

The Threshold

by

Mary Jaksch

In old houses there is a stone or plank at the bottom of the front door. It is the threshold and marks where 'home' begins. It marks the edge of intimate territory. The threshold itself is neither in nor out. It is an in-between place. When you inhabit the place or the moment that is betwixt and between, you inhabit a mysterious realm. Something new, something unknown, is about to open for you. The word 'threshold' is a poetic word which conjures up dreams and images and I want to speak of them in the hope that you in turn will begin to dream and that out of your dreams a new awareness will arise.

1. Daily Life

No-man's-land

Thresholds are about boundaries, they define 'inside' and 'outside'. Our lives are full of boundaries - we have boundaries in space and also in time. We are guided by boundaries at every turn and punishment awaits us if we ignore them - just notice what happens when your speeding car drives off the road! Properties, cities, countries are all defined by boundaries. And yet there are spaces that cannot be claimed by anyone. In medieval times they were called no-man's-land.

No-man's-land appears in many guises. If you walk along the beach you will see the damp stretch of sand that is between high and low tide. People love to walk there and look at flotsam washed up on the shore - treasures hoarded by the sea and offered for a time, ready to be washed away again. The song *Scarborough Fair* speaks of this never-never land:

Tell her to find me an acre of land,
Parseley, sage, rosemary and thyme,
Between the salt water and the sea strand,
And then she'll be a true love of mine.

Marshland is another place that is neither dry land nor water. Many fairy tales tell of terrifying dragons, evil spirits and other dangerous creatures that inhabit the marshes, ready to drag unsuspecting wanderers to their death. We are attracted to these places of between-ness and fear them at the same time.

Crossroads

Crossroads belong to no one direction. In olden times they were seen as places of magic. Spells were woven there and bodies hung from the gallows. People believed that ghosts visited crossroads at midnight. Today, roundabouts, overbridges and underpasses have taken the magic out of crossroads. And yet you still enter that special place of no-time and no-place when you 'come to a crossroads' in your life and have to make a decision that will change you for ever. Will I seek treatment for my cancer? Will I marry my lover? Will I separate from my partner? Will I seek a new home far away? Will I leave my job? Do I want a child? When you are pregnant with such weighty questions, you are on the threshold of something new. Time seems to stop as you wrestle with 'yes' or 'no'. All your ordinary life breaks open. And this openness and broken-ness allows you to glimpse your calling or what James Hillman calls your 'daemon'. He refers to the 'daemon' as our 'defining image', just as there is a defining image of the oak inscribed in the acorn.¹

Rites of passage

Thresholds come in many forms, both in time and space - 'liminal' states as they have come to be called ('limen' is the Latin word for threshold)². The liminal is the sacred place found between places, the sacred time found between times. In many cultures, rituals highlight the in-between spaces and times. In indigenous cultures, people preparing to take part in rites of passage are often sequestered. Young men in some African tribes are taken from their mothers and live together for a while, completely isolated from the normal life of the village. They are taught by their elders and prepared for the ritual that will mark the end of their childhood. This seclusion is liminal time. In our own society, there are still some rituals that mark turning points, for example christening, confirmation, twenty-first birthday, marriage, retirement or funeral.

Creative act

Writers, composers and artists know about the threshold you have to cross before a new piece starts to take shape. The term 'writer's block' describes the painful inability to cross the creative threshold. A swarm of judgements fly through your mind like meteors at such a time, each one carrying a dark message, "I don't have anything to give of value," "I'm a fraud," "I just can't do it." And out of this dark threshold state, this 'little death', something new can arise. Here is a description of this process, written by a composer:

Whenever I am composing a new piece, it is the same. I have to go through the agony of not being able to do it. I keep trying to cut out the stage of incompetence and misery, but it can't be done, and I'm not sure that I would want to do it. The blackness is the door of the creative process.³

Being on edge

Sometimes, when you are waiting for something to happen, you are ‘on edge’. There is a gathering of energy in your body that shows as a fast pulse and a fluttering in the belly. I think of a sword moved from lying flat to being ‘on edge’, showing its mettle, ready for action. This can be the edge where stasis moves into change or order disintegrates into chaos. Sometimes you can also come to that in-between place in a very soft way, for example when you are ‘on the verge of tears’. Something you say or hear touches your hidden pain or an unnameable yearning, and then you can feel the tears pricking in your eyes. You are suddenly in touch with your deepest self.

