

Crossing the Threshold

Growing up as a Unitarian, there was very little ritual in my life. But in the home where I was reared, we did have a mezuzah on our door. My stepfather was Jewish, along with many of my friends, so I liked the look of it there with its strange and cryptic Hebrew lettering. I didn't really know much about it, but the mystery of the object appealed to me. A mezuzah, if you don't know, is a kind of amulet that's affixed to the doorframe. Ours was made of brass with a blue enameled cover that opened in the back to reveal a little prayer tucked inside. The prayer, I later learned, is considered the holiest utterance in Judaism, so holy that a scribe uses a special ink to write it down: "Hear, O Israel, The Lord Your God is One."

It's usually called the "Sh'ma," in reference to the first word: *Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad*. *Sh'ma* means "listen, hear," or could be more broadly construed as "pay attention, get mentally focused, this is important." *Yisrael* is a proper name and form of address. If you remember your Sunday School lessons, it's the name that Jacob is given after he wrestles with an angel and is both thrown to the ground and blessed. So that literally it means, "you who contend with the ultimate, who are transformed by the struggle."

Adonai Eloheynu, the next words, need a little explanation, because they're circumlocutions, ways of talking about a subject that's really ineffable and beyond words. Jews don't mention the name of God, you see, because they realize that "God" is not God's name, but our human name for what's unknown and unimaginable. Words are like fingers pointing at the sun, which illuminates everything but can't be looked on directly. We shouldn't confuse the words or the pointing fingers with the reality they're trying to indicate.

So whenever the name of God appears in the Hebrew Bible, Jews substitute the word "*Adonai*," which is usually translated as Lord. But because there are no vowels in Hebrew, it's one of those funny languages where the consonants can be read in different ways, something the fundamentalists seem to have missed when they insist there's a single interpretation of the scriptures. *Adonai* comes from a root *adan* which also means threshold. So the subtext of the of prayer *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloyhenu* becomes, "Listen up, if you

want to know what it's all about, if you want to taste what's life-giving, pay attention to thresholds." That's why the Book of Deuteronomy (in this morning's reading) commands the Israelites to fix these words upon their doorposts and lintels. And it's customary on entering or leaving the home to touch or kiss the mezuzah. So the ritual becomes a daily reminder of what we import into our homes from the outside environment and also to be aware of the energy we draw from our families and intimate relationships and take back into the wider world.

Thresholds and doorways have always had a spiritual resonance, a metaphor for all the boundaries that define human existence: boundaries between life and death, between innocence and experience, between our public persona and our inmost, secret selves. It's in these interstices that life gets messy; it's on the edges where things get interesting. It's where we have to leap across from one mode of being to another that faith is required. So the world's religions and wisdom traditions are almost universally agreed: Pay attention to thresholds.

Coming from the Celtic direction, Mara Freeman writes that "the earthen floor just inside the threshold of old Irish cottages was known as the 'welcome of the door.' Upon entering, a visitor would stand at that spot and say a blessing for the household. The dirt scraped from this spot was considered healing and beneficial for treating ailments. An in-between place," she writes, "it was neither 'here' nor 'there' and so it allowed a crack to open between the worlds where power could seep in."

Aren't we all looking for places to plug into that power? That may have been one reason, years ago, that I studied martial arts, even got a black belt. And in the school I attended, there were rules and protocols for how to enter the practice floor. You always removed your shoes before stepping into the *dojang*, for instance. And it was also proper to give a bow upon both entrance and exit. Why? Because when you crossed over the threshold of the practice hall, you were entering a zone where thoughts should be concentrated and one must be fully present. The bow signifies a purity of purpose and single-minded intent.

So it was perhaps instinctive that I gave a small bow when I first entered the minister's office here at First Unitarian just this past week. I wanted to remember why I do this work, and honor those before me, Barbara and Tom, and all those others back to Aaron Bancroft who have ministered to this congregation, and sometimes wrestled with it, too. And I wondered if we all shouldn't bend just a little from the waist when we enter this magnificent sanctuary, genuflect as we step through those massive pillars out front and walk through the doorway that's a defense against all the cynicism and superficiality of our times, but also a means of access to what's beautiful and humanizing about our world? Because this is our practice floor, isn't it, as well as our spiritual home.

And what is it that we practice here? In one word, I'd say what we practice is art of hospitality, trying to create a haven that says "welcome" to every soul and seeker. The word "hospitality" of course is related to the term hospital, but also to hostel and hotel. And the "hospitallers," you may know, were originally a medieval order of knights dedicated to providing lodging and shelter for religious pilgrims, usually on their way to Jerusalem. The hospitals they founded only later became associated with the sick and infirm. Originally they were points of rest and refreshment for weary travelers. And this remains the primary reason we congregate here on Sunday morning: to provide shelter for those on the spiritual path—and especially those whose journeys have led them down roadways less well-trodden.

Let me repeat. Our primary purpose here on Sunday morning is to provide hospitality and welcome for the wayfarer, not to do church business, not to circulate political petitions, not even to catch up with old friends. Our mission is to create an environment where everyone, but especially our guests and visitors, can feel accepted, acknowledged, received in friendship and greeted with goodwill. Most people who walk through these doors do so for a reason, after all. It's not that they don't have anything better to do than get preached at. Rather, most people who seek out a faith community like this one are in some kind of need. Frequently, they're new to the area and may not know anyone. Or perhaps they're not new to the area but are among the quarter of all Americans who tell pollsters that they have no one in their lives, not a single person, who they can

trust to talk about sensitive issues. Many have made the decision to come to church because they've experienced a loss, the death of a loved one, or their marriage has come unglued, or because they've recently had a baby. Often they're like Annie Lamott, in the morning's reading: a single mom, not much money, maybe struggling with addiction, not terribly happy but still believing that some kind of peace and happiness might be possible, if only they had a little light to steer by.

