



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Living on the Edge

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It was probably not any earlier than just about now, in May, though more likely in June if we were not kidding ourselves, after a string of pretty warm days, the snow and ice of winter only a memory, school almost over, that we would go down, or over, to Lake Hiawatha in Minneapolis, on our bikes, carrying a towel, wearing just a t-shirt and swim trunks, and get ready for the first time in the water. It had to be a warm day, and a weekend, since school was still on. I am pretty sure we did not wear shoes; our bikes were Schwinn one speeds with flat pedals and we never heard of helmets or hand brakes.

Hiawatha was a relatively small and shallow lake so the water warmed a bit faster than the other lakes near by – Nokomis or Harriet – and my two best friends, Dave and Dave, and I would get ready. We took off our t-shirts, laid our towels down and usually walked to the small dock that ran out maybe 30 or 40 feet into the lake.

And then – well, the deal was to run and jump into the water – even though we knew it was going to be freezing. It was our yearly rite of passage, a test of manhood, a contest of bravery and courage – no Prufrockian wondering for us – we dared to eat a peach and hear the mermaids singing each to each; we were ready to disturb the universe.

Remember those times? Times when you took a leap? A time when you had courage, were not afraid, or were afraid but went ahead anyway, a time when you took a risk and experienced the thrill of having come through alright? Remember being on the edge?

Remember how much fun it was to be scared of something and then do it? Climbing a tree, or sidling along a slippery ledge to get behind Minnehaha Falls? Taking a chance, swinging on a swing so high the chains went slack then snapped.

When was the last time you took a risk – went bungee jumping or shot down a ski slope? Maybe the last time you thought something radical, or ate something different? Risky business The Talking heads sang ...

Remember the Auden poem I read a while back?

The sense of danger must not disappear:
The way is certainly both short and steep,
However gradual it looks from here;
Look if you like, but you will have to leap.

Tough-minded men get mushy in their sleep
And break the by-laws any fool can keep;
It is not the convention but the fear
That has a tendency to disappear.

The worried efforts of the busy heap,
The dirt, the imprecision, and the beer
Produce a few smart wisecracks every year;
Laugh if you can, but you will have to leap.

The clothes that are considered right to wear
Will not be either sensible or cheap,
So long as we consent to live like sheep
And never mention those who disappear.

Much can be said for social savoir-faire,

But to rejoice when no one else is there
Is even harder than it is to weep;
No one is watching, but you have to leap.

A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear;
Although I love you, you will have to leap;
Our dream of safety has to disappear.

You will have to leap. The edge is where I want to be.

Last week I went out to Joshua Tree for a couple of days with my best friend. We have been going out there almost yearly for 25 years, for day hikes and for overnights. He grew up in Orange County and camped there as a kid; he took his children there, and he knows the park really well. Joshua Tree is a magical place, and there is something healing and redemptive about being out there. Spirits abound there.

We parked in the overnight lot by Pine City, and walked for about an hour up a wash to our traditional campsite. There is no water at all in the park so we had to carry that in, along with camping gear, food, and what not. I took the novel 'True Grit' and my journal. I forgot a book of poetry, which I usually bring in order to read poems aloud. We go our separate ways during the day – each taking solo hikes.

We do this, in part, because my friend has no fear, and loves to take risks out there and not have to worry about someone worrying about him. If we go out in his car, I just make sure he tells me where the keys are. He likes to climb the rocks and hills, often in flip flops. He is not a rock climber, carrying chalk or gear – he just likes to climb up rocks and feel the danger.

My walks are more timid – not without danger or risk, but, well, I am jealous of my friend's courage. Still, being alone in the desert – it was hard not to think of Aron Ralston and 127 Hours – as I picked my way up and won the hills, over boulders, around cactus and scrub brush. There were lots of flowers last week, and from some places, I could see San Jacinto and Gorgonio covered in snow. I got turned around once. Heading back after a couple of hour walk, I noticed a rusted can on the trail and it looked familiar. Soon, I realized I had walked in a circle and was headed away from camp. Joshua Tree can be a maze and, for a brief moment, I was a bit scared, but I also became a bit more alive; I noticed more, looked more carefully at the rock formations, the hills in the distance, the flower field.

I was on edge.

the edge holds the answer to your questions
the question to your answers
it's the trailhead to the road not taken
the edge is everywhere
you've never dared to be.

Or, as another poet has said:

Throw yourself like seed as you walk, and into your own field.

Let me get at this straight: it is so easy to sit in the middle, so easy to look for safety and comfort, so easy to avoid risk:

sure, the middle's safe
it's safe like hot cocoa, life jackets and training wheels
if that's how you want to live

if you don't ever want to break the rules
take risks
grow up
past your precious fears and life-strangling limitations.