Birth

All of us have experienced the struggle in the narrow birth canal, or the horror of being plucked out of the mother during a Caesarean - a terrifying time between the safety of the womb and the ecstasy of suckling at the breast. And, if you are a mother, you will know about being in labour as an ‘in-between’ state. You will remember the flush of excitement and terror at the first contraction and the fear of going into the unknown. I remember reading many birth accounts during my pregnancy because I was afraid to go into the unknown, but in the end, I found that they had no relevance at all to my own vivid experience, filled with pain, wild joy and fear for my baby’s safety.

The limbo of sickness

In early Christian mythology, ‘limbo’ was a place close to hell, where unbaptised infants and other tormented souls languished. This place is familiar to all. If someone you love is on the operating table and you are pacing the waiting room, hour after hour, then you get to know the limbo state intimately. You taste this state also when you fall ill. When you suddenly go from seeming good health to severe or even terminal illness, all your usual ways of experiencing your life collapse and you enter a limbo state where you need to decide whether to give up or fight back. Here is an account of such a time:

And then when I woke up after the operation and was told that I didn’t only have bowel cancer but I had secondary liver cancer and probably only six to nine months to live and there was nothing, absolutely nothing they could do except sew me up and send me home to die, that was really, really a shock as anyone could understand... I look back now and realise how close I was to giving up then. But I decided, “No, I’m not going to give up”. So I battled back and got out of hospital. I decided to get on and do what I can to keep me here as long as possible.⁴

People facing a debilitating physical or mental disease are suddenly thrown into a borderland, where things that were easy are now difficult or impossible. In our society sick people are marginalised. If you have ever been sick in hospital you may have experienced humiliation or anger at doctors talking about you in your presence, as if you were not fully human any more and so not worthy of their consideration. And sometimes there are exceptions. I heard a story recently of a surgeon who specializes in working with cancer patients in a large university hospital. He was known to be cold and proud - no beside manner to speak of at all. And then one day he had to tell a patient of his that there was no future for her anymore and she was going to die, after he had put her through experimental treatment that they had both pinned

their hopes on. And he was suddenly in tears, while she touched his hand and comforted him. For both of them this was a moment of threshold where their roles suddenly fell away and they could meet each other fully, human being to human being.

Chrysalis

The chrysalis is a beautiful image of a liminal state. When the time for transformation has come, a larva wraps itself in a cocoon and becomes a chrysalis. Just imagine how that might feel! Suddenly the larva is constricted, can't move anymore and the light darkens. Then a disintegration begins. Some cells die, others revert to an undifferentiated state, some cluster together as 'imaginal discs' that carry a genetic blueprint for new structures. If you compare a caterpillar to a butterfly they seem worlds apart and yet one transforms into the other. In some sense you could say that the caterpillar dies. From this death a new, beautiful form arises. Before something radically new can appear, the old form has to die.

Death

In the last few weeks I have been watching a student of mine, Linda Davies, thirty-four years old, die of cancer. Slowly she had to give up more and more independence and allow others to care for her. And yet even in all the suffering, her wild, joyful spirit was still apparent and her tremendous courage. One evening, racked with pain, she looked up at me and said, "Really, I'm at peace with dying." And then her mind started to give way. As she entered the phase of dying, her body disintegrated more and more and she entered the place between places, where she was neither fully alive nor truly dead. Finally I visited her corpse, laid out in her favourite clothes at home. Her poor, still body bore no relation to who Linda really was. I thought of the chrysalis then and of the butterfly. Sitting quietly I could sense her bright, warm presence, radiantly alive and unfettered by her broken body. Here is a beautiful poem by Mark Strand that speaks of such a transition:⁵

Old Man Leaves Party

It was clear when I left the party
That though I was over eighty I still had
A beautiful body. The moon shone down as it will
On moments of deep introspection. The wind held its breath.
And look, somebody left a mirror leaning against a tree.
Making sure that I was alone, I took off my shirt.
The flowers of bear grass nodded their moonwashed heads.
I took off my pants and the magpies circled the redwoods.
Down in the valley the creaking river was flowing once more.
How strange that I should stand in the wilds alone with my body.
I know what you are thinking. I was like you once. But now
With so much before me, so many emerald trees, and
Weed-whitened fields, mountains and lakes, how could I not
Be only myself, this dream of flesh, from moment to moment?

