

The practice of thresholds

Thresholds were important to the ancient Irish monks whose wisdom guides us on this path. Thresholds are the space between, when we move from one time to another, as in the threshold of dawn to day or of dusk to dark; one space to another, as in times of inner or outer journeying or pilgrimage; and one awareness to another, as in times when our old structures start to fall away and we begin to build something new. The Celts describe thresholds as “thin times or places” where heaven and earth are closer together and the veil between worlds is thin.

In the Celtic imagination, thresholds are potent places. We experience the thresholds of the year unfolding, so that each new season beckons us into a renewed awareness of the nearness of the holy presence. In the Celtic wheel of the year there are eight portals in time that mark the equinoxes and solstices, as well as the midway points between them. Each of these festivals held the possibility of deeper connection to the divine. We will explore this further in chapter 10.

We encounter thresholds each day through the movement across the hinges of time. The turning of early morning and evening were thought to be especially graced times of day when the otherworld was near.

There are physical places that evoke a sense of wonder. My husband, John, wonders if “thin places” means they were worn thin by the many souls who have been drawn to these liminal landscapes

and sought prayer there. When we lead pilgrimages together in Ireland, there is a keen sense in the holy sites we visit of the thousands of prayers that have washed over the place.

The ancient Celts used to have “threshold stones” at the entrance to a sacred site, one on either side of the portal or passageway. (We still find this tradition alive in many of the monastic ruins as well.) The stones were markers and reminders that the soul was crossing over into a sanctified space. In many of these places, churches were later built, which shows a continuity of awareness of sacred places.

Philip Sheldrake writes that the Celtic peoples had “a fascination for the spiritual quality of boundary places. Living on physical boundaries also symbolized a state of liminality—of living literally and spiritually on the margins or between worlds, the material one and the spiritual one.”¹ The monks were drawn to edge places, inspired by monks before them who had fled to the desert. The Celtic Church grew on the very borders of civilization, at the outer edge of Europe and beyond much of the reach of the Roman Empire. In a seventh-century letter to Pope Boniface IV, St. Columbanus described his people as *ultimi habitatores mundi*, “inhabitants of the world’s edge.”² They lived at the very fringes of the ancient world and embraced the perspective it gave them.

I love this image and wonder what it would mean for each of us to claim that identity. What does it mean to be an inhabitant of the world’s edge? To go out to wild threshold places, into the holy darkness, and embrace a fertile and wide expanse of possibility there beyond the safe constructs of culture and the expectations that slowly suffocate our creative hearts?

We encounter thresholds in our experience as well—those times when life shifts, sometimes out of choice, and often because of circumstance. My mother’s death in 2003 was a huge threshold in my life not of my choosing, while John and my move to Europe in 2012 was a deliberate choice. Both were extraordinarily challenging, each in their own ways and full of their own kind of grace.

Thresholds and Discernment

If you are in a place of discernment in your life, a season of pondering next steps, then you are on a threshold as well. Thresholds are liminal times when the past season has come to a close but there is a profound unknowing of what will come next.

The Celtic monks were deeply influenced by the stories of the desert mothers and fathers. There is a wonderful story from St. Anthony that goes like this: “Abba Antony said to Abba Joseph, ‘How would you explain this saying?’ and he replied, ‘I do not know.’ Then Abba Anthony said, ‘Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said: “I do not know.”’”³

“I do not know,” and “[He] has found the way.” We are invited to release everything to which we cling too tightly: our need to be right, our need to feel secure, our need to be in control. None of those is the way according to the desert and Celtic monks.

Thresholds are challenging because they demand that we step into the in-between place of letting go of what has been while awaiting what is still to come. When we are able to fully release our need to control the outcome, thresholds become rich and graced places of transformation. We can only become something new when we have released the old faces we have been wearing, even if it means not knowing quite who we are in the space between.

Thresholds are as much imaginal places as they are literal and physical ones. The Celtic imagination saw this liminal place alive within us. Dolores Whelan writes, “The imaginal world is the region between the physical or material world and the spiritual world or ultimate mystery or source. This is the Celtic otherworld, *Tír na nÓg*, also known as the *mundus imaginalis* of the Celts. This otherworld is not an archetype produced by the unconscious mind, nor is it a product of fictional imagination. It is a dimension of reality that exists within the world and with the psyche or soul, the inner dimension of self.”⁴

As spiritual seekers, we are called to live with one foot in the world of earthly and everyday experience. The other foot is in the transcendent realm where the divine breaks through our ordinary

consciousness. To hold this kind of imaginal awareness is to recognize heaven on earth and the kingdom breaking through in each moment.

When we are in discernment, it means keeping an eye attuned to the ways that the holy touches us through experience. We can cultivate the capacity to see another layer of reality at work. We can listen for symbols and encounters with this numinousness because it happens within the very deepest recesses of our souls. To allow the soul's slow ripening asks that we sit in the mystery, at times on the threshold, awaiting the moment of fullness.

