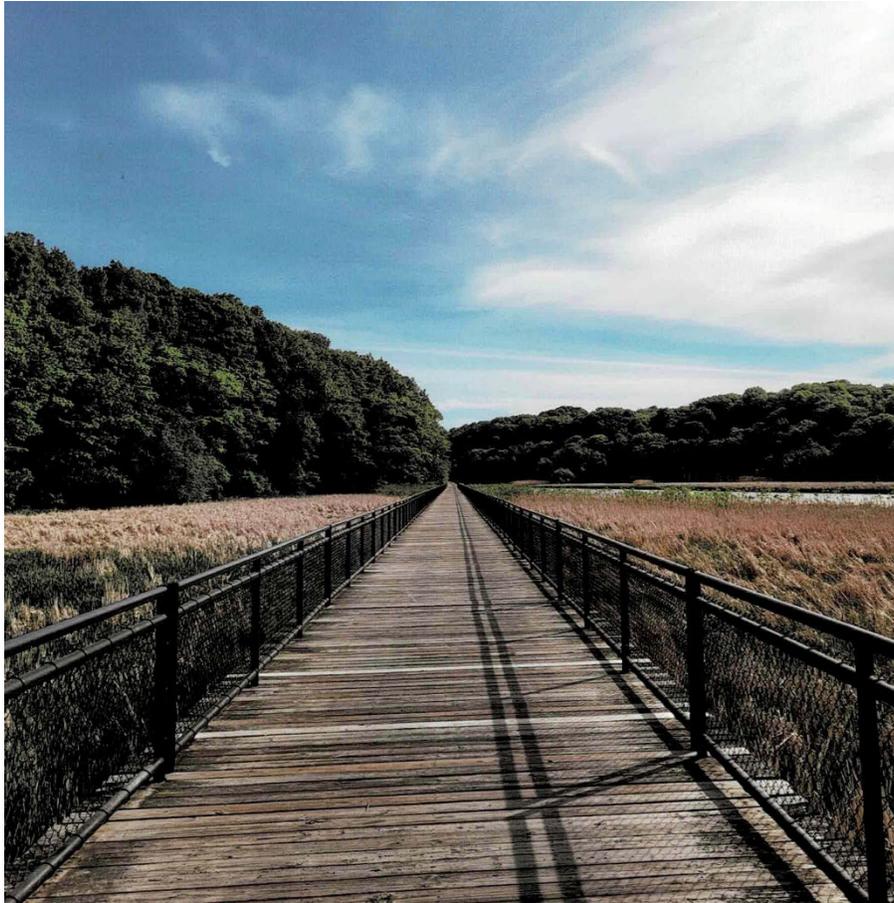


The Darkness Season Risk

A collaboration of First Universalist Church of Rochester,
Unitarian Universalist Church of Canandaigua and First Unitarian Church of Rochester.

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Turning Point Park - photo by K. Dickerson

“Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.”

-- T.S. Eliot, American-born, British poet and playwright

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We acknowledge with respect the Seneca (Onöndowa'ga:') Nation, Keepers of the Western Door and part of the Haudenosaunee People, [on whose ancestral land](#) First Unitarian Church of Rochester, First Universalist Church of Rochester, and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Canandaigua are now located.

Dear ones,

I write this letter having just left a cemetery where we commended the body of a beloved congregant to the earth. The sun shone on us while yellow leaves fell softly and geese flew overhead. It is a risk to live in the vulnerability of a body. To be woven into the vulnerability of the web of life.

A few days ago, I officiated the wedding of two people who had lost past loves to death and were choosing the risk of love again. It is, of course, always a risk to love. A risk to know a person in all their gifts and needs, their brokenness, and their holy wholeness, and to choose to weave our life with theirs.

What an honor it is, as a church, to hold space for one another to take the risk of love.

