



The Mystic Messenger

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In no particular order, I have been a sky-diver, a technical rock climber, a thru-hiker, a religious seeker, a world traveler and a jail bound activist.

When I tell stories of past adventures, many of the listeners shudder and offer some iteration of "I would never dare..." Oddly enough I did not consider any of these acts of daring, because I didn't perceive them that way. I knew what I was getting into, and sometimes it was harder and scarier than I expected, and sometimes it was easier, but I never felt that I had gone past any point of no return. The parachute canopy opened, I managed to hike out, and time in jail was finite.

Many years ago at an adventure educators training, our instructor talked about risk. We were able to opt out of any activity that felt too risky emotionally or physically, and several did at various points during the week. In our final debrief our instructor offered this fact, most accidents happen not on the high or low ropes courses, but on the lawn, playing running games, the one place where no one opted out.

In that case, as with others, the perception of risk doesn't align with the reality of risk. We can decrease the likelihood of harm with safe practices, but there are documented risks in any number of activities. We can reduce our risk of dying in an

automobile accident by exercising care and wearing seatbelts, although that doesn't eliminate the significant risks we are exposed to when we drive/ride in an automobile. Most of us don't break out into a cold sweat when we slide behind the wheel, thinking of everything that could go wrong, but a lot of people pale at the prospect of flying in a pressurized cabin thirty thousand feet above the earth, where the documented risk is lower.

Risk is what we perceive it to be. My tolerance for uncertainty and discomfort might be lower or greater than yours, so my perceived risk will be lower or greater than yours, when we encounter the same opportunities or challenges. If you like air travel, then your risk is a statistic. If you fear flying, then your risk is much greater, because you perceive

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John and Maggie Russell get the dance floor started at the Imagination Ball

Risk, continued

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it to be so. If you fear being out of work due to an injury, or going to jail as a person of color, then your risk is greater than those of us who don't worry about losing a job after a skiing accident or being treated badly by police because of our ethnicity. We may not perceive the level of risk others may face, but we should never make the mistake of assuming everyone else's risk is the same as our own in any given circumstance.

There are other risks not limited to the physical or active ones. It takes courage to disagree with someone whose opinion matters to you. Or to open up a soft vulnerable heart to

someone whose censorship you fear, or expose your pain to a world that may be indifferent to it. I'm always surprised at the deeply personal disclosures that are posted to a thousand intimates on social media, or the secrets out of the past that are shared with mere acquaintances. Those remote relationships are perceived as less risky, because, I suspect, there is almost no relationship to risk.

Risk is a question of recognizing how much we have to lose. And for those of us who have enough privilege to choose to take risks, the most dangerous risk is that of being changed irrevocably when we allow ourselves to be touched by the

world. Whether we take on a risk, deliberately, or place ourselves in an environment where we are more likely to encounter difference and challenges, we risk being changed by those encounters. The bell cannot be un-rung, the seen cannot be unseen, and we either harden ourselves and turn away or open to the unknown and lean in. It's a tumultuous time and we are risking more than irrelevance by not attending to the world. Turn away? Or lean in? Only you know what that looks like. Only you know what you have to lose. But not one of us knows what we have to gain.



The local band, Up, performing at the Imagination Ball