This past week Buddhists around the world have celebrated the Buddha's birthday. [In Japan it is celebrated every year on April 8.] Born about 2500 years ago, Siddhartha Gotama grew up in the lap of luxury. There were no risks in his life, no edge, everything was in the middle. He was shielded from all that troubles or from anything threatening.

I imagine you know the story: he sees, one day, an old person, a sick person, and a dying person, and he dedicates himself to understand the cause of suffering. Here is a religious history aside for you – much of western religion – the Jewish, Christian, Muslim line – sees suffering as redemptive. Buddhism, on the other hand, has the elimination of suffering as its goal – think about that one this week.

So, for the Buddha, an edge has appeared. He goes to extremes, seeking understanding in extreme asceticism, in the denial of the flesh, and in hedonism, in the satisfying of the flesh, but neither path works. He studies; he meditates; he meets with teachers, but to no final avail. Finally, he sits, and is determined to sit until he can unlock the riddle of suffering. And he gets it and becomes, in his term 'awake.' The Buddha, the enlightened one; awake, mindful, aware, present.

We live in an increasingly risk averse world, right? Safety is everything. Products are rated by their safety factor. Better safe than sorry, we say. We sue for everything. In medicine, there are risk factors, and they are to be avoided. We talk, in Unitarian Universalism, about safe congregations – and they need to be safe for people who are hurt or threatened or need security. I wouldn't minimize the need for safety here.

But how about being a risky congregation, too? Are there no risks here? When I met with the Search Committee before I was called, that was one of the questions: are you willing to take a risk? Am I? I don't always know. There was a member of the church I served in Fairfax – one of the best members of a church I have ever known – who used to ask me to scare her in a sermon. What would that sound like? What risks are there that you would want me or Hannah to take?

Afraid to take a stand? Afraid to anger or offend someone? Safe sex? As if sex is ever safe! Here, let's take a poll and ask what offends people and then we won't say that. Is that what you want?

It seems to me that the history of religion is a history of living at the edge, and then backing away. Abraham left his home and wandered to a new land; the Buddha left the safety of his upbringing; Moses led his people out into the wilderness; Jesus took up with outcasts; Mohammed heard a solitary voice and led a revolution; Gandhi walked to the sea; King walked the bridge in Selma. Parker denied the resurrection. Thoreau went into the woods. Melville took to a whaling ship. But then the bean counters took over and tried to preserve everything just as it was – safety, stay to the idle. Don't change. I like the prophets more than the priests.

The religious life has always been considered dangerous. Indeed, the medieval Jewish mystical tradition known as Kabbalah [Madonna notwithstanding] was known as a particularly dangerous path, one taken only with a guide and carefully. You might lose your life in religion. Thoreau went out into the wilderness to lose himself so that he could find himself – throw caution to the wind, religious leaders seem to say. Get to the edge.

I remember leaping from the dock into Lake Hiawatha – the race down the dock, the leap in the air, the cold snap of the water as we hit and it then closed around us, and coming up gasping for air and for warmth. And feeling totally, fully, totally alive – a Buddhist moment if there ever was one. Being fully present in the moment – mindfulness, the Buddhist idea – it can upset the apple cart so easily.

OK – here we are, near the end of a church year. The canvass is just about done; our annual meeting is coming up; our budget is essentially the same as ever. The middle is all around us. All I am asking today is: who are you, really? And, who are we, really?

Yet some edges are ahead of us too – the Rites of Passage class does their service on June 5 and if it doesn't take courage for an 8th grader to get up in front here and tell you what they believe, then I don't know what courage is. Be here and learn something about courage from them. This summer, most of the Sundays will feature sermons by those who took the sermon class with me this Spring – if that isn't courageous and being on the edge, I don't know what is.

Next month we will have a fund drive to pave the courtyard, which will include a labyrinth and memorial benches and stones – testimonies to those who pushed us, perhaps, to the edges. A labyrinth – a journey into the center of the self – a place of mystery, an edge of awareness and discovery. Prufrock says he measured his life out with coffee spoons. Is that you? Is that what you want? Is that what this congregation is? Measured out with coffee spoons?

I know this is not easy – it is the question of our life. How do we live? How can we feel alive? Where do we find courage? How do we balance safety and risk? How do we do that for our children and families as well as for ourselves? There is danger in both – too little risk, too much.

But, at least for today, maybe just for this hour, let's live at the edge? Let's open ourselves to the whole heart of living, the whole catastrophe as Zorba called it.

At the edge – I will see you there.

Readings:

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock T.S. Eliot
The Edge is Where I want to Be Lisa Martinovic
In Place of a Curse John Ciardi