As we enter into a season of Darkness and prepare to celebrate a baby whose birth in Palestine 2000 years ago changed the world, I want us to ask ourselves, today, who bears the risk of empire's power? I have been sitting with this poem by Madeleine L'Engle in preparation for this season:

*This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.*

*That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honor & truth were trampled to scorn—
Yet here did the Savior make His home.*

*When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn—
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.*

To live is a risk; to love is a risk. Some carry the risk of the vulnerability of life more than others. It is time to ask ourselves what we are willing to risk to belong to Love.

With care,
Rev. Eileen

GRATITUDE

Much thanks to the Darkness Season's packet-team leads, Suzy Farrell and Tom Perry, the three-church worship team brainstorm, and numerous contributions from the entire packet team. We hope you find inspiration to explore what risk means for you and your community.

READINGS FOR CHALICE LIGHTING

Legacy Chalice Lighting by Rev. Paul Sprecher

We light this chalice to honor the memory of those who have come before us,
kindling flames of wisdom in dark times,
willing to challenge orthodoxy even at great personal risk,
giving us a legacy of freedom and a love of truth,
A legacy that warms our hearts and lights our paths.



The Ember of Hope, and Love Set Ablaze by Rev. Lisa Doege

What if

sometimes it's not about a light in the darkness?

What if

sometimes it's about sparking potential into possibility, and possibility into existence?

What if

sometimes the flame that burns in the chalice of our faith is nothing less than the ember of hope and nothing more than love set ablaze?

What if

sometimes all we need do is follow this flame—one among scores, hundreds, thousands of steadily flickering flames across the land and among so many peoples—on the way to justice and into the land of peace?

What if

we dare to kindle that chalice?

READINGS FOR CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

Here and Beyond These Walls by Craig Rowland

As we extinguish this chalice flame, may the warmth of its light remain within us, guiding our steps and our hearts.

Let us carry forward the strength of this community, the courage to speak truth, and the hope that transformation is possible.

In each breath we take, may we remember that the work of love, justice, and healing is ours to continue—both here and beyond these walls.

Go in peace, with the light of this gathering to illuminate your way.

Our Calling in the World by Rev. Rebekh Savage

We have come to the end of our service but not our calling in the world:

We close our time together with the humble reminder

That Justice and Equity are our spiritual practices to embrace.

Each day, every day,

we are blessed to be the embodiment of what is possible,

When Justice and Equity ground us in all that we do.

May we go forth with the light and warmth of our chalice in our hearts

Until we are together again.



SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

These spiritual exercises are an opportunity to experience the theme, to come at it from a different angle than just thinking or talking about it. Pick one or two that speak to you, or perhaps that are out of your usual comfort zone, and make time to complete them.

Exercise A: Put Yourself Out There

Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk and philosopher, reminds us that internal emotions such as anxiety, fear, and anger prevent us from trying something new just as much as external forces like possible physical danger hold us back.

Take on the spiritual challenge of engaging in conversation with someone you do not know well or at all. It might be at church or in line at a checkout counter. Be genuinely curious about what they have to say and try to get beyond small talk. Do this exercise a couple times a week for the next couple months. As you practice this ritual, notice how it affects you. How do those conversations go and are there changes in your nervous system after having a few interactions? Record and share with your group.

Exercise B: Exploring Our World (intergenerational)

Explore the natural world with a child or children. Your backyard, a park or a forest will do. There are plants and animals all over in the water, air, and soil. Talk amongst one another about the assorted needs of all living beings in that habitat. Are those needs being met? (Food, safety and health.) What are the risks to their lives? And what can we do to help mitigate some of those risks?

Exercise C: Social Justice Risk Tolerance (interactive group activity)

You can do this exercise as a group without any prior preparation. Start by considering the organizations in which you are most active... pick one that is engaged in social justice work that is important to you. It could be your church or any other organization with a mission to better the lives of others and increase the amount of justice in the world.

Then refer to the chart of **Social Justice Actions** on page 8. Pick three actions that your organization is most suited and able to do. Are there any of the 10 actions that your organization should not attempt? As you are willing, share your two lists and discuss.

