Risk: Essays by readers

Readers Write in the July 9, 2014 issue

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In response to our request for essays on risk, we received many compelling reflections. Here is a selection.

Is Tyler's family in there?" I asked the emergency room attendant. "And you are . . . ?" she responded. When I told her I was the family's pastor she pressed a button that unlocked the door to the emergency area. I'd been in the ER before, but never for a young person, and never in response to a violent street shooting.

An hour ago I'd heard sirens and seen emergency vehicles in my neighborhood. I felt compelled to walk toward the accident scene, then told the police officer that I'd drive the sobbing mother of the victim to the hospital. At that point I almost went home, but as I stood in the corridor I kept seeing the face of that scared mother and thinking about the 13-year-old boy who'd been shot.

So I went back and sat with strangers in a small waiting room. Tammy, the mother, was asking repeatedly, "Where is he? What are they doing? Why can't I see him yet?" Two daughters sat quietly nearby. We waited.

Tyler’s grandmother showed up and helped Tammy sit still. An ER staff member brought us some sodas and juice, and we waited some more. The grandfather and his wife showed up and helped time pass by telling family stories, including some about Tyler.

Then Tyler’s dad showed up red with rage, screaming profanities and demanding to know where his son’s assailant was. Police officers arrived and talked with him, and the grandmother explained to me that he was “high.”

When the doctor finally came in, his face was heavy. “We did everything we could,” he told Tammy.

I’ve never heard anything like the wail I heard from the mother. I felt naked and powerless as a pastor in that moment. No psalm, sacrament, or prayer could bring back a boy shot for no apparent reason.

I sat in my chair, dumbfounded, silent at the foot of the cross.

When the father heard the news, he punched a hole in the wall. The police surrounded him but did not attempt to restrain him. In the face of a dead child, standard rules of conduct are on hold.

Later a friend from the neighborhood asked me to pray with family and friends who had congregated outside the hospital, and I did. I began to realize that I was minister not only to people in a church, but also to the neighborhood around that church. I began to see a larger congregation around me, and their needs and their potential.

A week later our church rallied the neighborhood for peace and prayers, and members have been organizing a youth group for neighborhood kids. I conducted Tyler’s funeral.

I don’t know what it will be like when Jesus comes back and melts all the guns into plowshares. But I hope that he’ll have me on a list of those who did his best to reconcile the neighborhood around him to Christ’s life-changing, peacemaking power.

Aaron Ban
Granite City, Illinois

When I was 24 I moved to Hawaii to marry an army guy. I left my home, job, and friends behind in Minnesota. Some of them asked me what the hell I was doing, and I didn't blame them. My decision seemed a crazy risk—yet deep down it made perfect sense to me. They saw my move as a rash decision; I knew that I was joining my best friend, but I knew nothing about army life. No one in my family had ever been in the military.

I felt sick to my stomach as I sat on the plane. I didn't want to run away, but I couldn't quite believe what I was doing. A woman across the aisle from me said that her husband was stationed at Fort Something-or-other, and I thought, "That will be me someday." I fingered the hat that my fiancé had given me. It had his unit's crest on the front as well as the motto *Nec aspera terrent* (no fear on earth). I tried to feel less fear.

I had bought a round-trip ticket as a safety net. For the entire first year of our marriage, I was scared—certain that someone was going to pull me over and tell me I couldn't be there, or that they'd discover that I had protested the Gulf War, or that my mom had given money to an antigun lobby.

Now it's been 17 years, two deployments, eight moves, and too many lonely days and nights to count. I've learned about all-night road marches and how uniforms are worn (and laundered). I've learned that "going out to the field" means that I won't see my husband for a week or two and that being "in country" means that he's not in this country.

I've lived a life that it had never occurred to me to dream about, but I'm glad I took the risk. It led me to take other risks: crossing a glacial river barefoot, starting, restarting, and re-directing a career in ministry. Some risks have paid off. Others haven't ended as well.

I believe that God wants us to take some risks that challenge us and help us grow. We're not meant to bury our lives, hide them away, and keep them safe. God asks us to put ourselves out there and not cling so tightly to what is known and certain that we miss something beautiful, joyful, scary, and exhilarating—something through which we might touch the Holy.

