most precious objects in my life, my link to the future. ..."

"The crowd below joins in as a man with a bull horn begins to bellow:"

"10...9...8...7...."

"Step out on onto the ledge,' commands the fellow who is with me in the little metal cage. I step out, a prisoner on a narrow gangplank two feet wide by two feet long. "

"I do the only sane thing left to do. I grab hold of the railing behind me, holding onto the safety of its solidness."

"Hold out your arms out wide to the side." I open my arms. Why do I suddenly feel like Jesus about to be crucified?"

"6...5...4...."

"Every cell in my body is screaming: "Do not go forward. Do not move off the edge. Do not step into the unknown."

"3...2...1.....Bungee!"

"I release my hold on life and step forward, flying into the open space that is quietly calling my name."

"It is risky business, this thing called life. It often feels as if we are balanced high on the edge of a shaky platform, far from the safety of the ground. Life can often feel as if we are caught in a countdown we have not started, but must somehow finish: "5, 4, 3, 2...." Life often feels like a leap into the unknown."

Bungee jumping is as good metaphor as any for the feelings of fear, the unfamiliar sensation of weightlessness, the second thoughts, and ultimately, the hope, that accompanies risk taking. I can understand how bungee jumping could be training for risk-taking of more far reaching consequences.

Dr. King's training in risk taking was achieved over a life time of living in a deeply racist society where every day meant jumping off into the unknown. For King, it was his conscience, and his understanding of his calling to embody his convictions about human community, and his place in that community that compelled him forward despite potential loss and failure.

In the January 2006 UU world, Thomas Mikelson put it this way, "The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a theologian who saw the interconnectedness of the world like few others before him. When he saw a person lying wounded by the side of the road, or the side of the culture, or the side of the economy, he saw in that person a brother or a sister, a child of God, a neighbor. Time after time in his life, he was moved to pity by what he saw and it changed his life and ours. Time after time, he risked his life to show mercy. He was our neighbor."

Risk was a constant in the life of MLK, for he challenged the way things were, he called our people and our nation to account for its treatment of people of color, the poor and oppressed. He challenged us to actually live the principles upon which our country was founded. He asked people to change, and in so doing he risked loss, despair and failure. ...And death.

While we hold the vision of thousands of people gathered in our nation's capital to hear him speak on that memorable day when he gave us the "I Have a Dream" speech, there were, no doubt, many moments of loneliness. When he spoke out and placed his ideals before the multitudes, there were many who disparaged him.

When he reached out in love to his detractors, he experienced not their love in return, but their hate and opposition.

The life of justice and mercy was the life to which he was called, but it was not an easy life. Every day he risked, and every day, no matter what the outcome of his previous action, he kept

on speaking, acting and inspiring enough people so that changes were made. While he may have failed in some ways, we never heard him question his need to keep trying. Without taking the risks he did, nothing would have been accomplished. He knew that he had to take risks in order to do his part in creating a world of peace and justice.

What is risk?

The relative value we place on what we have or think we have and what we want for the future. Risk is about having the courage to do something that is larger than our fear. Feel the fear and do it anyway! What have you got to lose? -- Perhaps quite a lot...friends, family, reputation, money, health, safety or even life itself. -- Or perhaps nothing more than pride, self image, expectations of *"the way things ought to be."*

We all want to be happy and healthy and safe. We want others to respect us, to love us, to know us. But as King said, "There comes a time when we must take the position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but we must do it because conscience tells us it is right."

But even when our conscience tells us what is right, we still need to have a clear sense of what it is that supports us and makes potential loss worth the risk.

Tim Kutzmark, the bungee jumper cautions:

"It is not wise to leap blindly. We must never step forward without being firmly connected to something. That morning of my leap of faith," he recalls, "I jumped into open space only because there were four bungee cords holding on to me. and so it is with life. We need to know there is something to hold us and guide us as we step forward."

For King it was that understanding, deeply imbedded in his soul, that we are all in this life together. One world. One People.

As he said in his famous sermon in support of the city of Memphis' sanitation workers,

"We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

Living according to that understanding was more important to him than the good will of others, than friends, than family or even than life itself. "A man who won't die for something is not fit to live." He said. For King, risking his life in service of his ideals was worth it because for him, life wouldn't be worth much if he allowed the daily comforts to take precedence over the larger purpose.

He was not only willing to die in order that change might happen, but he believed such a death had a larger purpose. "If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit," he said, "then nothing can be more redemptive."

Such a perspective did not come upon him all at once. It required practice, and strong faith. Each of us must determine for our own selves what kind of risks to take in the service of justice. For each of us today, the questions are, "What holds us and guides us as we practice risk taking? Can we be with ourselves if we fail?"

"Can we continue in the face of loss? Can we live with ourselves if we do not risk?"

Today we honor Martin Luther King Jr., as a man who knew the risks he was taking and why those risks were necessary. King's sacrifice inspires us to go to the edge, hang on to our guiding cords and make the jump that we might build the world of our dreams.