You can see in this example that poetry itself is a threshold art. As Ernie Hilber pointed out in a review of Mark Strand's collection of poems called *A Blizzard of One*, his poetry ‘

Mark Strand has successfully voiced with clarity that which is seemingly beyond the purview of everyday language. His poetry is situated on a volatile fault-line between what we accept as reality and what is just beyond our grasp. As a result, his poetry is remarkably serene with the promise, always the promise, of impending fury and disintegration.

2. Practice

Pilgrimage

When we begin to practise Zen we start out on a sacred journey that continues endlessly. In olden times, where people left to go on pilgrimage, their special state would be confirmed through a priest's blessing and pilgrims were offered hospitality wherever they went. Those who offered food and shelter themselves partook in the blessing through their acts of charity. The pilgrims were seen to be in a state of emerging grace. For the time of the sacred journey, the pilgrims stepped aside from their normal social position. Pilgrimage is a liminal time. You yourself, as you walk the Zen path, are on a pilgrimage, a sacred journey that has no beginning and no end. On this path, grace can come to you in sudden floods of insight or moments of love and kindness that illuminate and warm your lives and the lives of those around you.

Starting out

When people approach Zen, they often hover on the threshold of committing to the practice. There is a pull towards the practice that is elusive, can't be put into words and, at the same time, a dazzling array of excuses: "I'm too busy for this," "the teachers should be perfect human beings," "I'd do it if they didn't have all this ritual," "I'm really a Catholic at heart" and so on. This time of hovering, of inability to commit is important and fruitful. When you hover on the verge of a commitment, you are readying yourself in the depth. A wise part of you knows that you will be changed for ever when you step over the threshold and enter Zen practice. Mary Oliver speaks of this moment in her poem *The Journey*⁶

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
as the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice

The 'voices around you' are also the voices in your head that express your fear and inertia. When you finally commit to the practice of zazen, you encounter mysterious 'in-between' states as you breathe, experience the moment, immerse yourself in retreats and enter the practice ever more deeply.

Breathing

When you breathe there is a mysterious moment between the tides of in- and outbreath. For a moment, at the fullness of breath, there is no movement. It is an in-between time. And again, after the outbreath, there is a stillness, rather like a little death. It is a lovely practice to turn your soft attention to these points of stillness. Though they are fleeting, yet they speak of that which is always present. This is rather like sitting on the seashore and watching the tide turn. It is said time and tide wait for no-one. But when you sit on the wet sand, watching the tide, or when you pay soft attention to your breath, it seems that the tide does wait for you, it turns for you, it flows for you alone. The tide of your breath washes away the flotsam and jetsam of your thoughts. You flow as your breath and the myriad beings of the world flow in and out of your body - as you.

Present moment

You may think of the present moment as a narrow bridge between past and future. But when you enter a moment fully, it opens out and reveals its boundless quality. This is truly a liminal state, where there are no boundaries - no past, present or future. No boundary of 'inside' or 'outside', just a vastness that has no attributes and yet freely comes forth as the song of the wind, the muted roar of the city, the stars pricking the sky as darkness falls.

Doorways

There is a lovely way of paying attention to the 'in-between' realm. I call it "Threshold Practice". Just hesitate for a moment in every doorway, on every threshold, acknowledging the transition from room to room, from place to place. Just give a little inward gassho, a tiny invisible bow, each time you cross a threshold. Celebrate the ones you notice and don't look back in regret at the ones you missed. The ritual bow as you enter or leave a zendo is a form of "Threshold Practice". You stop and bow to 're-mind' yourselves of the moment. Your bow cuts through the sweeping thoughts and suddenly you are fully present and fully alive.

