

SERMON  
Sunday, October 9, 2011  
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## The Integrity of the Soul

Many years ago, I got laid off when the company I worked for underwent some major changes. After the initial shock wore off, I did what pretty much any responsible 24-year old would do: I bought an airline ticket to Amsterdam to spend three weeks at the Van Gogh Museum.

Okay, you probably didn't see that coming. Certainly, *I* would never have seen it coming at the time. My parents had grown up during the Great Depression, which meant that when faced with a layoff, I knew I should hunker down, batten down the hatches, tighten my belt, and hold on for dear life.

Objectively speaking, it's not a bad strategy. I had some savings, but I was on my own, paying back student loans, in charge of the care and feeding of my Kitty, and with no family in a position to help me financially.

For months, though, I'd been immersing myself in Vincent's art and letters, and I desperately wanted to go to the museum, which houses the largest collection of his work. And not just some superficial visit to see a few famous paintings, but a chance to sit with his passion and vision and allow the canvases to breathe with life. I knew I wouldn't have the luxury of such time once I found a new job. It was already a luxury to think about this option at all.

As I stood in the travel agent's office, deciding whether or not to take this trip, I couldn't believe I was even considering it when I had no income! But the *way* I felt afraid told me it was *exactly* what I needed to do. Once I got past that initial, knee-jerk reaction of "No, I can't," what I saw sitting there was "Yes...I *must*."

In this morning's reading, there's a moment when the poet has been floating along just fine under the night sky, then all of a sudden she feels cold, and afraid. She can't see where she's going, but she follows the sound of her friend's movements and makes it to the shore. "You help me pull / my body from the water as I stagger / to the weight of air, shivering and quickened." That's what it was like to buy that ticket: shivering with fear as I went against all the coping mechanisms I'd ever learned, and quickened with excitement at the possibilities.

I didn't ignore reality when I went to Amsterdam. I stayed in a youth hostel, kept my meals cheap, and planned ahead with an unlimited museum pass. I still had to look for a job when I got back, and my nervousness about money certainly lingered.

But I also came home with rewards I still carry with me: the sound of water slapping at the sides of a canal, painted figures threshing wheat under a green sky, the unexpected and extraordinary gift of seeing scores of Vincent's fragile drawings preserved in their archival storage boxes.

So how do we know when to take a leap of faith? Where's the line between courage and recklessness? Because a spontaneous post-layoff trip overseas might not have been the right decision for someone else.

A big part of it comes down to mindfulness. To noticing things like, what are my patterns? How do they serve me, and when do they hold me back? For example, the frugality I'd learned growing up was an important survival skill when I was unemployed, but it could also have kept me from fulfilling a dream. Being reckless means you've just thrown caution to the wind, heedless of the consequences. Having courage means you've taken in all the information and chosen to act despite your fear.

A leap of faith doesn't ignore the practical and the logical—but the practical and the logical don't always tell the whole story. We have access to a lot of information beyond the surface analysis we usually think of when trying to make a decision.

Sometimes, we feel it in our bodies. One possibility might make you feel like your chest is collapsing, while another feels like bubbles effervescing upward.

Sometimes, the information comes as an instinct that glimmers at the edge of consciousness and keeps catching our attention.

Sometimes, it's just a deep knowing that just won't go away.

When we're figuring out whether to take a leap of faith, the decision isn't just about what might happen if we move ahead. We also have to ask, what might happen if we *don't*?

There are times when the potential outcomes are more important than the consequences, even if the story gets ugly. The Freedom Riders in the 1960s knew that their campaign to integrate interstate buses could have severe repercussions. And in fact, it did—they were beaten, arrested, sometimes moments away from being killed. But they continued, and other people joined them, because risking their lives to end segregation was less dangerous to their souls than inaction.

More recently, we've seen people take over the capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin, camp out in Tahrir Square in Cairo, stand on the side of love in Arizona, and occupy Wall Street in New York and other cities around the country. Because the costs of inaction became higher than the costs of taking a chance.

