

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Covenant Group Meeting
VOLUNTARY RISK OF BODILY HARM
Les Grady, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson, SC, January 2009

OPENING WORDS:

Mountaineering, for many participants, is an exercise in personal examination, or a reboot from the daily grind. For others, it's an existential look at life via the raw medium of a mountain peak, where mind games often overshadow the physicality of the pursuit. (From <http://thegearjunkie.com/k2-the-play>)

CHECK-IN

FOCUS

K2 - THE STORY: The setting is an icy ledge high up on K2, the world's second highest mountain. Two climbers, Taylor and Harold, are stranded at 27,000 feet, and Harold has suffered a broken leg in their precipitous descent. They have also lost one of their ropes, and the remaining one is neither long enough nor strong enough to serve as a sling to lower Harold to the next ledge. As Taylor climbs back up the mountain in an attempt to recover the other rope the two men keep up a running conversation that gradually shades into an absorbing discussion of the meaning and value of life. Taylor, an arch-conservative, womanizing assistant district attorney, sees personal gratification as the focus of existence, while Harold, a physicist, has found an almost mystic satisfaction in his love for his wife and young son. When Taylor's attempts to retrieve the second rope fail, and the desperation of their situation can no longer be denied, it is, finally, the bond between the two men that is put to the test as Harold, in a scene of shattering emotional impact, calmly but firmly orders Taylor to save himself—to salvage the one life that can be saved, and to live on for both of them. (Adapted from <http://www.dramatists.com/cgi-bin/db/single.asp?key=1249>)

The play *K2*, by Patrick Meyers, uses mountain climbing as a metaphor to explore a deeper theme: the recognition that human beings are free to choose whether to place themselves in harm's way. Some times people do so for purely personal (selfish?) reasons. For example, Charles S. Houston, the leader of a K2 expedition in 1953 speaks of the "great beauty of clear cold air," of "colors beyond the ordinary," of "the lure of unknown regions beyond the rim of experience" - and, most of all, of leaving behind the inessentials of existence to arrive at "the core of life itself." Other times, people do so for altruistic (selfless?) reasons: a firefighter entering a burning building to save a trapped person; a backcountry rescue team member making a dangerous descent on a mountain face to prepare an injured climber to be hoisted to safety; a rescue diver entering a dangerous hydraulic in a mountain stream to retrieve the body of a drowned kayaker. The question to be addressed tonight is whether there is a moral or ethical difference between the personal and the altruistic choice to put one's self in harm's way. Is one selfish and the other selfless, or are there aspects of both in either choice?

Discussion:

Given the fact that 25% of the people who have attempted the summit of K2 have been killed in the attempt, is there a moral or ethical difference between the decisions of Harold and Taylor to attempt to climb the mountain?

If Harold and Taylor had been on a rescue mission, rather than on a strictly personal pursuit, when they became stranded, would that change the moral or ethical nature of their choices?

Inherent in these questions is the broader question of whether one is truly free to choose whether to place one's self in harm's way, or whether the relationships in one's life alter the freedom of that choice?

Also inherent in the questions is the issue (exclusive of war where society itself is at risk) of the circumstances under which society has the right to ask members to risk their lives. For example, is there a difference between asking a firefighter to rescue a living person from a burning building versus asking a diver to retrieve a body from an extremely dangerous hydraulic in a mountain stream, as was necessary a few years ago on the Chattooga River? In the preceding example, are there differences for the individual to consider in the two situations when deciding to put one's self at risk?

Just how free are we in making decisions about our lives?

Finally, what forces drive some people (usually, but not always men) to pursue extreme adventures such as mountaineering?

CLOSING WORDS

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:

To love what is mortal;

To hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;

And, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

Mary Oliver

(From *Singing the Living Tradition*)