See the **Social Justice Risk Tolerance Levels**, on page 9. The scale is a continuum with five labeled points. Consider the justice work you have done or considered doing this year. What is your current risk tolerance level? You can select a point that is in between two labeled points, e.g., 2.3. Have you done riskier justice work in the past? Share and discuss as willing.

Considering the ongoing threats to our institutions and values, is there a place on the Risk Tolerance scale that you aspire to be in the future? Are there things your organization could do to help you get there? Share and discuss.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

These questions aren't "homework" that need to be covered entirely. Instead, simply pick the one question that speaks to you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The questions often lead not to answers, but more questions.

1. What kinds of risks prompt you to stop and think about the consequences? How are they different from risks you take every day without thinking?
2. How certain do you need to be of your religious beliefs before you publicly share them?
3. How do you discern that the loving choice is to take the risk and act?
4. Do you apply different rules or standards in choosing to take a risk for yourself or choosing a risk for others?
5. How do the risks an organization is willing to take reflect or reveal their core values?
6. What was the last risky action you took?
7. How do you see vulnerability playing a role in risk?
8. "Try it, risk free!" What is truly risk free?



RESOURCES FROM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

The Fire of Commitment #1028 in STJ

When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul a blaze
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin.

To Risk, Responsive Reading #658 in SLT

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.

To weep is to risk appearing the sentimental.

To reach out for another is to risk exposing our true self.

To place our ideas – our dreams – before the crowd is to risk loss.

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To hope is to risk despair.

To try is to risk failure.

To live is to risk dying.

-- Anonymous

Love and Risk by Robert C. Spirko, Chapter 16 (pp. 130-132) in Love at the Center: Unitarian Universalist Theologies, Editor: Sofia Betancourt, 2025

“We must live with no guarantees; we may be called to pay a high price for Love. All we can do is be prepared to love as the times require. By contrast, we do know the high cost of living without Love: shame, guilt, silence, death. Our leaders can help us understand this dual truth.

Ultimately, we need to practice risk. The more we practice, the better our skills and discernment become. We need to prepare for those moments when we have to take action, when the risks of not acting are greater than those of action. We need practice, especially, with institutional risk. Many among us might accept a level of personal risk in our Love work; are we also ready to accept institutional risks? That determination takes careful group discernment, but also collective boldness.

...

By calling us into wider circles of community, Love empowers us to act; any action puts us at risk. The feedback spiral of Love, risk, and trust—of relationship and community— becomes the ground for the actions that are necessary for mutual liberation. These actions set the conditions for further change and growth, often regardless of their “success” or “failure.” And while we know we will never fully arrive at a perfect Beloved Community, we call it into being whenever we accept risk and act in Love, stronger and stronger with each call.”

WISDOM FROM WORLD RELIGIONS

Christianity

American Reformed theologian and author Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) held beliefs throughout his lifetime that included political and theological risks. His 1936 book, [Moral Man and Immoral Society](#) (free on the Internet Archive) highlights the discrepancies between an individual and society with regards to morality. Reinhold points to the risks of being complacent instead of challenging an unjust society. “The individual must strive to realize his life by losing and finding himself in something greater than himself.”

Buddhism

The Buddha reminds us of the importance of exploring our fears and anxieties otherwise we risk stagnation in our growth and freedom from suffering. This is from [the mindfulness bell](#), Issue No.89, Thich Nhat Hanh Memorial Issue.

Buddhists believe we should show compassion (karuna) toward all beings, not just humans. And that risking our own comfort to prevent others from suffering is important.

Hinduism

The Indian Hindu mystic Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) said, "Real freedom is not within the boundaries of security, but in the highroad of adventures, full of risk of new experiences." Found in [Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore](#) (free on the Internet Archive).

Judaism

English Orthodox rabbi and author Jonathon Sacks (1948-2020) wrote “The feeling of failure does not necessarily mean that you have failed. All it means is that you have not yet succeeded. Still less does it mean that you are a failure. To the contrary, failure comes to those who take risks; and the willingness to take risks is absolutely necessary if you seek, in however small a way, to change the world for the better.” This from one of his many essays on [Studies in Spirituality](#).