Now, in case you're thinking, "There's no way I can just jump on a plane or camp out on a sidewalk or stare down a tank," just take a breath—that's okay. Not every risk is so visibly dramatic. Sometimes the single most frightening thing we can do is share a secret we've never talked about. Or admit a truth about ourselves that we haven't been able to face. Or just tell someone how we feel. These are the everyday risks that determine the quality and fabric of our lives.

The good news, though, is that we don't have to do this alone. Community plays an integral role in

supporting people who are taking risks. It was critical in the civil rights movement of the 60s, it's critical in the social justice movements of today, and it's just as critical in our personal lives. Community is the buoyancy we need to go far, the tools we need to stay upright.

This Unitarian Universalist community can be a place that holds everyone. That gives people a touchstone of safety where they know they'll find compassion and love, week after week, whether they're the bird that learns how to fly that first time out or the one that falls flat on its face. And what's great is that we don't have to be perfect to do it. We can be angry, or hurt, or annoyed, or lonely, and still support each other. We just have to be present.

UU congregations are known as places where people with all kinds of beliefs can come together. But they can also be places where we come together bringing all of ourselves, even the messy bits that we don't want to acknowledge.

Many of us are living lives that are less than whole. Somewhere along the line, we decided there was something wrong with who we are, and so we boxed up the parts that we labeled as unacceptable and hid them in a corner somewhere. I know I talked about my body for a long time as though it were something separate from me. Or maybe something happened, and we feel like we've lost part of ourselves, like some part of our essence is not quite all the way here.

In all of these cases, we're cut off from a source of our own power. Sometimes, it takes a leap of faith even to believe that wholeness is possible. We may need to go far outside our comfort zone to find it.

My life is looking radically different from the way it did not that long ago. I'm in school again after nearly 20 years away. In order to go full-time, I'm leaving a job at a meaningful nonprofit where I've worked for nearly eight years. My classes are stretching and challenging me in ways I never could have anticipated. And while it's powerful and transformative, it's also a little frightening. I had to kind of ask myself, "Am I *insane*?" Why would I mess with a life for which I was already quite grateful?

There's only one area where the stakes are high enough to justify putting all of my considerable blessings on the line like this: the integrity of my soul.

When I was trying to decide whether to apply to seminary, my body ultimately held the answer: I felt filled with life and joy when I thought about going, but I felt myself become desiccated and shriveled when I considered staying with the status quo. Ultimately, that's what a leap of faith comes down to: the choice between listening to that voice "still and small," or agreeing to the slow erosion of your soul. The latter is always a bigger risk to me, because over time, the waves of regret lapping at my spirit would eat away at my core.

I watched it happen to my mom.

"What does it matter?" was her relationship to life. All she could do was tread water in the ocean of old hurts she carried with her, with no hope of relief. One by one, she pushed people away until she

was almost completely isolated. She certainly didn't have a faith community to draw on: she was convinced that one communion wafer she'd had as a girl while attending mass with a friend—she didn't know you were supposed to be Catholic—meant that her spirituality was forever compromised.

She had battened down her hatches in the middle of her pain. I asked her once what she was passionate about, or even just to name some activities she enjoyed. She admitted that she used to write poetry, but then sighed in resignation, "It's too late for that."

And then one day, she was right. On December 16, 2004, it *was* too late. But she'd given up on her life years before her heart stopped beating.

Seismic shifts like losing a job, or facing down racism, aren't the only way to keep your soul vital and alive. Sometimes, it's a matter of refreshing yourself before a long drive, or finding new wonder among familiar paths in the woods. Sometimes, it's groping your way towards healing a wound, or letting down your guard with a friend. Sometimes it's being held by the water, trusting in the support that keeps us afloat.

Not every leap of faith may turn out the way we think, or the way we might hope. But if we're tending to our souls, living in alignment with our truths, and embodying compassion for each other, what exactly is there to fear? That's our wholeness—right there. There's nothing missing. There's nothing lacking. That's how our souls stay intact. And that's all we ever have.

"It's good / to know you're here," the poet writes. Together, as a community, we have more than enough courage for everything to need to face.