

Risking Aliveness (Matt. 25.14-30)

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Three summers ago, most major news sources in America reported the death of a French philosopher and psychoanalyst named (and I need you to *literally* pardon my French) Anne Dufourmantelle. Philosophers sometimes still achieve rock star status in France, I'm told. But that's not the case in our country. And the death of this one would almost certainly have gone unnoticed if not for a touching, if heartbreaking, irony in its circumstances.

Anne Dufourmantelle died attempting to rescue two children from drowning in the Gulf of Saint Tropez. She had also written a book titled, "In Praise of Risk." Because she had come to believe that embracing risk is essential to a full and meaningful life. The headlines wrote themselves. "Philosopher Who Praised Risk Died Trying to Save Children From Drowning," went one.

Now, Ms. Dufourmantelle didn't run the bulls at Pamplona or bungee jump or climb Mont Blanc without ropes. She didn't go out looking for risky things to do. She had simply noticed that there is a risk inherent to being alive that we need to come to terms with. In fact, she once said, "The usual expression is to say, 'I risk *my* life', but perhaps one should say, 'I risk life'. To be entirely alive is a risk, and few people are. There are many zombies, undead, lives attenuated by the 'disease of death' as Kierkegaard called it."

The story travelled the world, not because her death showed us how foolhardy her interest in risk had been, but because something within us knows that Anne Dufourmantelle was very much among the fully alive when she leapt into the sea that afternoon in Saint Tropez.

The parable of the talents is often understood in terms of...well...talents. And there's good reason for this. As you probably know, a talent was a unit of money in Jesus's time. But by about the 13th century the word "talent" had come to mean "gifts" or "skills" in English and several other languages as well. And this new meaning of the word arose directly from an interpretation of this parable. But I increasingly find this understanding of the story, if not entirely wrong, much too small. To limit the parable's reach to what we can do misses something more essential in what drives it. It actually misses what drives it so powerfully that 13 centuries later it would add a word to a language that hadn't been invented when Jesus spoke it into being.

And something of what it misses is captured fairly directly, by my lights, in the death of a philosopher of risk, who probably would be alive today if her skill as a swimmer were greater. The parable comes so much more alive for me if Jesus wasn't talking essentially about your ability as a butcher or a baker or a candlestick maker, although it's all well and good to do what you do to the glory of God. The parable comes to life when we see Jesus was talking about embracing a risk inherent in being fully alive.

There is a deep paradox in the way of Jesus. At its heart, it is a way of grace over law, a way of unconditional love and radical acceptance. But he also tells us this way will cost us everything, beginning with our impulses toward self-preservation and our need for security above all else. The liberating, world healing, abundant life of Jesus demands making our peace with these risky lives we've been given, and not giving them over to fear. Or, as Marilynne Robinson puts it, "Fear is not a Christian habit of mind."

This doesn't mean Jesus was never afraid, or that Christians should never be. In fact, the most vivid image of a person afraid, not just in the Bible, but maybe in all the world's literature, is Jesus himself, sweating blood in the garden. It's not that Jesus never experienced fear. It's that he refused to use it as means of control over others. And he refused to let it control who he was and how he lived and thought and related to other people.

Throughout his life and his teachings, Jesus showed us what it looks like to live a life not driven by the fears that have long driven so much of the world. Fear of the outcasts and the unclean, which is fear of whoever makes you shiver or cringe or turn away in disgust. Fear of not having enough, and therefore burying our talents in the ground, or worrying today about tomorrow, or building barns to store up what won't last, or holding on tightly to what becomes meaningful only as it's given away. Fear even of the power of the empire and its violent ways, even if it takes your life away in the end.

Read the stories he told, the statements he made. Look at the whole arc of his life and his death, and you see someone fully, vibrantly, divinely alive in a risky and dangerous world.

And so, Anne Dufourmantelle was just expanding on the 2,000 year old insights of Jesus when she said the enemy of a right relationship with risk is an obsession with security. In part, because the idea of absolute security, or zero risk, is a fantasy. But she also named that the persistent attention we give to security seems to *generate* fear rather than assuage it. Especially when our fears are generalized and vague. Like the threat of a random terrorist attack, which is meant to give us a sense of continuous danger.

When there is a real but specific threat that needs to be faced, like the Blitz was for Londoners during WWII, human communities have great capacity for action and cooperation, for dedication to one another, and a great incentive to become part of something larger than oneself. But this doesn't happen when we walk around in a generalized sense of continuous danger. We shrink back into destructive habits of self protection as our imaginations fixate on the infinite possibility of threat, often creating images of the threatening one who is unlike us, but coming to get us. And when our media and politicians use generalized fears about groups or horrific events in order to command our attention, and thus exercise a potent form of power and control over us, it does deep and lasting damage, not only to us as individuals, but as a society. Fear of liberals or conservatives, fear of evangelical Christians or atheists, fear of brown immigrants or rural whites or Black people who live in cities. None of these fears provide the security they promise.

And so we see that the parable of the talents is not a tidy little one-off self-help story. Jesus lived in a radical freedom from the forces of his world that presented themselves as providers of security, but, in fact, ruled through threats and fear and dividing people from one another. The parable of the talents is another way in to this radical essence of who Jesus was. Which means it is another way in to the radical essence of who you and I were made to be as well. Like Jesus, we're not made to bury our lives in fear of the risk of losing them.

But the way he models for us is not as a chest thumping conqueror of one's fears, which is more likely the image of someone in the grip of by their dark and unfaced fears than of real bravery. As his parable of the talents and that dark night in the garden make clear, the way Jesus models is facing the risk inherent to our lives truthfully and even vulnerably. As our heroic philosopher put it, "It may be possible to tame fear by welcoming it. When one admits his fear, his finitude, a confidence can be reborn from this vulnerability."

Among Anne Dufourmantelle's other books were one on hospitality, written with the great Jacques Derrida. And another, translated into English soon after her death, was titled *Power of Gentleness*. These subjects strike me as telling and wise, if we take seriously the way of Jesus. Because they are turns outward, not inward, aren't they? Hospitality and gentleness have meaning only in relation to other people. Maybe you can be brave all by yourself as you step off a cliff strapped to your hang glider. But hospitality and gentleness involve people besides yourself. They're meaningless and worthless buried in your solitary heart like a talent in the ground.

In the end, Jesus wasn't forming fearless individuals. He was forming a community in which our fears can be honestly faced and vulnerably held and, only then, begin to lose their sway over us, opening another way to be alive in the world. Another way that makes space for a gentleness and a hospitality that allows the essence of who you are and who I am not to be buried in the ground of our individual lives, but given away, like talents perhaps, whether five or two or one, that we've been entrusted with by someone who's gone off on a journey. Given away to a world in which the one lack we know God has called you to fill is the person God has made you to become.