Not always, but quite often, they come because they are standing on some kind of threshold—a life transition, a decision-point, a precipice, a transforming moment—when the universe seems to be opening up, like a great door swinging on its hinges, and they're not sure whether it's opening to welcome them in or swallow them up. It's a scary, hopeful place to be. And what they really need at that point is not someone to solve their problems, not someone to advise them what to do, not a religious expert or authority who will give them an answer. What they need at that point is not a special mug or even a name tag (though that helps). What they need is someone to be present with them for a while there in that no man's land, someone to reach out, someone to listen—which is after all the great prayer and final commandment: *Sh'ma, Yisrael, Adonai. Listen, pay attention, to those who are on the threshold.*

As the Bible picturesquely puts it, “Remember to show hospitality. For there are some who, by doing so, have entertained angels unawares.” This is the primary ministry in which all of us are engaged, as well as the boundary where social justice meets spiritual discipline. For if we cannot find a way to engage the humanity of the visitors who want to be part of this congregation, how can we ever hope to build bridges of compassion and understanding with people of other lands and cultures?

This mission is doubly important because our country is at a threshold right now (easy to see in Worcester, where demographic change is a poppin'), passing from a white majority, Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment to a polyglot nation of languages and cultures and religions. Between 2000 and 2010, this town saw the number of Hispanic residents increase by 48%, blacks by 59%, Asians by 61%. And these sea changes in our community have led

elsewhere, from Maine to Arizona to Florida, to a convulsion of fear: dread of the foreigner, the immigrant, the stranger, the Muslim, the infidel. Here in Worcester, there were reports of voter suppression last fall. Yet it's not enough to label this backlash as racist or xenophobic. Because when the shouting stops, somehow all of us, every American together has to pass through this gateway into a post-racial future, not just Democrats or Greens but also Republicans and Tea Partyers, black, brown, white, yellow, residents of Massachusetts and Mississippi, all of us marching into that Promised Land of *E Pluribus Unum* or "Out of Many One." Co-existence or no existence! Easy to say, but the fact is that no one knows quite how to get across that finish line—across the color line, across the sectarian lines and parochial and socioeconomic lines that divide us—into that beloved community of civility and mutual respect. If we Unitarians knew, we'd have churches that weren't so homogeneously Caucasian and middle-class. We'd have people in our pews who watch NASCAR as well as Downton Abbey. We'd actually be as diverse as we say we want to be. We've never done this work before and we aren't not quite sure how to really open our own church doors to folks who look different or habla espanol. But that doesn't mean we can give up hope or stop working. It just signifies that, again, it's in these unknown, borderland regions, neither "here" nor "there," that all the good stuff happens, the struggle and the blessing both.

Finally, let me remind you all that this congregation is in a period of transition. You have been served in the past by able and talented ministers, with a history of lengthy tenures. The First Unitarian Church of Worcester has been an influential institution within the city, and at one time claimed to be the largest congregation in our religious denomination. You've survived disasters, from hurricane to fire, and you've weathered schisms and mergers with remarkable resilience. But now you stand at a threshold, where the only certainty is that tomorrow will be different than yesterday, and adaptability is needed. Listen, pay attention, accept that the work of renewal and revitalization will be challenging and that like Jacob, you may need to let go of old identities. The world is changing, and this church needs to resolve not just to keep pace but to be a change agent, at the forefront. Imagine this interim interval as a creative as well as a disruptive juncture. Together, we can make of this crossing-over a

“door of welcome,” a crack between the worlds where the power can seep in.

Children’s Sermon

So I’m the new kid on the block. I didn’t grow up in Worcester, I’ve never been part of this church. And as I start to meet people and get acquainted, I’m reminded of an old folktale.

There was once a traveler who came upon an old farmer hoeing in his field beside the road. Eager to rest his feet, the wanderer hailed the countryman, who seemed happy enough to straighten his back and talk for a moment.

"What sort of people live in the next town?" asked the stranger.

"What were the people like where you've come from?" replied the farmer, answering the question with another question.

"They were a bad lot. Troublemakers all, and lazy too. The most selfish people in the world, and not a one of them to be trusted. I'm happy to be leaving the scoundrels."

"Is that so?" replied the old farmer. "Well, I'm afraid that you'll find the same sort in the next village."

Disappointed, the traveler trudged on his way, and the farmer returned to his work.

Some time later another stranger, coming from the same direction, hailed the farmer, and they stopped to talk. "What sort of people live in the next town?" he asked.

"What were the people like where you've come from?" replied the farmer once again.

"They were the best people in the world. Hard working, honest, and friendly. I'm sorry to be leaving them."

"Fear not," said the farmer. "You'll find the same sort in the next village."

People in Worcester, I imagine, are like people everywhere. If you look for the good, you'll find it. And there's a lesson in the story also for this church, this village, as you begin your search for a new minister to follow Tom and Barbara. You've got to find the right person, sure. But whether you're looking for a minister, a mate, or just a friend, being the right person is equally important.

Words for Offering

In gratitude for this liberal church that fosters the arts of hospitality and sustains us in our spiritual quest, we now receive our offering, to put our principles to work at home and in the wider world.

The great purpose of a life is to spend it for something that outlasts it. May our lives and gifts be put to useful service.