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Opinion

In Our View

Ethics of risk

"Risk" is a reality that impresses itself upon us from time to time under a variety of conditions, and recently the risk inherent in just being alive in the world today seems particularly poignant.

Last week's terrorist bombing of a TWA jetliner over Greece, plummeting four Americans to their deaths; word that the U.S. will conduct another nuclear-weapons test on Tuesday, likely forcing the Soviets to resume testing as well; and news of the building of a Libyan base capable of guarding the disputed waters of the Gulf of Sidra with long-range surface-to-air missiles — all these developments emphasize the unpredictable elements of risk that now define the global situation from one day to the next.

It is as if absolute risk — the very real possibility of death — looms everywhere around us, with terrorism confining the limits of travel from one continent to another, nuclear cataclysm defining the horizons of civilization and survival.

But there is another kind of risk that an increasing number of people are beginning to think and talk about — the risk of resisting, rather than succumbing to, death in all its manifestations — physical, spiritual, emotional and moral.

Harvard theologian Sharon Welch describes this "ethic of risk" as a struggle characterized by "defiance — sheer holy boldness" against structures of power, governments and ideologies that appear overwhelming in their capacity to dehumanize and devastate life. Within the context of that resistance, she maintains, arise alternative ways of thinking about power and new signs of hope for the life of each individual and the planet as well.

Responsible action, according to Welch, does not guarantee that a specific, desired end will be reached but instead creates a climate for more and different forms of resistance — a network of self-generating change, spreading out from individuals and their communities of struggle.

"The ethic of risk is propelled by the equally vital recognition that to stop resisting, even when success is unimaginable, is to die," Welch writes. "The death that is experienced by those who turn from rage, who forego resistance, is . . . real. It is the death of the imagination, the death of caring, the death of the ability to love.

"For if we cease resisting, we lose the ability to imagine a world that is any different from that of the present, we lose the ability to imagine . . . ways of sustaining each other in the long struggle for justice. We lose the ability to care, to love life in all its forms. We cannot numb our pain at the degradation of life without numbing our joy at its abundance."

