

Chance / Probability--UUFVB Covenant Groups—April 2015

Chalice Lighting

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings,
but connected, in mystery and miracle,
to the universe, to this community and to each other.

Check-in: How is your spirit right now?

Opening Reading

By definition, taking a chance means not being in control. Reasonable chances offer reasonable amounts of control. Risky chances offer far less control. But of course, the paradox is that not taking chances doesn't actually give us more control at all. It just keeps us from getting what we want. We are often confused about when, or whether, to take chances. Risk, probability, chance, coincidence—they play a significant role in the way we make decisions about many aspects of our lives--health, education, relationships, and money. But where does the basic data come from on which we rely to make our decisions? How does the brain find patterns and where can these patterns take us? When should we ditch the data and go with our gut? (www.worldsciencefestival.com," The Illusion of Certainly.")

Topic Exploration

It is our organic drive as human beings to rationalize what occurs around us. But that is always, to a great degree, subjective, so we are bound and limited by our awareness and understanding of the related facts. The human dimension is the greatest variable of all.

A mistaken notion is the idea that an event is more or less likely to occur because it has or has not happened recently. The idea that the odds of an event increase or decrease depending on recent occurrences of the event is called the gambler's fallacy. For example, if in a coin toss 44 heads came up in the first 100 tosses, the coin would not develop a bias towards the tails in order to catch up! That's what is at the root of such ideas as "her luck has run out" and "he is due." That does not happen. For what it's worth, a good streak doesn't jinx you, and a bad one, unfortunately, does not mean better luck is in store." (Leonard Mlodinow, *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives*)

Questions / Sharing

1. What decisions have you made recently that involved taking a chance?
2. Is taking risks easy or difficult for you? How much of your life is based on chance?
3. How do you figure out the probability that you will make the right decision?
4. Is your willingness to take a chance governed by the subject area—for example, finances, relationships, purchases—describe your different attitudes.
5. Have you taken a significant chance that you later regretted?

Chance and Religion

In life, we begin with conditions that are pure chance, and not of our choosing. We do not choose the genes that predispose us toward traits that increase our chance of success in life. We do not choose our parents, neighborhoods, school systems or countries with their attendant economic and social systems that either allow or inhibit our eventual success. Some of us are lucky and some not so lucky in this initial game of chance.

"Now, many people feel uncomfortable with the idea that some people are dealt extremely fortunate or unfortunate hands when they were born. So people have devised emotional defense

mechanisms to shield them from their distress about this unfairness. The doctrine of reincarnation conveniently explains that the fortunate or misfortunate nature of our dealt hand is a reward or punishment for choices made in a previous lifetime, and/or that people actively choose the conditions of their birth in order to make spiritual progress. The doctrine of heaven and hell reassures people that birth into a difficult life is just an infinitely small inconvenience, because eternal bliss will compensate for the suffering in a person's mortal life." (John A. Johnson, Ph.D., "Life as Poker," [www.psychologytoday.com/](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cui-bono) blog/cui bono)

4. What do you think of Johnson's suggestion that religion is a "defense mechanism" to deal with the chance and inherent inequality of our initial condition?

Closing Reading

Chance pushes the world. Knowing how to use chance enhances your life. Accepting chance's power is just the first step. The real fun comes from using chance wisely. Which you're built to do—from the ground up. ([www.psychologytoday.com/](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/chance-and-survival) blog "Chance and Survival")

Extinguish the Chalice

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Housekeeping