Islam

Rumi, 13th century Persian poet, famously said, “Run from what’s comfortable. Forget safety. Live where you fear to live.” His wisdom lives on and continues to encourage followers to take risks. By stepping out of conventional approaches we will grow emotionally and spiritually to aid in the evolution of our souls.

QUOTATIONS

“Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.”

— Helen Keller, author and activist for disability rights

“Self-care alone won’t save us. Community is a necessary risk.”

— Cole Arthur Riley, Black writer and poet

"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you'll be swept off to."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings

"The practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control."

— bell hooks, All About Love: New Visions

"And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."

— Anais Nin, (1903-1977), a French-American essayist and author of short stories

"I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you grow wings."

— Rev. William Sloane Coffin, (1924-2006) white UCC minister, activist for civil rights, peace, and gay rights

RISK DISCERNMENT IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

Risk, Courage, and Discernment: Spiritual Preparation for Collective Action, produced for UUA LeaderLab by Elizabeth Nguyen, February 5, 2025. Action discernment, role discernment, risk assessment, spiritual preparation, and after-action practices. "The goal is always to live to fight another day," says Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen.

Charts for Exercise C:

Note: While these two charts were developed for use by churches, they can also be applied to risk discernment for non-profit organizations engaged in social justice work.

Social Justice Actions

1. Educate and inspire our congregants to participate in our own programming and that of other organizations.	2. Host public events, such as panels, presentations, workshops, speakers.	3. Facilitate letter writing, phone banking, and petition signing.	4. Organize opportunities to interact in person with government officials and elected representatives.	5. Support organizations with monetary and in-kind contributions (Greater Good, Share the Plate, food, clothing, school supplies.)
6. Provide and/or coordinate volunteers from our congregation to partner with community organizations.	7. Ministers/ church leaders represent our church at public events (e.g., be a panelist/ workshop facilitator, media appearances.)	8. Be a physical and identifiable presence in protests or marches (e.g., Pride Parade, Black Lives Matter protests, vigils.)	9. Assist other organizations/ individuals in actions that avoid, thwart or violate the law. (e.g., assist those who come here for medical care banned elsewhere.)	10. Take actions in our church building which could be considered in violation of the law (e.g., provide sanctuary or directly confront law enforcement on our grounds.)

Social Justice Risk Tolerance Levels

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
<p>Concerned Citizen Donate money or goods, Educate yourself about causes and issues, Vote</p>	<p>Supporter Background support volunteerism, letter writing, contact elected officials, sign petitions, boycott a product or business</p>	<p>Advocate Direct support volunteerism, post or comment on social media, display bumper sticker or lawn sign, serve on a board</p>	<p>Activist Attend rallies or marches, lobby representatives, speak at town halls, door knock, phone bank, lead a project or organization</p>	<p>Warrior Attend protest or counter protest, civil disobedience risking arrest, harbor people at risk, be an escort</p>
				

[Community Resilience Hub](#), produced by UUA Safe Congregations program. A collection of resources gathered for Unitarian Universalists, Guidance and resources for UU congregations on how to take action now, support each other, and build a more resilient community that can stand firm in the face of uncertainty.

FURTHER ENGAGEMENT: PODCASTS, SONGS, ARTICLES, FILMS, & BOOKS

A Feminist Ethic of Risk by Sharon D. Welch (academic and lifelong activist, retired from Meadville Lombard in 2017). An “ethic of risk” is embodied by those who persist in living according to their conscience even in the face of overwhelming power. “Our values are not eternal guarantees of right decisions or of proper analyses; they are calls to action.” A free-to-borrow edition is available at the [Open Library of the Internet Archive](#).

“Stepping into Risk and Landing in Trust,” sermon by Rev. Ruth MacKenzie at First Unitarian Church of Dallas, February 2, 2025. In a world filled with uncertainty, how do we take the risks necessary to grow, heal, and trust?

Daring Greatly by Brené Brown, academic and best-selling author. Her 2012 book explores how the courage to be vulnerable opens us up to take the risk of being our authentic selves. There’s a 9-minute YouTube animated summary here: [Daring Greatly \(detailed summary\) by Brené Brown](#).