St. Brigid of Kildare

In Ireland, Brigid is one of the three patron saints of the land, alongside Patrick and Columba. We don't know many details of her life, and there is great evidence that she is part of a much older lineage extending back to the Irish triple goddess Brigid of pre-Christian times who was the goddess of poets, smithwork, and healing.

The saint is said to have been born on a threshold. Her mother was standing, straddling a doorway, when Brigid came into her earthly form. There is a tradition from this of midwives calling upon the presence of Brigid at the time of birth, honoring her reality as a midwife of the threshold place.

Most of what we know about St. Brigid comes from *Life of Brigid*, written by the monk Cogitosis in the second half of the seventh century. *Life* emphasizes her healing, her kinship with animals, her profound sense of hospitality and generosity, and her concern for those oppressed. These stories of the saints are not meant to be literal or historical but spiritual, mythical, archetypal, and psychological, resonating with the deepest parts of our souls.

Her feast day is February 1, which in the Celtic calendar is also the feast of Imbolc and the threshold into springtime. It is the time when the ewes begin to give birth and give forth their milk, and it heralds the coming of longer and warmer days. Brigid is believed to bring the first sign of life after the long, dark nights of winter. She breathes into the landscape so that it begins to awaken. Snowdrops, the first flowers of spring, are one of her symbols.

Often in Ireland, I have heard Brigid described as a bridge between the pre-Christian and Christian traditions, between the other world and this one. She bridges the thresholds between traditions and draws them together under her mantle.

Consider calling upon Brigid each morning of the coming days, asking her to help you tend the threshold of your life right now.



Scripture Reflection by John Valters Paintner

Lectio Divina

Each chapter will have a scripture passage that you will be invited to pray with in the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* means “sacred reading” and is an ancient, contemplative way of praying with sacred texts that is practiced in monastic communities. *Lectio* asks us to release our desire to have something happen or know what a text means for us and to drop down into our intuitive sense and wait to receive whatever gifts may be offered to us. If you are unfamiliar with this way of praying, please refer to the guidelines in the appendix and apply those guidelines to your reading of this passage:

Thus says the LORD:
Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.

—Jeremiah 6:16

Biblical Context

The prophet Jeremiah grew up during the religious reforms of the good King Josiah. The Book of the Law had been rediscovered, and with the help of the prophetess Hulda, the people of Judah were returning to the covenant and to God. It was a time of great spiritual renewal and hope for the Chosen People.

But then King Josiah died in battle against the Egyptians and the reforms were thrown out with the new king. (Fortunately, the religious movement started by King Josiah did continue. During the Babylonian Exile, the followers of these reforms became known as the Deuteronomists and were responsible not only for writing the book of Deuteronomy but also compiling and editing most of what we think of today as the Old Testament.)

Jeremiah recognized that Josiah's movement was the last chance to avoid the judgment of God. The Chosen People had broken the covenant for too long, and the consequences were going to be disastrous. Jeremiah envisioned the total destruction of the kingdom. Nothing would be left intact, and everyone would be affected. While some prophets wrote to warn the people from impending doom and destruction, Jeremiah was both pessimistic and hopeful. He was pessimistic in that, with the death of Josiah, Jeremiah believed that the punishment of Judah was inevitable. And yet he still preached. His hope was not in the immediate future but in an age to come. He hoped that some would survive. He hoped that they would look back on all that had happened and realize their mistakes so they could restore the covenant with God. One gets the sense that this was more a hope of Jeremiah's rather than faith in its certainty.

Jeremiah did not live to see the covenant restored. But his teachings became a cornerstone to the slow rebuilding of faith among God's people. In his words, the exiles found important lessons that led them back to God and the Promised Land. The book Jeremiah left behind became an important aid to learning from the mistakes of the past and discerning the path ahead.

In Jeremiah 6:16, Jeremiah warns the Israelites that they stand at the threshold of a new era. There is a crossroad before them, and they must choose the correct path. Staying where they are is not an option. Their enemies are in pursuit. Staying put means death. To live, one must move.

Not every journey, whether physical or spiritual, is intended. The people of Judah had no intention of going anywhere. They were quite comfortable with their lives, too comfortable. When Jeremiah confronted them about their transgressions against God and one

another, they refused to be moved. But their misdeeds and their stubbornness forced a change.

They failed to see the threshold they were standing on, even as the prophet pointed it out. When the Exile came, they had wasted their chance to stop and consider their options. Fortunately, for those who survived, they had the words of Jeremiah to comfort and guide them.

Personal Reflection

Have you ever entered a room and suddenly realized that you've completely forgotten why you were there? (Be honest; I know I'm not alone on this one.) Well, don't panic. There may be a perfectly reasonable and comforting explanation for it.

A recent scientific theory going around is that it's not just a "senior moment." It very well may be a normal brain function. When we walk across a threshold, a door or other barrier of some kind, our subconscious minds recognize that we are going from one environment to another. To prepare us for the possible dangers of a new space, our brains do a quick short-term memory dump in order to free up more active cerebral computing space so we can more quickly adapt and react to whatever we may encounter.

You aren't losing your mind. It's an evolutionary adaptation that allowed your ancestors to survive and you to be here now.