Kirsten Batchelor
Fort Riley, Kansas

In 1964, Bishop James Albert Pike asked me to attend a conference of homosexuals and clergy sponsored by the Glide Foundation, a Methodist organization. I attended and met a dozen gay and lesbian leaders of the San Francisco Bay Area. For the first time, I heard about how the police, employers, landlords, and the public mistreated lesbian and gay people. Beatings, firings, discrimination, deaths, and disownment by families were not uncommon, but as clergy we were hearing about many of these things for the first time. We also heard how homosexuals were regularly condemned from Christian pulpits.

As a result of the conference, several of us founded the Council on Religion and the Homosexual; we were two UCC ministers, two Methodist ministers, one Lutheran, and one Episcopalian, as well as eight men and women who were gay or lesbian. We wanted to offer a lecture or a course to let congregations hear the stories of gays and lesbians. But there was a lot of publicity. Participating clergy were vilified and told that we were being used by the homosexuals. My wife was worried about my safety.

But now I'd seen that gays and lesbians were suffering, humiliated, and discriminated against. They were often denied medical care, sometimes losing their lives and dignity because society and laws incriminated them. As a follower of Jesus, what was I supposed to do? I felt called. I didn't think it was my business to judge people's sexual behavior. I did think it was my business to help fight injustice.

From then on, my life was in chaos. Church leaders demanded that my bishop fire me (instead he encouraged me). Radio and television commentators interviewed me. Many people assumed that I was gay.

I knew that I would be promoted in the church through the usual channels. But I would not become rector of a posh suburban parish, a dean of a cathedral, or a bishop. I spent the last 20 years of my ministry as rector of a struggling downtown parish known as the "gay nineties" church; those who weren't gay were around 90. Many of our parishioners contracted AIDS; we conducted 75 funerals for men between the ages of 25 and 35 in a five-year period.

I performed many ceremonies for same-sex couples. We all knew these marriages had no legal standing, but the couples wanted us to pave the way to the future. My bishop forbade me to perform the ceremonies and threatened to have me removed.

We went ahead anyway with a ceremony that was broadcast on television. My bishop and I found a way to compromise and move on.

Robert Warren Cromey
San Francisco

I don’t know how or when it began, but I had always felt that I was a disappointment to my dad. I lacked something as a boy and then as a man, or I had fallen short of some unidentifiable mark.

The relationship took a terrible turn while I was attending seminary and began to openly question theological suppositions of my childhood faith. The straw that broke the camel’s back came when I said good-bye to Baptists. Yes, my family still visited my folks, but there was always a gap in the relationship with my dad. I would arrive at home and my mom would come out into the yard to hug my children, my spouse, and me. My dad would greet them warmly but only shake my hand stiffly.

On a warm, windy Sunday before Memorial Day, a member of my church took my dad, my brother-in-law, and me out on the Delaware Bay to fish. The waves were choppy but manageable. The breeze was cool and refreshing. It seemed like a good time to talk, so I worked my way to the stern where my dad was fishing. I was determined to ask him, “So what’s wrong with me, Dad?”

But then I noticed that water was splashing across the stern. We were in trouble. My brother-in-law started the engine, but another wave pushed the stern and engine below the water. Suddenly the boat capsized.

Once in the water, we were able to find some rope and tie ourselves together through our life jackets. We waited on the overturned boat and finally caught the attention of other mariners, who called the Coast Guard. The conversation between my dad and me never happened.

But one morning a few months later we were again at my parents’ house. My dad was going through his usual routine. He went to the back door to check the lock and then came through the living room singing his favorite bluegrass song. He stopped to say good-bye because he was leaving for work. As usual, he stiffened his back and extended his hand. I stepped toward him. “I can’t do that anymore. I’ve been

thinking all summer about being in that water . . .”

Suddenly I found myself in a bear hug so strong I could barely breathe, and I heard my dad say, “You know we love you, son.” We stood there crying and hugging. Only the self-awareness that we were two men broke up that heavenly moment. In a moment of risk, we bridged a great divide.

