



**A Feminist Ethic of Risk**  
**The Rev. Benjamin Maucere**  
**First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati**  
**536 Linton Street**  
**Cincinnati, Ohio 45219**  
**513.281.1564**  
**January 22, 2017**

From Seamus Heaney  
 from "The Cure at Troy"

*Human beings suffer,  
 they torture one another,  
 they get hurt and get hard.  
 No poem or play or song  
 can fully right a wrong  
 inflicted or endured.*

*The innocent in gaols  
 beat on their bars together.  
 A hunger-striker's father  
 stands in the graveyard dumb.  
 The police widow in veils  
 faints at the funeral home.*

*History says, Don't hope  
 on this side of the grave.  
 But then, once in a lifetime  
 the longed for tidal wave  
 of justice can rise up,  
 and hope and history rhyme.*

*So hope for a great sea-change  
 on the far side of revenge.  
 Believe that a further shore  
 is reachable from here.  
 Believe in miracles  
 and cures and healing wells.*

...  
*If there's fire on the mountain  
 Or lightning and storm  
 And a god speaks from the sky*

*That means someone is bearing  
the outcry and the birth-cry  
of new life at its term.*

I don't remember a time when our values have been as threatened as they seem to be today. And we need hope and strength for the struggle to defend them.

I think of the words of the 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice." Yes, Martin Luther King quoted the sentiment.

I would not, however, use the passive voice. It does not bend. *We bend it. We bend it.*

Today I want to offer a theological framework for such work, drawing primarily from the Rev. Dr. Sharon Welch who is an influential Unitarian Universalist scholar at Meadville Lombard, our Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago.

The opening paragraph of her book defines the problem she means to address: What does it mean to work for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering and evil? How can we sustain energy, hope, and commitment in the face of an unrelenting succession of social and political crises?

It comes with the morning news. It's all war, starvation, genocide, global warming. It's just too much! "*We suffer, we torture one another, we get hurt and we get hard.*" What can anyone do about it?

Drawing from feminist ethics and theology, Welch proposes what she calls an ethic of risk as a contrast to what she calls the ethic of control; power with rather than power over.

The overwhelming nature of the problems facing our culture leads many well-meaning people to cynicism and despair. The problems are so many and so vast that hope is destroyed. Sharon Welch contends that this reaction takes a particular form among the middle class—it becomes what she calls a cultured despair—"a despair cushioned by privilege and grounded in privilege. . . . When the good life is present or within reach, it is tempting to despair of its ever being in reach for others and resort merely to [seeking it, or] enjoying it for oneself and one's family."

Part of what holds us back is the ethic of control. Welch argues that "To the extent that we still cling to the ideal of omnipotence—of a sovereign god or an all-wise, always successful father—we are trapped in our own role as oppressors, expecting a level of ease in action impossible in an interdependent world."

She discusses the ethic of control in classical Greece. Their concept of virtue was based on dominance. It applied only to free men, "self mastery and the mastery of others were regarded as having the same form; . . . one was expected to govern oneself in the same manner as one governed one's household [women and slaves] and played one's role in the city. . . ."

Christianity didn't challenge this ethic, but made it transcendent. God governed men and in the same manner men governed lesser beings. As twentieth-century theologian Alfred North Whitehead wrote, when Christianity became the official state religion of the Western world, "Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers. . . ."

"The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly. . . . But the deeper idolatry, of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers, was retained. The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar."

Augustine of Hippo, called Saint Augustine, was one of the main architects of Christianity. Humans, he said, due to their sinful nature, must be slaves to God, a concept Welch calls "the erotics of domination."

Augustine defended the use of force by the church, and as bishop, he exercised force to deny the rights of non-Christians, or Christians with whom he disagreed and labeled heretic, but neither he, nor indeed any ruler could be held accountable since they were merely acting as slaves to God themselves.

This valorization of power, Greek or Christian, results in  
 “either the domination of others  
 in the name of the common good  
 or despair at not being able to readily attain  
 the essential goals of peace, freedom, and justice.”

An ethic of risk is Sharon Welch’s alternative to the ethics of control and domination. What does offer us — in our lives and in the life of the church?

