

We are in a new month, which means we have a new theological theme to sink our teeth into. Our new theme is thresholds. Later in the month we've got a sermon coming up by Bob about the end of life—an important threshold time that has been on all of our minds more than usual since the pandemic began. We've got a sermon coming up by Jane, about ending her internship at First Unitarian and entering into the next phase of her ministry. That's another kind of threshold. And on the last Sunday, I'll preach on exit strategies, because every threshold is both an entrance and an exit.

Today, we begin by thinking about what thresholds are, and why they are suitable as a theological theme at all.

The word threshold comes from somewhat obscure roots, but the “thresh” part of threshold most likely refers to something you must step on or over to pass through, specifically, the wood or stone or other material that lies across at the bottom of a doorway. A physical threshold. To thresh, in the old-fashioned sense, is to tread or trample. That's why in the reading this morning, David Breeden calls thresholds a place “for stamping and stomping.”

We commonly think of doorways and other entryways as thresholds even when they don't have anything going horizontally across the bottom.

Physical thresholds (like doorways) are just regular, everyday things. We pass through them more times than we can probably count on an average day, even with a stay at home order in place. But they represent more than meets the eye, in our psyches. And even when they are being regular old doorways, they have a strange kind of power in us.

A team of researchers at the University of Notre Dame has been exploring a curious phenomenon called “the doorway effect.” I am sure you have experienced it.

It's something like this. Let's say you're in your kitchen, preparing a snack. Cucumber slices sprinkled with rice vinegar and seaweed. Or maybe it's a bunch of Doritos with queso. To quote the poet Mary Oliver, “You do not have to be good.” You're in the kitchen, preparing a snack. But you realize you left your favorite plate in the bedroom. So you leave the kitchen to get it. You're trying to remember the rest of that Mary Oliver poem as you go. And then, as you enter your bedroom, you find yourself just standing there wondering what the heck you were doing.

Or let's say you're wrapping up a gift for a friend in the living room. You need a pen to write a little note. But when you pass through the doorway into the kitchen, where there's a drawer with pens, you can't remember what you were looking for. You draw a blank.

You wonder if you should be worried about your cognitive functioning. Is it Alzheimers? But I'll tell you what: don't worry about it. What happened is that walking through a

doorway made you forget.¹ That's really a thing. The researchers at Notre Dame have conducted multiple experiments that demonstrate it. They even tried it virtually. People played a video game in which they were supposed to take something from one room to another, and that study also confirmed the doorway effect: when the game included a doorway, a significant number of people forgot what they were "carrying."

In the Jewish tradition there is a practice that long predates that research by thousands of years, but on a spiritual level it seems to mirror our need for reminders at thresholds. It's the practice of hanging a Mezuzah at each doorway in a Jewish home.² The Mezuzah is a little box that contains a scroll. On the scroll are verses from the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible. They are the verses in which God tells the Jews to love God with all their heart, and all their souls, and all their might, and to keep their covenant (their sacred agreements) with God. God also says to the Jews: you should teach the covenant to your children, recite it regularly, "bind" it as a "sign on your hand" and a "symbol on your forehead," and inscribe it on the doorposts (the mezuzah) of your home and on your gate.

So mezuzah, which look like little decorative rectangular boxes, are traditionally placed in a certain spot, at a certain angle, on each doorway in a Jewish home, where they serve as a reminder of the covenant at every threshold.

Unless you are a Jewish UU you probably do not have a mezuzah, but you can still make a spiritual practice for thresholds. Recently, I made a video with ideas for how to make an altar in your home, in which I placed mine at a threshold, for spiritual grounding as I pass through. That's one option. At the end of this message, I'll post a link to the video in the chat box.

Spiritually speaking, thresholds also represent times of passing through from one state of being to another. Threshold experiences are those times when we go through some kind of transformation.

This kind of threshold is not the same as mere change. You can make some changes in life and still be kind of the same. A transformation is when change is accompanied by a radically different understanding of self, or a radically different sense of your life's meaning and purpose. Transformation of this kind primarily takes place on the inside. The outward appearance of you and your life may or may not be as obviously impacted.