Ed Middleton
Dallas

We already had two biological children and two children adopted from Korea. But we were ambitious—we loved children and family and decided to adopt another child.

I’d learned to think of adoption as a process designed to weed out the less determined. This time around, one of the forms directed us to check a box if we’d consider adopting a child of another race. “Race” was not troublesome for my husband, but I had concerns. We were already a “mixed” family, but wouldn’t issues be different and more complicated with a dark-skinned child?

Then I had a dream . . . I was in an office somewhere and someone was introducing me to a small black boy wearing red shorts. We visited pleasantly together while he sat on my lap. But when it came time for me to leave, I saw him lying on a cot in a room where endless rows of cots held an endless number of children like himself, all with their backs turned to me. I knew he did not believe that I’d return. When I awoke from the dream my husband and I checked the box that indicated our openness to a child of color.

We were shown photos of children in a São Paulo orphanage and were immediately drawn to a five-year-old with a polio-withered leg leaning against a door frame. His engaging smile won us over. Eventually, I went to Brazil and met Marc on a busy playground where he stood out, happy and energetic. I loved his warmth and earnestness. I was elated even before I realized that he was wearing red shorts!

The coincidence confirmed my feeling that Marc was right for our family. That feeling upheld me through the years when young Marc had doubts about his life (he once asked me if he’d have blond hair in heaven) and 20 years later when Marc committed suicide.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” With Marc we gained beyond measure! He renewed our wonder in everyday things we took for granted. He was loving and lovable, casting his charisma of sunshine far and wide. He made us laugh and taught us courage. Teachers complimented us on our parenting, and we could only respond that “he came that way.” When he returned to the ER with his leg rebroken (we had warned him not to try skating), staff gave him a hero’s welcome. And at the end, when mourning strangers shared their stories of Marc’s impact on their lives, we could only feel grateful to have been part of his life.

With Marc we experienced a dimension outside ourselves. It all began with a powerful “God moment”—meeting Marc in his red shorts.

Bobbie Oettinger
Grand Rapids, Michigan

A group of ordained pastors are sitting in a cabin at the edge of Puget Sound. We’re the Sanhedrin of ordained ministry, here to affirm and judge eight people who dare to respond to a call from God to become ordained ministers. The God who moved mountains and carved out the hole wherein plopped the Puget Sound. The God who used a watery genocide to cleanse all life forms from the crust of the earth—except for the lucky ones Noah hauled into the ark with him before God shut the door. The God who killed off a thousand Egyptian babies and drowned an entire army. The God who pushed the sea back from its bed and breathed life into the leviathan and ordered the annihilation of the inhabitants of an entire city, except for a prostitute. The God who had his son banged onto a tree.

This God, according to “Sammy” and “Sarah” and “Lindsay,” had bent down and whispered in their ears, “I think you would make a fine pastor. Why don’t you spend seven years and $70,000 becoming one so that you can be sent to a feeble church in Skamania County or Dinwiddie or whatever hell-and-breakfast dying hole the bishop ‘discerns’ you should go to (the places Jesus lives and cries over), or to the ends of whatever conference has good health insurance and a better-funded pension plan, so that you can speak my words of hope and jarring discomfort to some innocuous but nice deists who sew quilts and want you to agree with them (all of them).