The ethic of risk, Welch says, is characterized by three elements, each of which is essential to maintain resistance in the face of overwhelming odds:

1. A redefinition of responsible action,

2. A grounding in community,

And 3, strategic risk-taking.

Responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but rather the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible, the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes. It means improving the odds.

In the ongoing process of identifying and living out our values as a religious community, the inspiration expressed by Sharon Welch can be helpful. We know that we can not guarantee the outcome, but we believe we can work together to serve the common good.

So many who love this church would have it be a resource and a support in spiritual development; a community that loves and cares for its members and reaches out beyond its walls working for peace, justice, and freedom. Many of you want this congregation to be radical—not in the sense of being far-out or weird, but in the sense of addressing both the symptoms and the root causes of injustice.

Sharon Welch would add that this primarily white and middle class community has a holy obligation

>to recognize and take seriously  
 that it has a part to play  
 in the struggle for justice;  
 >to challenge the oppressions  
 of the political and economic system  
 from which it benefits;  
 >and to be guided in this struggle  
 by the literature of the oppressed,  
 drawing strength and hope from their “sheer holy boldness.”

For example, consider these words from African American feminist author June Jordan, “I am entering my soul into a struggle that will most certainly transform the experience of all the peoples of the earth, as no other movement can, in fact, hope to claim: because the movement into self-love, self-respect, and self-determination is the movement now galvanizing the majority of human beings everywhere.

“This movement explicitly demands the testing of the viability

of a moral idea: that the health, the legitimacy of any status quo,  
any governing force,  
must be measured  
according to the experiences of those  
who are, comparatively, powerless.”

Our motivation for our involvement in the struggle must not; cannot be sustained if it comes from self-sacrifice or from guilt. It must come from a theology of love — a theology of expansion, of engagement, of immanence.

It starts with self-love — not narcissism but self respect, self-honoring, self-affirming. Our Universalist roots affirm that we all have inherent worth and dignity.

Rooted in this conviction, our love then moves out, to love for others — to the expansion of the self. Feminist theologians challenge the Enlightenment self: the atomistic, individualistic concept of personhood. There is no self, in any meaningful sense, apart from our relationships.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith offers the affirmation that we are part of an interdependent web — that we are connected, that what we do or leave undone affects everything. We are called to enlarge our sense of identity, to expand our sense of self in ever wider circles. To “say we, and know who we mean, and, each day to mean one more.” (Marge Piercy)

Our sense of self is expanded to include the earth – to cultivate a deep awareness and appreciation of the beauty and wonder of the world around us. Mary Daly writes that “A woman who can evoke her childhood experiences  
of gazing at the moon and stars on clear nights,  
or lying on the grass,  
or listening to the sea,  
or watching the sunset  
is Elementally inspired.  
When she can recall early experiences of the smell of leaves on an October day, the taste of raspberries at a picnic, the feel of sand warmed by the sun, she is empowered.”

Feminist theology offers a theology of immanence in the place of a theology of transcendence. Rather than an ethereal God “out there” somewhere, separate from the world, it offers a belief in the immanence of the divine, of the fact that the holy is present – working in us and through us. It is present in our compassion and in our struggles for love and for justice. It is present in the awe and mystery of life itself.

All is relationship. Perhaps the ultimate ethic of immanence is to choose to make that relationship one of love; love of self and of others, erotic love, transforming love, affectionate love, delighted love for the myriad forms of life as it evolves and changes . . . love for all the eternally self-creating world, love of the “bright blessed day and the dark sacred night,” and a fierce, raging love that stands against all that would diminish the unspeakable beauty of the world.

This is our task – this is the purpose of the church in the world.

*History says, Don't hope  
on this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
the longed for tidal wave  
of justice can rise up,  
and hope and history rhyme.*

*So hope for a great sea-change  
on the far side of revenge.*

*Believe that a further shore  
is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
and cures and healing wells.*

Believe in yourself. Believe in this religious community,  
working together,  
to find that a further shore is reachable from here.

May it ever be so. Blessed be. AMEN