In hindsight, there were plenty of warning signs that my time at the high school I taught at in Seattle was nearing an end. I just wasn't ready to see them. I appreciated the blessing of teaching (and learning about) a subject I love: Hebrew Scriptures. I worked with many great people, and most of the students were delightful.

But there were conflicts; there were struggles. I tried overlooking them. It just made matters worse.

So when the subject I loved was pulled out from under me, I could no longer ignore that I was being driven from my comfortable (if not completely perfect) home. I was at a crossroads that I did not ask for. I didn't want to be there. I wanted things to stay the same.

But life is movement. Life is change.

And so I quit my job, we sold our home and most of our belongings, and we traveled to Europe. We became exiles, strangers in a strange land. And it was good.

I needed the change. It was time. But it could easily have been nothing more than a long vacation or retreat from reality, leaving everything behind and forgetting all my problems. But I used our time living in Vienna as an opportunity to look back and reflect. I took time to stand on the threshold, consider, and learn from the past before moving forward. It is an ongoing journey, but the threshold demands reflection and openness.

Now living in Ireland, I have discovered new possibilities beyond my imagining. We have settled in a city with a vibrant theater and film culture, both of which are passions of mine. I now have time to write—short stories and plays and film scripts—and am involved with a wonderful community of people who support one another in bringing these to life. When we stand at the threshold, we can't possibly know what awaits us.



The Practice of Thresholds

In the days ahead, become aware of all the times you cross a threshold. This might be moving from one space to another—entering through a doorway, transitioning from one activity to the next, or tending the thresholds of the day, especially at dawn and dusk. Pause at each and offer a short blessing, simply becoming aware of the possibilities alive in the moment. See if the threshold helps call forth the thinness of this moment, making the voice of the divine more accessible.

Reading this book and taking on its practices is a threshold experience, inviting you to an inner journeying from old patterns into renewed commitments to intimacy with God. It is about a shift in awareness as you seek to embrace a new vision.

Wander out to edge places—the threshold of shoreline, where forests begin, or borders between towns—and ponder those thresholds

within you. Bless each threshold you cross, that you might remember to hold loosely all that you think you know.

We are forever crossing thresholds in our lives, both the literal kind when moving through doorways, leaving a building, or passing into another room, and the metaphorical thresholds, when time becomes a transition space of waiting and tending. We hope for news about a friend struggling with illness; we long for clarity about our own deepest dreams.

In the monastic tradition, *statio* is the practice of stopping one thing before beginning another. It is the acknowledgment that in the space of transition and threshold is a sacred dimension, a holy pause full of possibility. This place between is a place of stillness, where we let go of what came before and prepare ourselves to enter fully into what comes next.

When we pause between activities or spaces or moments in our days, we open ourselves to the possibility of discovering a new kind of presence to the darkness of in-between times. When we rush from one thing to another, we skim over the surface of life, losing the sacred attentiveness that brings forth revelations in the most ordinary of moments.

Statio calls us to a sense of reverence for slowness, for mindfulness, and for the fertile dark spaces between our goals where we can pause and center ourselves, and listen. We can open up a space within for God to work. We can become fully conscious of what we are about to do rather than mindlessly completing another task.

We often think of these in-between times as wasted moments and inconveniences, rather than opportunities to return again and again, to awaken to the gifts right here, not the ones we imagine waiting for us beyond the next door.

Photography Exploration: Thresholds

In each chapter of this book, I will invite you to go on a contemplative walk. There are some simple guidelines for this in the appendix. Essentially, this is a walk where you aren't trying to get anywhere but simply striving to pay attention step by step to what calls to you.

During your walk, use your camera to receive images that deepen your experience. In my book *Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Contemplative Practice*, I write about the difference between “taking” photos and “receiving” them. The first is reflective of our consumerist, grasping, scarcity-focused mindset, so prevalent in Western culture. The second is the call of the monk, the contemplative, the one in us who sees all of life as gift and so receives the graces offered with a sense of wonder and gratitude. It is the difference between walking around with closed fists or open palms. Open your hands wide and pay attention to what gifts and graces arrive when we move through the world in an open-hearted way. The frame of the lens helps you to see them in new ways and reflect again later on what you have encountered.

Your invitation is to walk and be open to noticing all the places of threshold you discover: doorways, gates, transition places from one kind of space to another, such as the transition from home to work or from city to countryside. See what you notice as you bring this awareness with you. As you encounter each threshold, use your camera to receive an image of it to carry with you. Notice which thresholds especially stir your heart.

When you return home, see if one of these images speaks to your heart and rest with it a while. What might it reveal about the threshold you are standing on in your own life?

Writing Exploration: Three Questions

In addition to photography, I will also invite you in each chapter into some written exploration. These exercises are meant to simply open up your curiosity and inquiry and see where the writing leads you.

As we begin the journey of this book, consider what questions you carry with you. If you are in discernment, what are the graces your heart is seeking?

Phil Cousineau, author of *The Art of Pilgrimage*, describes questions as the beginning of a quest, and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke invites us to “live the questions” as a way of dwelling in mystery. Questions point us to thresholds of unknowing. They might be