

Reading: "Within This Instant" Thomas Rhodes

Within the space of an instant, you can make a first impression

show gratitude, kiss, change your mind, wipe away a tear, live, and die.

It only takes a minute to write a note, tell a joke, change a diaper, sing a song, or be still.

Within an hour you can share a meal, run an errand, make a cake, or make love, attend a parade,

or balance your checkbook (Sometimes.)

It takes a day to paint a room, feed a crowd, visit relatives, read a book, rest.

If you commit a year, you can write a book, plant and harvest a crop, become a parent, change your life. And with your lifetime, and with your life, you can, and you will, change the world.

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When I was a little kid, risky behavior was climbing the apple tree in our back yard or walking barefoot on our gravel driveway. As we grow older, what we consider risky varies from person to person, it may depend on our age, our personality, our family situation, or even our income. Some of us may find driving 5 miles over the speed limit is risky enough, others take risks in their recreation like scuba diving, and some of us take one of the greatest risks, hoping our significant other won't notice one more pair of new shoes in the closet.

Then there are those risks that only a handful of people might be willing to take. The kind of risks that declare that life is worth living and joy can be found in the most unlikely of circumstances. There have always been people who have found something in this world worth risking their lives for. We have seen people who save the poor, the hungry, and the sick in times of war and peace even when it endangers their own safety. And there have been those who believed that beauty and love are such a powerful force that they would put themselves in harm's way to take it to others in the world.

Vedran Smailović, is one of those. He was the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera in the early 1990's when Yugoslavia was being broken up into new countries. The citizens of the city of Sarajevo were in an almost constant fight with shelling, snipers and a daily struggle to find food and water. Peace activist and minister Daniel Buttry tells us about the tragedy and triumph that occurred in May of 1992. He writes, "A long line of people had queued up at one of the still-functioning bakeries. A mortar shell fell into the middle of the line, killing 22 people and creating a bloody mess of body parts and rubble. Smajlović lived close to the bakery and was appalled by what he saw as he helped the wounded. He felt powerless as he was neither a politician nor a soldier—he was a musician, who could speak truth to the heart beyond any language.

The musician took his place, dressed in the customary formal black tails and white shirt. He sat on the stool with his cello between his legs. He took the bow and began to play... in a crater where the day before, 22 people had died. Smajlović took his cello to the spot where those waiting for bread had been butchered and began to plaintively play. He played in a daze but in an incredibly evocative way. In spite of the risk, people gathered to listen. When he was finished he packed up his cello and went to a coffee shop. Quickly people came up

to him expressing their appreciation, 'This is what we needed.' Smajlović went back the next day and the next 22 days, one for each person killed. Sniper fire continued around him and mortars still rained down in the neighborhood, but Smajlović never stopped playing.

Then he went to other sites where shells had taken the lives of Sarajevo's citizens. He played there, and he played in graveyards. He played at funerals at no charge, even though the Serbian gunners would target such gatherings. His music was a gift to all hiding in their basements with rubble above their heads, a voice for peace for those daily dodging the bullets of the snipers. As the reports of Smajlović's performances on the shattered streets spread, he became a symbol for peace. A reporter questioned whether he was crazy to play his cello outside in the midst of a war zone. He countered, 'You ask me am I crazy for playing the cello, why do you not ask if they are not crazy for shelling Sarajevo?'"

In a later interview, Smajlović said: "I worry. I am afraid. Are you? It is not enough just to pray, to whatever God, for a better future. It is necessary that we take urgent, healthy action to return ourselves to the beauty of a life without fear." He now lives in Ireland. He says there is nothing left for him in Sarajevo, "Besides," He says, "The war taught me never to go back, only to go forward." Smajlović stood on the edge of risk to bring beauty into a city amidst a pile of rubble. He did the only thing he knew how to do, to play, to help recognize and mourn those who died and to give the living hope; despite the danger he faced in doing so.

There have been individuals like this cellist throughout human history; even in our own religious tradition. Hundreds of years ago, people like us who believed in freedom, reason and tolerance in religion thought challenged the religious majority. They risked being arrested, imprisoned, and even executed. Religious liberals were beaten, chased across Europe, and even burned at the stake because they refused to declare the prevailing orthodox religious beliefs. Our UU ancestors stood on the edge of risk to say that they too believed in beauty and truth, and love. They stood on the edge of risk to say I believe in a loving god that does not give eternal damnation. They stood on the edge of risk to say I believe in interpreting the bible and don't believe I can buy my way into heaven.

Because of this, we are here today. Unitarians and Universalists philosophies survived and risk takers built churches in Europe and eventually the Unitarians and Universalists came to America and established their own denominations here. Those Americans too, stood on the edge of risk as abolitionists, women's rights advocates, and later as civil rights and LGBTQ rights activists.

That tradition has not stopped. Our congregation has taken a stand on issues like housing Equality in BG, marriage equality and Black Lives Matter which has not always made us the most popular church around here. When we support of health care for all, women's right to choose, or transgender equality, we stand at the edge of risk of being disliked, harassed, even threatened by those who disagree with us. I've been getting a 20 plus page packet of bible verses in the mail each month from an anonymous person with specific passages underlined. That is a message to us. Phone calls of disapproval of what we say or do, derogatory letters to the editor, and negative Facebook postings are not uncommon; yet we continue. Like the cellist, it is what we know, it is what we believe... what else could we do?

Liberal religion has always stood on the edge and although we are becoming more mainstream, I am confident that there will always be some issues that will make us stand out. But isn't that why we are here? We are willing to stand in the edge because, like our paper dolls, we have one another's hands to grasp? In the year ahead, we will be taking even more risks. We plan to be more active in social justice, provide lifelong learning opportunities for our members and friends in the community, and we will be encouraging members of the community into to the congregation to share their experiences with us. These are new initiatives and that always carries some risk, but we have each other, and with your continued time and money, our greatest risk will be MVUUC becoming THE Congregation in Northwest Ohio for Progressive Philosophy and Religion. Take a risk with me, lets change the world. May it be so.