

I don't think that there is any sport on this earth that is filled with more contrariness, or counter-intuitive actions, than skiing! First, depending on where you live, you spend hours driving up treacherous, icy, slick, snowy mountain roads to "get away from it all" -- only to join thousands of others involved in the same great quest. Then, instead of standing in line like you would for a ride at a theme park, you are standing in line at a chair lift. Finally, after spending all that time driving up the mountain, and being chair-lifted up to the top of your chosen trail, you finally reach your destination only to then turn around and fly down the mountain as fast as you possibly can.

There is also the whole issue of downhill skiing being an outside winter sport. In order to properly enjoy the bracing chill of the frosty air, and freezing snow, you spend a gargantuan amount of money on high-tech, lightweight, waterproof, wind proof, glow-in-the-dark clothing. As far as your skin is concerned, while you're schussing down the slopes you might as well be sitting at home in your living room.

All of these are basically counter-intuitive actions. Following them may require us to go against other rules, already established by our common sense. And yet as we think of the counter-intuitiveness of skiing, perhaps we can be reminded there was an ancient Hebrew patriarch who would have made a terrific skier. Despite his age, despite his desert location, and despite the fact that the only fields of white he most likely ever saw on the mountains around him were flocks of sheep, Abram had everything going for him to take off down the slopes of life. Abram's overwhelming trust in God's Word, his faith in God's dream, his conviction in God's divinely established covenant, allowed him to disregard what his common sense told him. Thus he "believed in the Lord!"

Common sense told Abram that he and Sarai were not going to have any children. But God's promise said something else. Common sense told Abram that

he was a desert herdsman, not the father of a nation. But God's promise said something else. Common sense told Abram that the divine God of the universe couldn't be held accountable by any human-devised contractual agreement. But God's promise, and the covenant he offered, said something else. Common sense told Abram that there was "no such thing as a free lunch" -- so he must be expected to pay for the land that he, and his ancestors, would someday possess. But God's promise said something else.

How many of us today could make the same leap of faith that Abram took? How many of us today could disregard our own voice of reason and listen to God's astounding voice of promise? When God confronts you with the incredible, rather than the predictable, what is your first reaction? Can you "hit the slopes of life" with Abram? Or are you content to stay inside, next to the fire, wondering about the sanity of all those red-cheeked, runny-nosed, windblown skiers who stagger in to the ski lodge at the end of a long, exhilarating day of lunatic behavior?

This evening let's test your body, and your spirit's reaction, to what I like to call the "four rules of soul skiing." And as we think about these rules it might be good for you to consider whether or not, at this very moment, your soul is crawling through life, or is it skiing through life?

Now the first rule that should be followed anytime we soul ski is that we must expect the unexpected, and be prepared for the unknown. Preparing for the unknown is kind of an oxymoron right? Doesn't the mere fact that something can come at us, out of nowhere, mean that we have no way of preparing for it? Perhaps, perhaps not, but you might say that we can "prepare" ourselves by always keeping our eyes, our minds, and our hearts open to the surprises of God's Spirit.

For the wandering nomad and shepherd Abram, the unexpected came to him first as a vision and conversation with God. God stunned the childless Abram with a night-sky dream and star vision of his uncountable offspring. Abram's spirit was

"prepared" for the unexpected and he "believed the Lord." Later in the grimmest of circumstances, when God demands the ultimate sacrifice of Abram and Sarai, they are still prepared for unexpected divine demands and their faith never wavers.

The second rule probably isn't all that surprising to those of us who are experienced skiers. When you ski, you need to go fairly fast. If you want to be out of control when you are skiing, try inching down the slope at a snail's pace. Without speed, you lose your ability to maneuver, you have no agility, and you cannot negotiate a curve, or cut away from running over another skier. Speed on the slopes is safe, as long as you don't panic, and as long as you keep doing all the things you know are right.

When God said "move" to Abram, the quiet, unassuming shepherd took off. Without questioning why his move was necessary, without agonizing over all its implications, Abram simply responded to God's command to "move it." And although common sense demands we slow down, stay at home, play it safe, and keep in control; crazy intuitive soul skiers get their wisdom from a Lewis Carroll perspective who writes in his book, *Through the Looking Glass* -- "It takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to go somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast." Especially in this hectic, busy, ever changing, and crazy paced world we live in these days, we must be prepared to go fast! Who was it who said, "If you're not running, you're going to get run over?"

Abram, fueled by his belief and trust in God's covenant, went about those 25 years between the promise of having offspring, and the day of Isaac's arrival filled with an active, faith. He left his homeland and began to travel across the land, enduring and escaping famine, the Pharaoh of Egypt, and family fights. His quiet, shepherding existence was transformed into a life packed with danger and excitement - marked by experiences of great evil and great goodness. The pace, the purpose, and the productivity of Abram's life took on new intensity and vigor and

drive because he continued to move forward, which can help us remember the third rule.

The third rule is that, whenever you ski, you must face forward, and also fall forward. Of course if you end up falling, you will probably try to do so with as much grace as possible. Obviously, this means not landing flat on your face if you can help it. But all your egotistical instincts to look good, and not make a fool of yourself, will do you a disservice if you try **NOT** to fall on your face when taking a spill while skiing.

If you fall backward, you risk jamming a pole or a ski into the snow and flipping yourself into some bone-snapping position. If you fall sideways, you risk unhappy relationships with your knee cartilage and ligaments. But if you fall reaching forward, you fall right on your face, and often times you simply snowplow safely to a stop. Falling forward makes it possible for us to get up and get going again, in as brief a time as possible.

Abram fell forward onto his face often, and with real flair. After receiving no less than a divine promise, and witnessing Yahweh cutting a covenant with him, Abram later listens to his wife Sarai and fathers his son Ishmael by Hagar, her slave-woman, in an attempt to assure himself a progeny. Abram came to doubt the promise of God. But Abram followed up this trespass by cutting another covenant with God later in chapter 17, and while renewing his faith in both the covenant process and promise, he and his wife are given new names. Sarai, becomes Sarah, Abram, becomes Abraham. You might even say that the two of them discovered that if they fell, and fell forward, they would fall into the arms of God.

The final rule we should seek to follow, whenever we soul ski, is that we should always keep our weight on the downhill ski. Leaning back into the mountain just isn't a good idea. The surly slope-side will be all too happy to trip you up, slow you down, and keep you fighting to maintain your balance. But when

you keep your weight downhill, you will find yourself free-flowing down the mountainside with the force of gravity suddenly on your side.

Abraham learned to shift his weight and realign his priorities, according to the divine directions given to him by God. Despite the confusing plethora of kings and city-rulers that populated the territory that Abraham dwelt in, he never got entangled in petty border skirmishes, but became a respected figure among the residents of the land. He was always the "resident alien"-- the outsider continually present but removed from political snafus. Abraham remained tied to his covenant with God amid the diverse political and economic relationships he established with Canaan's inhabitants.

One more thing about Abraham. Abraham did not merely know the rules of soul-skiing, or have them memorized by heart, he actually put them into practice! And like our great ancestor of the faith, who didn't always let common sense get the best of him, you'll never know if these rules will work for you if you don't try them out for yourself. Your soul will only discover if these rules work, if you follow them, and put them into practice, as you ski down this mountain we call life! After a while, when you've gone on enough retreats, and have read as many self-help books as you can stand, there comes a point when there isn't any way to get more out of the adventure of life than to give soul-skiing a try. And with God's' help, it will be worth the risk. Thanks be to God. Amen.