

Certainty

By Michael Irwin

Certainty. The feeling that things can be counted on. The absence of risk.

Risk. The degree to which certainty can not be counted upon.

When we are babies we feel risk if we are uncomfortable, like being cold, hungry, or alone. Those conditions can be fatal and the risk is high. As we age we learn to take control of our lives. We seek to minimize risk. But at all ages we continue to learn what is risky and what is less risky, that is, safe. When it comes to most things, most people believe that they reduce risk so much that they do not see living as dangerous. People grow up and gain competence and confidence. Nevertheless, the sense that danger is present, that the risk of harm or death is possible, does not go away. None of us ever outgrow assessing risk to some degree. Risk never leaves us alone. It nags us.

As our civilization become more sophisticated and complex, risks are dealt with, individually and collectively, better and better. Our confidence increases, reinforced by our increasing knowledge. But risk never goes away. In fact, as we age, our sense of risk increases.

Allaying our fears in the face of nagging risk has, in the past, made necessary the use of magic, ritual, charlatans, belief systems, etc.; dozens of behaviours that are supposed to keep risk at bay. One solution to our insecurity is to look to the successful behaviour and confident beliefs of others who seem more sure than we are, as a means of quietening our doubts. So we replaced shamans with doctors, handymen with engineers, magic with science while still seeking those wiser than ourselves to advise us on our stubbornly recalcitrant doubts and fears about the unknown. These authorities are like our parents who soothed our fears and doubts when we were children with incomprehensible explanations and practices. We imbue them with wisdom and give them our trust. They seem above risk.

The problem is that there is no solution to the problem of risk. Some of us die when being cared for by doctors. Sometimes the rabbit's foot doesn't prevent falling down the stairs. Sometimes bridges fall down. Sometimes scientists admit that they don't know something. Even these 'wise' ones disappoint because we incorrectly assumed they knew everything. Then the emotion of a yawning sinkhole opens up under us as our control slips away and we realize that we are still at the mercy of risk. We remember what it was to be a child in need of help while realizing that, because we are not children, help is not at hand. We realize, in fact, that we are grownups and have to live with risk. But certainty has gone. We can't let that happen!

In the past, all but a few turned to religion because it gave us certainty. We needed that certainty so badly that we turned religion into the purveyor of Truth. It even salved our ultimate risk, the fear of dying, by explaining the afterlife. Religious belief was not casual. It

admitted of no doubt. Doubt let in risk. We supported our denial of risk by elevating beliefs into unchallengeable doctrines. We reinforced the need to keep doubts at bay by routine rituals, by the collective affirmations of the Truth, by making beliefs more solid by sharing them through preaching and then disseminating them by first writing them down and then printing and distributing sacred books. By surrounding ourselves with others who shared our beliefs, and by endlessly insisting that others join us in reaffirming doctrine, we created communities that continually reflected back Truth that was defined as obvious but that still harboured occasional lingering doubts spurring us on to reinforce the doctrines again...and again.

Two signature words in Subud are surrender and submission. These words, and others like them, are used to describe part of the technique of the latihan. From a risk point of view, they are dangerous words. Surrender to what? Submission to what? They represent a commitment to knowing nothing, the ultimate attitude of doubt. To make those states more palatable in the risky world, they were coupled with a word representing an indefinable something into which each individual could pour whatever content he or she wanted. No surprise. The word is God. So, 'surrender to God', and 'submit to God'.

From the moment of the acceptance of those phrases, what followed, in a sea of proscribed doubt, was a compensatory belief structure. The proscription was not imposed. It became necessary because to deny it was too risky. Everything was in place for a new religion. There was material to create ritual, not just in observance but also in social gatherings; material to write and disseminate, containing comforting phrases to repeat; community to reflect back conviction, complete with thought control driving out both doubt and those with the doubts. 'Enforced' harmony became the bedrock of a theocracy, a mini-religion, in some aspects, a cult. Subud did not have to be that way, but for those who remained faithful it became liberating. They didn't have to worry any more.

The latihan itself is an activity that produces, in those for whom it works, experiences. Those experiences, like all experiences, are integrated into the story of each participant. The results of those experiences are defined by the non-latihan experiences of each individual. Unfortunately, all people, to a greater or lesser degree, fear risk and seek certainty. Latihan or no latihan, the psychology of the need for certainty and the fear of risk has, through the need for external support, turned social relationships into a mutually supportive network. What was, and is, needed is for individuals participating in the latihan to become aware that this result is just a default state for all human beings who do not objectively observe themselves - that is, pay attention. It is the lazy state, the comfortable state...and yes...a state that the latihan, itself, can alter. The latihan is introduced to newcomers as surrendering or submitting. But it is also introduced with the idea of objectively watching, observing, paying attention to what happens when surrender is successful, even briefly. Amazingly, unbidden, the body moves!

Then what happens? Through the advised regular attendance at latihan, the participants get used to experiencing involuntary muscle movements including those of the voice box. The latihan becomes routinized. It is no longer even slightly frightening. The rest of life continues

to generate fears in a world of risk. The latihan experience becomes defined as peaceful, as a refuge, as safe where it once, while exciting, was, well, a bit scary. The need for paying attention to it is reduced and becomes selective, revelling increasingly in the calming bits. Only the wanted experience is remembered, not the process, the necessity of paying quiet attention to all the involuntary experiences.

The continuing lesson of the latihan is the first one learned. Let go and watch. Then, don't forget to keep watching. The movement of the body is just a metaphor for the more extensive inner exploration. This movement of the body is always there at the start of each latihan as the first lesson to remind the participant that that attention must be maintained throughout every latihan. That is hard to do. Balancing surrender and paying attention is hard work. But then, the latihan is hard.

For those who have found a salve for the fear of risk in the latihan, the trappings of a new religion become comforting and worth protecting. For those who pay attention there are also rewards, but they are hard won, highly individual and sometimes frightening.

It is difficult for these two sets of people to live together in one organization.