Last Sunday we had our annual Coming of Age service, in which youth who are transitioning from middle school to high school age share what they know now about spirituality and meaning. They are experiencing one kind of threshold, the transformation from childhood to adulthood. By the time a new adult *feels* like an adult, meaning within themselves, they will have a completely transformed sense of their place in the world. One

¹ There is a summary with study author names here: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-walking-through-doorway-makes-you-forget/>

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mezuzah/>

if the things we share and celebrate in the Coming of Age service is a snapshot of that transformation.

Now if you have experienced your own transformation from childhood to adulthood, then you know that along the way there is a lot of in betweenness.

All spiritual thresholds include a call or initiation of some sort, an in-between time, and a new beginning (or the after time). I want to spend the rest of this homily time exploring those a little, because I think they are such good conversation starters for the rest of May, and because throughout our lives, we will find ourselves in each of these phases at various times. And if you have a framework for thinking about it, it can help you get your bearings, stay centered when you are feeling lost, and it can help you eventually find your way to the other side.

The first part, the call, may come from within or the outside. It may be desired or it may begin with an unwanted event. In the book of Exodus, a story of call takes place when Moses goes up the mountain, and hears God speaking to him in the form of a burning bush. Moses, God says, you cannot continue on as you have been. You have a new mission. With it, Moses discovers his new identity. He leaves his privileged place in the Pharaoh's household and becomes a liberator. His life, his sense of self, and his purpose are all utterly transformed.

In our lives, a call to transformation may come in the form of a nagging sense that you are not living the life you are meant to live, or it can feel like a revelation. It can sneak up on us, or it can happen suddenly. And it can come from within, or it can come from an external change like the loss of a job or the loss of a marriage, or, you know, a global pandemic. (For some of us, the pandemic will ultimately be an event that initiates transformation in our lives. I'd like to think it initiates transformation in the world, too.)

Whatever form the call takes, it tends to be unavoidable. You are compelled to respond. Jim Marsden writes that the initiating or call event "occurs as if life, or our soul, is trying to reach out and grab our attention."³ We may try to ignore it, but in the end we can't. It has to be that way. It has to be compelling because what happens next is usually pretty uncomfortable: you enter into the threshold, and into the unknown. You find yourself in the in between place.

In Exodus, this is the part where Moses and the liberated people wander in the desert for forty years. The in between can feel like being lost in the wilderness.

In the in between, we may experience confusion, disorientation, anger, and grief. This is where we are being transformed. There is time we have to spend just being, just inhabiting the in between so that needed development can occur. And this is the stamping and

³ Marsden, Jim. "The Journey of Transformation." *The On Being Project*, 25 June 2016, onbeing.org/blog/the-journey-of-transformation/.

stomping place of the poem—stomping in anger, stomping to shake off the things we have to let go of in order to proceed in our lives. It's a time of ending and clearing away, Marsden says. He specializes in coaching people through transformation and is pretty widely known for his work.

Some of the framework I'm using today is borrowed from an essay he wrote—though most of these are pretty timeless concepts. You can find similarities in the work of Joseph Campbell, who identified the phases of transformation from studying stories from across the ages.

About the in-between time, Marsden writes, "It's as if we are swinging on the grand trapeze. One hand is held firmly on the rung of our current life, and as we wing out, we know that there is another rung — our future life — swinging toward us."

When that happens, we wish we could grab that next one before we have to let go of the current one. But he continues, "It is often the case that we can't know the solid ground of that new beginning before we let go of the old handle on our lives and enter that space of in-between... Like the caterpillar entering the cocoon, we are no longer our old selves, nor are we the butterfly that is yet to come."

It might be cheesy, but it's true.

This is the part that we can't think our way through, he says. We have to experience our way through it.

On the other side, is the transformed self. And with that, what? Thresholds can lead to many gifts. Growth. Adventure. Liberation. Self-acceptance. Authenticity. Maturity. A deepened capacity to love and receive love. And more.

I think this is a good resting place for today, and a good discussion prompt. I invite you to take these questions to the break out groups after the service: What was on the other side of a threshold in your life? Did you think of it as a spiritual threshold? Would you in hindsight?

Here's the link to the video about making an altar in your home. (You can cut and paste it to see later): <http://uuabq.com/2020/04/16/ideas-for-making-an-altar-in-your-home/> You can also find it on the front page of church website.

Discussion prompts: What was on the other side of a threshold in your life? Did you think of it as a spiritual threshold? Would you in hindsight?