

THAT SINKING FEELING

The other day during rush hour my secretary Marcia was driving home on 95. It was the usual rush hour traffic—stop and go—often bumper to bumper. Suddenly, a few cars ahead of her, a dark sedan in the middle lane, stopped cold. Then the doors opened and out came a skateboard followed by its owner. In seconds, he had flopped it down on the pavement and started scooting along the middle of the highway, just as a passenger bus was rumbling down the right hand lane. He was stuck. Marcia, being the good soul that she is, put on her brakes, rolled down her window, and as she motioned for him to cross in front of her into the breakdown lane, she yelled out “God gave you brains! Use them!”

It is amazing what stupid risks people will take! I read recently that through the years fifteen people have attempted to go over Niagara Falls in barrels, boats and what not. Only ten of them have survived. The first such soul was Annie Edison Taylor, who, in 1901, used a four-and-a-half foot long oak barrel. You’d think she’d know better—she was no kid, but rather a sixty-three year old school teacher! She stuffed the barrel with a mattress, pillows and an anvil for ballast. She survived the 170 foot fall over the waters. She is said to have told those who were there as she was fished out of the river: “No one ought ever do that again.” (Quoted by Cecil Adams in “The Straight Dope”, *The Reader’s Guide*, 7-18-03, 2)

Duh!

Some would say such risk taking is all about courage. All about trust and faith.

Poet Amy Hunter would probably disagree. She writes of a college classmate she once had who used to define faith as “stepping out of airplanes, knowing that God will catch you.” To which she would reply “Surely God has better things to do than catch folks who are stupid enough to step out of airplanes.” (“Stepping Out,” *Christian Century*, 7-26-05, 19)

Still, there are times in life when we must be willing to take risks. There are times when we need to leave behind that which is safe, that which is familiar, that which is secure, and step out on faith. As philanthropist John Shedd once said: “A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.” And so too for us Christians. We are not created to play it safe.

We are wise to avoid unnecessary hazards. We are never called to be stupid. God did indeed give us brains! But we can’t eliminate all danger: after all, another fellow who successfully went over Niagara Falls in 1911, a man named Bobby

Leach, died fifteen years later after he slipped on an orange peel walking down the streets of Christchurch in New Zealand!

But all that notwithstanding, we Christians are called to move into unfamiliar territory and to do new things. To think in new ways. To love with new vigor. As followers of Jesus are called to take risks: emotional risks, spiritual risks, social risks, even at times physical risks.

I saw a cartoon recently which depicts a preacher in the pulpit. He has a rather weary look on his face. Gesturing to his congregation he says: “I’ve stopped expecting you to make leaps of faith, but it would be nice to see a hop now and then. (Doug Hall, *The Best Cartoons from Leadership Journal, Volume I*)

OK—so you’ve decided to hop—maybe you’re even ready to take a leap! However you choose to step out in faith, though, the risks may seem overwhelming. So what are you to do? How can you go about answering God’s call to new challenges? Fortunately, our lesson from Matthew provides a helpful approach.

Jesus and the disciples have just finished feeding the five thousand. It’s been a long day, and Jesus wants some time to himself. So he tells the disciples to get in the boat and head back towards home. Meanwhile, after he spends some time on the mountain in prayer, he’ll head back on foot. He’ll meet them later on the other side of Galilee.

By the time Jesus comes down from the mountain, though, conditions have changed. The disciples are far from shore, and a storm has taken hold. The wind and the waves are tossing them to and fro. They are struggling to maintain control of their boat—and they are very frightened.

Suddenly they see what they think at first is a ghost making its way across the water—coming right at them. The natural world is frightening enough at the moment. Contending with the supernatural is more than they can bear. They start to panic. Some of them scream in fear.

“Take heart,” says the supposed ghost, “it’s just me—Jesus!”

Peter, rubbing his eyes, wants to be sure. “If it’s really you, master, prove it! Command me to come to you over the waters!”

Jesus calls his bluff. “Come!” he says.

Peter, ever impetuous, jumps over the side and starts towards Jesus. And all goes well, until Peter is distracted by the raging storm, takes his eyes off Jesus, and stares at the waves lashing at his feet. In great fear, he starts to sink.

Fearing for his very life, he cries, “Help!”

And Jesus, probably shaking his head, pulls him up and takes him to the boat.

Frankly, this is another one of those gospel stories that provokes all sorts of questions. It seems totally contrary to our understandings of how things work: people just don't walk on water! But while this story invites us to take a risk, to take a leap of faith, that leap doesn't mean you have to set aside reason. As William Sloane Coffin writes: "There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith, for faith is not believing without proof, but trusting without reservation." (*Credo*, 8) . That leap isn't believing the story itself really happened. You may or may not accept it as an historical account. No the leap of faith is what we do as a result of hearing the story For in the end, you don't need to be a literalist to learn from this story about winds and waves and wavering faith.