In retreat

Zen retreats are a liminal state. You leave your ordinary life and loves behind, retreat into solitude and silence. You are sequestered, with no contact to the outer world. Each sesshin is a rite of passage. You are changed forever, even though this change happens in the dark and cannot be known by you. Your life shifts over time through these rites of passage, becomes warmer and more vivid. Each time you emerge from a retreat, you step forward into a life that opens to you more fully.

Ritual

Ritual has the function of highlighting liminal states. For example, the bows practised in Zen

emphasise thresholds. We bow as we enter or leave the zendo or the dokusan room. Entrance means entering into the mystery, that is, becoming en-tranced. In fact, the entry into sacred spaces relates to the precept of 'not stealing'. Instead of rushing in with our predictive mind, thinking "I know what will happen here, it's nothing different," we wait, bow, and complete the past before being accepted into a new realm. This is a way of not taking what is not given which equates to the precept of 'not stealing'.

Ritual is helpful in defining liminality in ceremonies. Many ceremonies in Zen, such as Shoken, Jukai, or Transmission are rites of passage. There is, accordingly, an in-between, a liminal state - a moment on the threshold. In Zen we use rituals to define this liminal state. Such as Shoken participants being called to the Dokusan line at a special time and doing a set of nine bows, in the ceremony of Jukai, having the participants in seclusion before the ceremony and then, once they enter the zendo asking them to kneel at a table in front of the altar and so on.

On the edge of insight

Sometimes, when you are working with a koan you will feel as if you are on the edge of insight. Just like when you are searching for a name and it is on the tip of your tongue but you can't quite remember. Wu-men speaks of this in his commentary on the koan 'Mu': "It is like swallowing a red-hot iron ball. You try and vomit it out, but you can't." You are stuck in an in-between state. Truly, to be stuck like this is a blessing! It allows the koan to seep right into your bones and marrow, to bless body and mind and to illuminate your life. When you go to Dokusan at such a time you may feel tongue-tied, heavy and stupid. As if you are pregnant with a mystery that has no words and no shape. Slowly things shift and you get the feeling that you have entered a new landscape but it is still unlit. Again Wu-men describes this experience with sharp accuracy: "You're like a mute person who has had a dream - you know it for yourself alone." This sense of hovering on the edge may be accompanied by strange experiences, such as trembling in the body or mysterious visions, or a sense of deep broodiness. At such a time it is good to sit devotedly and allow things to unfold in their own way and in their own time. As John Tarrant Roshi said to me once, "The sun rises without the help of your hands."

Crossing the river

Many cultures have a myth about crossing a river to the other shore. Often the river symbolises the interim state between life and death. In Buddhist lore, the crossing to the other shore means crossing to the other shore of enlightenment. Zazen and the many rituals of retreat are the endless task of rowing across to the other shore. And then one day you realise that you never left the 'other shore' in the first place - what a laugh!

Makyo

Makyo is the term for the mysterious realm of deep-dream experiences that you can sometimes touch deep in your practice. It can take the form of a dramatic vision or unusual sensations and it

is sometimes a precursor to awakening. Here is a Makyo that I experienced many years ago that has as its theme the waiting on the threshold of things to come:

I am in a vast and ancient temple. Huge pillars rise up at the sides into the darkness. The ornate ceiling is faintly visible. The interior is dimly lit. I am doing zazen alone in the middle of the temple on one of the great flagstones that form the floor. People dressed in black robes are hurrying about in the background, preparing a special ceremony for me. In the dark distance of the temple I see a fire has been lit for the ceremony. I am waiting to be called.

You can see clearly how this vision describes a threshold state: I am sequestered, sitting alone to prepare for the coming rite of passage. The fire indicates that the ceremony is one of purification to ready me for my initiation and it also symbolises the coming of light into the darkness. There is a feeling of the ancient, of the timeless realm.