[The Psychology of Risk. A Brief Overview](#) (PDF). Paul Slovic, University of Oregon. Slides summarize how people think about risk:

What factors determine the perception of risk and the acceptance of risk? What role do emotion and reason play in risk perception and decision making? What are some of the social, economic, and political implications of risk perceptions?

["Playing with Risk: The Dangers of Thinking Safe,"](#) a TEDx Talk by Mike Hewson. Mike is an artist who believes that eliminating risk during the creative process squelches the possibilities. He came to this conclusion after experiencing an earthquake in Australia only to realize it is impossible to mitigate all risks.



[Fruition Seeds - Trusting Abundance Shared.](#) "We're weaving a new fabric together, Friends." These words are from Petra Paige-Mann, part owner of Fruition Seeds in Naples, New York. She and partner, Matthew, took a large leap in 2024 to go from selling and shipping seeds, a typical market economy, to a gift inspired practice - a gift economy.

Music

[Take A Chance On Me](#) by ABBA (Official Music Video)

"If you change your mind, I'm the first in line

(Take a chance, take a-take a chance-chance, take a chance, take a chance)"

[I am Willing](#) by Holly Near - Cantor's Concert 2024 at Temple Chai

"I am open and I am willing, for to be hopeless would seem so strange.

It dishonors those who go before us, so lift me up to the light of change."

[Get Up, Stand Up](#) by Bob Marley

"Get up, stand up stand up for your rights

Get up, stand up don't give up the fight!"

[Climb Ev'ry Mountain](#) ft. Audra McDonald | Rodgers & Hammerstein 80th Anniversary Concert

"Climb every mountain

Ford every stream"

[Try Everything](#) by Shakira (from the movie Zootopia)

"No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything

I wanna try even though I could fail"

Children's Read Aloud Books

Sheila Rae, the brave by Kevin Henkes. A self-assured Sheila feels she is brave toward anything and tries to prove it only to find she needs help. Sheila was surprised when that assistance came from her sibling.

The Brave Little Parrot, by Rafe Martin. A small parrot in a very large forest sets out to stop a fire raging through his home threatening to destroy his friends and all their homes. The other animals respond and help. Cooperation and teamwork help all.

Fly High! The Story of Bessie Coleman by Louise Borden and Mary Kay Kroeger. Recommended for ages 9-12. It's about the first Black American woman to earn a pilot's license.

Movie

Finding Nemo (Disney, 2003), in which a young clownfish risks the safety of the only home he has known to explore sea life beyond the reef. His father then prevails over his own anxieties and fears searching for his son.

LOCAL ACTIVITIES / FAITH IN ACTION

First Tuesday in November – Hey, folks! November 4th is election day. Cast your ballot!

Rochester Brainery. Take a risk and try something new! Look at all that is available to help you discover a side of yourself you never knew you had! Dancing, cooking, artistry and more! Group or private classes offered.

Thursday November 27th Rochester Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, 11am-12pm at Asbury First United Methodist Church, 1050 East Ave, Rochester, NY 14607. This will be the 151st year for this oldest continuing interfaith service in the country.

December 5-14 is International Human Rights Week in Rochester. Join the celebration of the 77th Anniversary of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948. Two big free events during the week will be:

- **Affirmation of Human Rights Gathering** on Saturday, December 6th 10am-12noon, at First Unitarian Church, 220 Winton Rd. South, Rochester, NY 14610. Faith Leaders gather to affirm the continued moral and spiritual relevance of Human Rights. There will be time to network with tabling. Click for more info and free registration: <https://bit.ly/4qeNQDB>
- **Human Rights Conference** on Sunday, December 14th 3-5pm, at The Islamic Center of Rochester, 727 Westfall Road, Rochester, NY 14620. Human rights advocates confer on their 2026-27 visions for Rochester. How can we link up to right the wrongs that stress our neighbors? Click for more info and free registration: <https://bit.ly/4nTtuOL>

HUMOR