Think again about the story itself, and note what Peter does after he spots Jesus. First, he makes sure that he is seeing things clearly. "If it's really you," he says. Secondly, when he has clarified that it really is Jesus, and he knows what Jesus bids him do, he does it. He takes action. Third, he stays afloat as long as he keeps his eyes on Jesus, as long as he maintains his focus on the goal. Finally, when he realizes he is in trouble, when he gets that sinking feeling, he asks for help.

So how can you step out of the safety of our own boats? How can you take the necessary risks that come with following Jesus? How can you leap, or at least hop, in faith?

First, clarify your vision.

Second, take the necessary action.

Third, maintain your focus.

Fourth, when you need help, ask for it.

Clarify vision. Take action. Maintain focus. Ask for help.

We saw how this can work this past week as Discovery astronaut Steve Robinson made repairs on the underbelly of the shuttle.

Robinson has been taking risks all his life. At fourteen he took his first flying lessons. At fifteen he built a hang glider and used it to jump off a cliff. That, he recently said, was a "foolhardy" risk. But not flying aboard the Discovery. A risk, yes, but anything but foolhardy.

And this week, as he prepared to take his space walk to repair the ever touchy system of gap fillers and tiles, the risk level increased dramatically.

But Robinson was ready. He knew the reasons he was going where no one had ever gone before. He understood it had life and death implications—if the protruding gap fillers weren't removed the heat on the orbiter's return could become unbearable, could kill the crew. He practiced with the tools he would use. He had trained on the equipment that would bring him around to the underside of the ship. He knew the what, why and how of what he was doing. He had clarified his vision.

And then at the right time, he took action. He did not falter in stepping out of the space craft and into the darkness of space. And he was decisive as he carried out his task. He took the necessary actions.

And during it all, he remained focused. One misstep and he could have damaged the tiles so necessary to protect the crew on reentry. But as he said in a television interview the next day, "As I approached the belly of the shuttle I was all eyes." (*The Today Show*, NBC-TV, 8-4-05) Steve Robinson maintained his focus.

And he asked for help. And made full use of that help. Not only from his crewmates, but also from folks here on the ground who simulated the task he was going to undertake by doing it underwater and sharing the results with him.

Steve Robinson clarified his vision; took action; maintained his focus and asked for help. And as a result the risks paid off. His efforts were successful. The shuttle was repaired.

If you take a close look you can find endless examples of how this principle works.

Martin Luther King had as clear a vision as any American has ever had. "I have a dream," he told us in Washington on that August day long ago.

He took action—risk-filled action. He organized and marched and spoke, despite being jailed, despite being stabbed, despite having his home bombed.

He maintained focus: keep your eyes on the prize, he said again and again.

And he asked for help: help from God as he prayed every day, and help from countless others, white, black, Christian, Jew, northerner and southerner alike.

And as a result our nation is a different place today, and little black children and little white children can legally go to school together, play together, grow up to vote and work together.

Or Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity, who, despite his current difficulties, clarified his vision and stated it simply: "a decent house" for everyone.

He took action, he was a millionaire who literally sold his possessions and left his cushy suburban life behind to work to help create affordable housing for the poor.

He maintained focus, he could have addressed a wide variety of issues, but he saw his calling was all about housing.

And he relied on God and the help of the famous and the unknown alike. Thousands upon thousands of hands have swung Habitat hammers all around the world.

And as a result, hundreds of thousand of folks now live in good, solid homes all around the globe.

Or Margaret Sanger. An Irish Catholic woman of the last century, Sanger saw more clearly than most that being able to have a say over one's reproductive life made all the difference in a woman's health and well-being. She saw that having safe, reliable and legal birth control could literally save a woman's life in a day and age when death during childbirth was not at all uncommon.

So she took action. She spoke. She wrote. She taught women about sexuality. She opened a clinic. And she was often arrested.

But she maintained her focus. She continued to work to overturn outdated ideas and dangerous laws so that women could take control over their own reproductive health.

And she relied on the help of others: physicians, sympathetic lawmakers, and countless women devoted to the cause.

And today, ours is a nation where women can choose how and when to have children. And they can do it safely.

Most of us will not be called to grand visions like that of King or Fuller or Sanger. More than likely none of us here will ever walk on water—or even in space. We won't face those kinds of risks.

But we all face risks.

If we are children, we face the risks of growing up and taking responsibility for ourselves. If we are young adults we face the risks of choosing careers and lifetime partners. If we are parents, we face the risks of letting go of our children. If we are seniors, we face the risks of growing old. And as Christians, no matter what our age, we face the risks associated with being followers of Jesus, especially the risk of loving not just our friends and families, but our enemies as well.

We can try to deny or forestall the risks we face. We can refuse to engage them. But we weren't built for that—no more than boats are built to stay in the harbor. No more than planes are built to stay in hangars. No more than shuttles are built to

stay on the ground. You and I were built to sail, to fly, to reach for the stars. You and I were built to love--and that is always a risky proposition.

But our story from Matthew offers a way to take those risks: clarify vision, take action, maintain focus, ask for help. And remember this: Jesus always stands ready to come to our aid. For both in word and in deed, he shows us best how to take the risks of life. He shows us best how to love.

**Amen
John H. Danner**