Dark Night

Along the spiritual path you can experience stretches that are dark and arid, yet strangely full of hidden promise. Saint John of the Cross called this the ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ and in the psalms it is termed ‘the valley of the shadow of death’. You can feel lost and bewildered at such a time. Somehow you are drawn deep into the darkness and it pervades you more and more. In this time of darkness, our sense of self crumbles away. This is a painful process. St John of the Cross expresses it as follows:

“...the soul feels itself to be perishing and melting away...in a cruel spiritual death, even as if it had been swallowed up by a beast and felt itself being devoured in the darkness of its belly, suffering such anguish as was endured by Jonas in the belly of that beast of the sea.”⁷

All the while, in this great anguish and darkness, a transformation is happening and such an experience can sometimes be a precursor to awakening. Sandra Cronk calls the Dark Night an ‘inward re-patterning’.⁸ The ‘dark night’ is a liminal time, a borderland state where all familiar markers have disappeared. If you have ever been in the mountains on your own and tried to find your path in gathering fog and darkness, you will know about the fear and loneliness of such a time. Here a Zen student describes the experience of the ‘dark night’:

In the desert that surrounds me there is no succour. Even desire has given way to a dull, arid pain. Even though I can immerse myself in activity, yet, like a compass needle that, when shaken gyrates and then settles back to point north, so does my soul returns to darkness.⁹

Awakening

In Zen the moment of enlightenment is often called ‘awakening’ and the process itself is referred to as the ‘Great Death’. In some way we have to die to our limited sense of self to be reborn. We have to let go of concepts of who we are and let go into unknowing. This is like the cells in the

chrysalis disintegrating. Only when we let go of knowing can the chirping of birds, the flush of the toilet, the rumbling of a train suddenly speak to us in a voice that is no other than our own.

Tung-shan speaks of this in his Second Rank:

*An old woman, oversleeping at daybreak,
encounters the ancient mirror
and clearly sees a face that is no other than her own.
Don't wander in your head and validate shadows any more.*

The time is dawn, a time on the threshold of day, still full of darkness and yet with a promise of daylight. It says that the old woman is 'oversleeping'. This is an experience that we all know about. The alarm clock has failed to ring and we wake up with a jolt, disoriented. There is a moment of 'in-between' where we don't know whether we are asleep or awake and we don't know what time it is, we don't even know whether it is still night or already day. In the Second Rank the old woman emerges from this muddle and confusion into sudden clarity: "...and clearly sees a face that is no other than her own." This is the moment of transformation, the moment of true intimacy.

Coming home

When we step over the threshold, we come home. Tung-shan says in the Fifth Rank:

Everyone longs to leave the eternal flux,
not just to live in harmony, but to return and sit by the charcoal fire.

This is coming home. Remember how it is when you arrive back from travels? You enter your home, shedding bags and clothes right and left, until you finally sit on your sofa and heave a sigh of relief - ah! Home is a safe haven, a place that holds joy but also knows the tears you have shed, it is the place where you lick your wounds, where you allow your quaking heart to come to rest. This peace is not far away at all. You can find it each time you return from the wanderings of your mind and come home to the present moment. As you deepen in your practice you find that the 'peace that passeth all understanding' is always present, intimately present - offering itself to you in every moment. Then you can say with the poet Rumi:

I'm at home wherever I am
and in the room of lovers
I can see with closed eyes
the beauty that dances¹⁰

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Dedicated to Linda Davies who crossed the Great Threshold on January 18, 1999.

Photo??

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- ¹ James Hillman, *The Soul's Code* (Sydney: Random House, 1996)
- ² Timothy L. Carson, *Liminal Reality and Transformational Power* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997)
- ³ John Tarrant, 1998, *The Light within the Dark*, New York, Harper Collins, p164.
- ⁴ Linda Davies, 1998, 'Terminal', in *Bright Water*, 2/98, Nelson, NZ.
- ⁵ Mark Strand, 1998, *Blizzard of One*, Alfred A. Knopf,.
- ⁶ Mary Oliver, 1986, *Dream Work*, New York, Atlantic Press, p38.
- ⁷ Peers, E., 1990, ed. St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, New York, Image, p. 104.
- ⁸ Sandra Cronk, 1993, *Dark Night Journey*, Wallingford, Pendle Hill Publications)
- ⁹ Mary Jaksch, 1999, unpublished manuscript.
- ¹⁰ Chopra, D., 1993, ed., *Love Poems of Rumi*, New York, Harmony Books, p.28.

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