“It will be a great way to spend the years before your waist spreads out from the Jello potlucks and Krispy Kreme fund-raisers you will participate in every single year till you’re high enough on the food chain to have a ministerial candidate do it for you, or until you retire out at 68 with a string of small churches behind you and watch a 30-second good-bye video of you speaking about you planning to spend time with grandkids, since you missed your own children for all the admin, trustee, and finance meetings you went to, a video in which you couldn’t possibly cram the heart-bursting gratefulness you feel from the 117 infants you held throughout 24 years of ministry and yearned for them to live with confidence that they would never escape a God who would die for them and did, as you held those infants over the baptismal font Uncle Frank varnished in his garage in ’72 and poured the blessed lethal water over them and squawked, ‘The Holy Spirit work within you,’ and then released them back because there was nothing else to be said; no way in 30 seconds to express gratitude for having been able to guide countless seekers through the muddy shoals of dull cynicism to skepticism to become rough doubters or wonderers for God; gratitude for sitting with the dying and stooping with the bereaved until you got old enough to know for yourself the unmovable permanency of death when your own family got picked off (because they did, and you, the only pastor in the family, had to lead the funeral and wrote the homily in the back seat of the rental car as you cried); the heart-bursting gratefulness of preaching a sermon that once in a month full of Sundays would zing with celestial prose so that for once Mrs. Winters, the retired English teacher, said, ‘I gave that one an A minus, it wasn’t unpleasant’ as she passed you in the receiving line—the first grade above B you had received; the heart-bursting gratefulness of having spoken a word of release to the woman who believed she lived under God’s curse because her husband struck her; the heart-bursting gratefulness of protesting at the town council or was it the school board or was it the state house because someone was trampled down by power; the heart-bursting gratefulness of the quilters pounding the parsonage kitchen with food before you arrived with your new wife to a house that lacked upstairs heat; the heart-bursting gratefulness of the uncertain folks who stuck around long enough to trust God even though not a single one of their questions was satisfactorily answered; the heart-bursting gratefulness of the one job in town that allowed you to read and think.”

This is the life that Sammy, Sarah, and Lindsay claim to be called to. We’ll be glad to sit in a drafty cabin and decide whether these three will risk serving this risky God.

Andy Oliver
Vancouver, Washington

He was rolling slowly down the church hallway in his wheelchair, a middle-aged, highly successful, and effusive man who had been stopped in his tracks when an accident crushed his femur. This was the first time he'd come to church since his accident and surgery.

I wasn't sure what to say. As we turned to face each other in the hall, I blurted out something about getting together sometime if he'd want to look for a sense of meaning in the midst of his recovery.

He stopped and gave me a wide-eyed look. I thought, "Oh, no, he's wondering what meaning could there possibly be in this sad series of events." Then he said, "Wow, yes, I'd like that very much." He nodded. "Yes, that would be really good. Let's do that."

We met on a fresh autumn morning and sat on the front porch of his home, sipping coffee and talking. He started asking deep spiritual questions and off we went. At the end of our talk he asked, "When can we do this again?"

We discussed spiritual questions every other week. Then he started attending Bible study. By his own admission, it was the first time he'd really had an interest in looking at the Bible. Then he asked how he might serve in the congregation and signed up when our nominating group was looking for a vice president of the church.

What if I hadn't risked that awkward moment in the hallway when we were separated only by a wheelchair and a cloud of unknowing?

This congregational mentor taught me again the risky power of a simple question: "Could we look for God's presence somewhere in this?"

Craig Schaub
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

I sat on the edge of a rear pew and clung to my ten-year-old son. It was our first visit to this church, and it had taken all my courage just to walk in the door. After the service we sneaked out the side, but the next Sunday we came back. I was still terrified. What if they knew my history? Would they turn on me?

A harrowing journey had led me to this place. I am rooted to a denomination by baptism, confirmation, and love of the liturgy. But I live in a close-knit community, and when I filed a complaint of sexual misconduct against the well-loved pastor, word got around fast. Doors began to close. Friends became strangers. Accusations appeared on my Facebook page. Even other clergy turned against me. One Sunday, in a small parish a half hour from my home, I sat near a retired pastor with whom I had a friendly rapport. During the passing of the peace, I turned to her with an outstretched hand. She greeted the man to my left and the woman to my right but stared through me as if I wasn't there.

It was my Year of Risk. I took a risk to protect other women, to push for transparency, and to claim my place in my faith tradition. Yet what happened exceeded my worst fears. I lost almost all of my friends. My name became notorious. There was no place for me in my church. If we are all part of the body of Christ, I had become the cancer.

I stayed away. I could no longer pray; the very idea of God seemed like a cruel joke. I considered leaving my faith. Many survivors of clergy sexual misconduct never return to church. Those of us who do may struggle for years, and if we are open about our stories, we struggle with our new friends' misgivings. We make people uneasy.

And yet only a few months after my old church froze me out, I realized that I needed to be with God's people. Heart racing, knees knocking, I began to look for a church. Now I had walked into the warm, old-fashioned sanctuary of a century-old United Church of Christ congregation. I knew only that the pastor seemed kind and thoughtful and was gay, which made me feel safe.

Could I join? I was still frightened of being frozen out. My former pastor's behavior made me feel like prey; the cold silence of others made me feel as though I no longer existed. Unfortunately, most church members fear scandal more than they fear the abuse that causes the scandal and will ostracize the congregant who dares to speak a scandalous truth. Would a new congregation do the same thing?

There was only one way to find out. I had to risk telling the truth again. Two weeks before I joined the church, I told my new pastor that I had reported his colleague for misconduct. That Christmas I told women in my prayer group. The next summer I recounted my story to an officer of the church. Finally, near the end of my first year on council, I told my story to the church's senior leaders. Every time I spoke I was terrified, but I always felt compassion from my hearers. And each time I became a little less afraid.

My church now knows the darkest part of my history. They've seen how my wounds get in the way, and yet they embrace me. By inviting me to serve, they've helped me discover new gifts. By accepting me as I am, they've helped me heal. By taking the risk of being in this community, I've found my way home.

Catherine Thiemann
San Diego

I was 16. It was about two o'clock in the morning. I'd been up watching TV after a night with friends driving around St. Louis and causing trouble as usual. Suddenly someone knocked on the front door. Who could be knocking at this time of night? My parents had gone to bed hours before, and I felt alone. Maybe it was just the wind. There couldn't possibly be anyone outside.

Then there was another knock. I was terrified, scared for my life. My heart began to beat harder. My senses heightened. I tried to look through the window on the door, but all I could see was part of a figure standing to the side. Then I slowly pulled back the curtain. There she was—a woman dressed in shabby clothes, with black hair, but dirty and unkempt. Again I pulled back. This woman might be crazy, for all I knew. Why the heck did she have to pick my house?

By some power I didn't know I had, I opened that front door. I stared. I had never seen a person like this woman before. Her clothes were filthy, her boots old and worn. Her hair was greasy and her face dirty.

"Hello," I said. We stood for a moment looking at each other. She glanced up at me, then turned to look at the streetlamp and back to me. In a raspy, guttural voice she asked for water. "OK," I said, and closed the door behind me and ran to the kitchen. I filled an old plastic cup with water.

I slowly opened the screen door and held out the cup of water. She took it with hands that were worn and tough. We stood there—she drinking the water, me looking her over. I felt pity but was still scared to death. What I should do next? Before I could even say anything else, she thanked me and turned away.

I quickly shut the door and locked it. I checked to see that all the doors were locked. My fear was balanced with pity, but that seemed to make me fear something else—God. I remembered having heard something about seeing Jesus in the face of the poor. Had I seen the face of God?

Ron Trimmer
Georgetown, Texas

I looked ridiculous. I was sitting in the campus center cafeteria wearing my clerical collar, something I'd been doing once a week for months. As the pastor of a congregation adjacent to campus, I was trying to get to know the students, but I had no idea how to start.

I knew another minister who posted questions on a giant bulletin board, and I wondered if I could do the same thing. Then it occurred to me—I'd use a whiteboard as a facsimile of a Facebook wall. I purchased a 2' x 3' whiteboard and carried it into the campus center. Now I was risking my dignity. I imagined being asked to leave by the cafeteria managers or ridiculed by the students. I posted questions that tackled faith issues. "What are you most afraid of?" "What are you waiting for?" and "Love is . . ."

People began slowing down to read the board. They were intrigued, and some offered comments as if they were grateful for a chance to express themselves.

But the most intriguing result was that people started conversations—not with me, but with each other. In fact, most often people read the question and asked their friends for answers.

They usually walked out of earshot before any answer was offered, though sometimes I could see that a good conversation had begun—and that I had no control over it. I had thought that I was risking my dignity; the risk was in putting something out into the world that had a life of its own.

We take the same risk in Sunday worship. We give people the body of Christ and then send them out into the world to be that body. Like questions that begin conversations I will never hear, worship propels us into ministry that isn’t contained within the confines of the church. Thanks to the whiteboard, I began to imagine every worship gathering as a holy risk that we trust into God’s hands.

Steve Wilco
Amherst, Massachusetts